

God's Big Vision
Isaiah 49:1-7; John 1:29-42

January 20, 2008
Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

The kids' cartoon, Veggi-Tales, teaches us the following put to a tune:

*God is bigger than the bogeyman/ He's bigger than Godzilla or the
monsters on TV God is bigger than the bogeyman/ and He's
watching out for you and me*

The Lord, through the prophet Isaiah, teaches us the following:

*Let the wicked forsake his way
and the evil man his thoughts.
Let him turn to the LORD, and he will have mercy on him,
and to our God, for he will freely pardon.
"For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways,"
declares the LORD.
"As the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.
(Isaiah 55:7-9)*

The combined picture we get is that the God of Israel, Yahweh God, is larger than we know God to be. Here, of course, we're not talking about physical size, or height in feet and inches.

God's ways, God's thoughts are beyond our understanding. He knows so much more than we know.

It's like that Indian proverb of several blind men who touched various parts of the elephant and tried to describe the elephant. One said that the elephant had a long extension that kept moving and grasping. Another said that there were sharp, tusk-like things, two of them, in fact. Another described the feet. Another the tail. Each one could not grasp the enormity of the elephant because they only could touch that one part of the pachyderm. But taken together, their testimony revealed what their blind eyes could not see.

The big-ness and grandness of God's thoughts extends to His ability, capacity, and desire to forgive and grant mercy. Our thoughts are that the wickedly sinful will not change their ways. Not so with God. God will freely pardon and grant mercy.

The big-ness and grand-ness of God's ways are not just about His wisdom and thoughts; He has a large heart – one that seeks to save that which was lost, to love the unlovable, to grab hold of us

wretched sinners who would seek nothing other than to love ourselves only.

Hear this word from Psalm 103, that speaks to the big-ness of God's compassionate, forgiving love:

*The LORD is compassionate and gracious,
slow to anger, abounding in love.
He will not always accuse,
nor will he harbor his anger forever;
he does not treat us as our sins deserve
or repay us according to our iniquities.
For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
so great is his love for those who fear him;
as far as the east is from the west,
so far has he removed our transgressions from us.
(vv. 8-12)*

The same God who created us and from whom we walked away in our sin and our desire for self at the expense of others, God seeks us out and forgives us.

That is the God whom we love, the God who love us. So, we find that God is big in character, God is big in His thoughts/wisdom/ways, and God is big in His compassion, love, and mercy.

Which is no wonder, then, that our text today in Isaiah 49, speaks about God's desire to display His big character, thoughts, wisdom, ways, and compassionate love, not just to Israel, but to the whole world.

Listen to verse 6 again of Isaiah 49:

he says:

"It is too small a thing for you to be my servant

to restore the tribes of Jacob

and bring back those of Israel I have kept.

I will also make you a light for the Gentiles,

that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth."

God's big vision captures the imagination. While Israel is loved and was loved to restore a part of Israel that was lost, God says, that His ways and plans go beyond just Israel. Israel is just the beginning. The love and patience that He pours out upon Israel is a small example of what God intends to do for the whole world – Jews and Gentiles, slave and free, man and woman, rich and poor –

God will bring the whole world, and, indeed, the whole of creation to obedience towards Him, the Holy One of Israel.

That is a wallop for the imagination. In order to grab hold of such a wonderful vision takes not only faith, but an enlarged and continually enlarging faith.

The great and almighty God – who is big in character, big in thoughts/knowledge/wisdom, big in compassion/love/mercy – is the same God who does not wish to confine Himself and the giving of Himself to just one people or one nation. God's agenda is for the whole world to experience and know of His loving, saving purposes.

For all the couples that I have conducted pre-marital counseling for, I always tell them that because their vows are made in a public setting, in the presence of God and witnesses, the marriage covenant is not just about two lovers getting together and living happily ever after. The new family that God is establishing is a public witness. The way that a family lives, behaves, worships, prays, loves.....these are visible testimonies of what they

have declared on the marriage altar. It's been said that the family is the Church in miniature – the way we live and love within our marriages, our child-rearing, our attitudes towards our parents and elders – all the ways that we handle forgiveness, faithfulness, mutual growth in love – how well these are done are visible expressions of what we declare on our lips when we say our vows.

This is to say that marriage, family, and, indeed, all of our relationships is about the Gospel. That means that our families, our marriages, our relationships, in and of themselves, are not just for marriage and family sake. I agree with the mantra, “Focus on the Family”, but we ought not to make our marriages and families idols in themselves, for God enlarges our vision towards His vision.

Just as Israel was quickly stagnating in their view that God's loving covenant was only confined to the family of Israel, God says that the family of Israel is included but is not the end.

God's vision, God's big character, big thoughts, big compassionate love matches His big agenda for the whole world.

The focus is not on just ourselves, our marriages, and our families – as important as all are – but rather, how is God using all of our relationships for the greater vision that He has, which is to show His compassionate love to the entire world.

That's one of the important lessons that Grace and I have been intentional about, and will be for the rest of the years we are parents. That is, to raise our children to know that life is not just about themselves and our family – that we are called by our big God to enlarge the vision – how can your life be seen through the eyes of God for the greater purposes that God may be using you to bring the big-ness of His mercy and love to the entire world.

That enlarges our thoughts and broadens our imaginations. This week is the 100th anniversary of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. I'll have more to say about it later this afternoon at the ecumenical prayer service at the Our Lady of Mt. Virgin Roman Catholic Church at 6:00 p.m. where I will preach and share that vision of God about mission and ministry in the world. This centennial anniversary hopefully challenges us to pray for unity

and wholeness not only in this part of the body of Christ – Middlesex Presbyterian Church – but also unity with all Presbyterian Churches, with all Protestant churches, with all Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches. That what we pray for and do here in our 45-member community shows whether we not just talk the talk, but we walk the walk. God’s big vision begins in small places. Think globally, act locally.

Confirmation of God’s grand vision for the world is again confirmed when John the Baptist declares Jesus Christ to be the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. After this, the first disciples are called, and the world hasn’t been the same since. From the tribe of Judah of the family of Israel, came the Son of God, promised from ages past.

His decisive life, death, and resurrection changed the world. And even though the disciples had the wrong idea of what Jesus’s purposes were for, by the time He rose from the grave, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit revealed to their hearts and minds what God’s vision and God’s agenda was about. Their eyes were opened!

God helped them to discover that His salvation, His agenda to bring wholeness and healing to the nations would come through them