

Isaiah 42:14-21

The LORD Shouts

¹⁴I have been silent for a long time.
I have kept still. I have restrained myself.
But now, like a woman giving birth, I will scream.
I will gasp and pant.

¹⁵I will dry up mountains and hills.
I will make all their grass wither.
I will turn rivers into islands.
I will dry up pools.

¹⁶I will lead the blind on a way they do not know.
Along paths they do not know I will direct them.
Ahead of them I will turn darkness into light
and rough places into level ground.
These are the things I will accomplish for them.
I will not abandon them.

¹⁷They will be turned back and completely disgraced—
those who trust in an idol,
those who say to molten images, “You are our gods.”

But Israel Does Not Notice

¹⁸You deaf ones, listen!
You blind ones, watch carefully so that you can see!

¹⁹Who is as blind as my servant?
Who is as deaf as my messenger whom I sent?
Who is as blind as my associate,
as blind as the servant of the LORD?

²⁰You, Israel, see many things, but you do not observe.
Israel opens his ears, but he does not hear.

²¹Because of his own righteousness,
the LORD was pleased to make his law great and glorious.

Can't See the Forest for the Trees

I.

I grew up in a place where, once you get out of town, you can see for miles and miles. The perception of those not familiar with the great plains of South Dakota is that the land is flat because a person can see so far. What trees there are tend to grow at the bottoms of the hills, where there is more shelter from the winds sweeping across the plains, and where there are little streams to water the root systems.

When you grew up in such a place, the forest seems a bit stifling. Trees just hem you in. It feels claustrophobic. You can't see the forest for the trees.

Perhaps that's where the expression came from—from people like me who once lived on the plains and found forests a bit overwhelming and claustrophobic. What the expression has come to mean is that one focuses so much on small details that it is easy to lose sight of the larger plan.

Each year there was an event in Israel in which people tended to focus on small details. Perhaps it caused them to lose sight of the larger plan.

The event combined three kinds of learning that should have made for a superior opportunity for the people to really internalize the subject matter and come to understand it. The event was a festival which combined active learning with repetition with a small group setting.

For *days* before the festival, preparations were made. Special foods were meticulously prepared. Leaven—or yeast—was removed from every corner of the home.

Finally, the big night arrived. Father would take out the special book called the Haggadah and follow the instructions. The Haggadah was the history of the Passover. Each individual family group would hear the events of the plagues that led up to Israel leaving the land of Egypt and the slavery they had endured there. The epic tale recounted the deliverance God had brought for his people, and looked forward to the deliverance that was yet to come.

“Who is as blind as my servant? Who is as deaf as my messenger whom I sent? Who is as blind as my associate, as blind as the servant of the LORD? ²⁰You, Israel, see many things, but you do not observe. Israel opens his ears, but he does not hear” (Isaiah 42:19-20, EHV).

Hands-on, small group learning, repeated year after year. The Jewish people saw and heard and internalized the message of deliverance by God again and again. The mighty hand of God was among their people in a very special way.

Passover was one of those things in Israel that had become a “can’t see the forest for the trees” event. The people saw, but did not observe. Their ears were open and the vibrations of sound were entering the auditory canal, yet somehow, they did not hear. Tiny minute details had become their focus. They couldn’t see the larger plan—the big picture.

Sin is serious. Sin demands a life as payment. This was what the Passover celebration was to remind the Jewish people of year after year. The lamb was slain to provide blood to paint on their doorposts so that God’s Angel of Death would pass over the house of his people. What Passover had become, however, was just a festival. Since it was a *home* festival, rather than a *temple* festival, it was a good excuse to get out of work—the focus became less about the redemption of God, and more about the opportunity for family time. The details of a fun celebration became the whole focus because they had turned their hearts from God and had made family time into an idol.

II.

Have the tiny, minute details of individual trees become overwhelming to you in the last week or two? The pieces of information have been coming at you like so many sledge hammers—bombarding you with details.

Is the forest of life becoming a scary place to you?

The threats of COVID19, or Coronavirus, have left many people feeling vulnerable and frightened. The governor of Michigan ordered schools to close for the next three weeks, declaring a need for an “abundance of caution” in an attempt to minimize the spread of this virus. Closing schools means that parents are scrambling to find child care.

The affects of COVID19 on our daily life go far beyond closing schools. Major sporting events have been cancelled or postponed indefinitely. Concerts and plays have suffered the same fate. Even Broadway shows in New York have been suspended. In our state, the governor has signed an executive order to prohibit all events over 250. Since our worship services are under the threshold, we are not prohibited from meeting, but if you are feeling

ill or your immune system is compromised, you might want to stay away—even from church—and watch the livestream of the services. Many are today.

The Coronavirus scare along with an oil price war between Russia and Saudi Arabia have combined to a radical decline in the stock market. Whether or not you have individual retirement accounts invested in the market, if you have a retirement plan it surely has funds invested there. If you have paid attention to your investments—which might not be a very good thing right now for your own personal sanity—you have watched tens of thousands of dollars evaporate from your accounts.

Has your whole existence been turned into one big ball of worry? Jesus once said: “I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing?”...²⁷Which of you can add a single moment to his lifespan by worrying?” (Matthew 6:25, 27, EHV). When you worry you fail to trust God as your strength and your helper.

Has worry led to a lack of trust in God? Has worry become your idol? Lack of trust in God was one of the problems in our text. “They will be turned back and completely disgraced— those who trust in an idol, those who say to molten images, “You are our gods” (Isaiah 42:17, EHV).

Can you see the forest? Or do you only see a bunch of trees?

III.

It isn't just worry or idolizing family that are our problems. *All* our sins are a problem. Turning aside from God—taking him out of first place in our lives—just going through religion by rote instead of making it a pivotal part of our existence—is the problem.

“I have been silent for a long time. I have kept still. I have restrained myself. But now, like a woman giving birth, I will scream. I will gasp and pant. ¹⁵I will dry up mountains and hills. I will make all their grass wither. I will turn rivers into islands. I will dry up pools” (Isaiah 42:14-15, EHV).

Our God is a patient God, but his patience has a limit. He has been affected by us turning away. God is profoundly affected by our sin. He is like a woman in labor, screaming, gasping, and panting with the efforts of childbirth.

But the imagery of childbirth also implies that God's people are on the verge of receiving new life. There is a rebirth that is entirely beyond our doing.

“I will lead the blind on a way they do not know. Along paths they do not know I will direct them. Ahead of them I will turn darkness into light and rough places into level ground. These are the things I will accomplish for them. I will not abandon them” (Isaiah 42:16, EHV).

Note the last sentence first. God does not abandon his people. Even when we have seen, but not observed. Even when we opened our ears but did not hear. Even when we are filled with worry and dread. God is still there. God still loves his people and cares for us.

Now look at the rest of the passage. The Savior God is not a God that first restores the sight of his people so that we can make decisions for ourselves to follow the Lord's way. No, while we are still blind, the Savior God acts on our behalf. He leads the blind. He directs us on paths that we don't know. He turns the darkness into light for us, and makes rocky and rough terrain into level ground for us.

“You deaf ones, listen! You blind ones, watch carefully so that you can see!” (Isaiah

42:18, EHV). God's restoration of our sight begins with a call to repentance. Before we can truly see, we must first admit that we *can't* see. We confess our sins in the worship service. We confess the worry and the lack of trust that we have had as we are bombarded with the troubles of the moment.

IV.

Having confessed our sins, we receive absolution. Then we look for continual strength and nourishment in God's Word and in the Sacraments. "I will lead the blind on a way they do not know. Along paths they do not know I will direct them. Ahead of them I will turn darkness into light and rough places into level ground. These are the things I will accomplish for them. I will not abandon them" (Isaiah 42:16, EHV). God will continue to guide us and be with us throughout our lives.

What is it that lies heaviest on your mind right now? On top of all the regular worries of life—family problems, health problems, depression that seems to overwhelm you, or whatever your personal issue is—COVID19, or the Coronavirus, has been injected into our list of concerns.

The Lord your God will not abandon you. He leads us even in uncertainty. He leads us with the certainty that heaven is ours, no matter what this world might throw at us. He is with us. Even when we can't see the forest for the trees. May God give you the peace that comes from knowing what God has done. Amen.

Stand

One of my favorite closing sentences to a sermon, after the congregation has risen, is appropriate for today. Today I will put it on the screen for you.

May the LORD our God be with us, just as he was with our fathers. May he never leave us or abandon us. ⁵⁸May he turn our hearts to him, to walk in all his ways (1 Kings 8:57-58a, EHV). Amen.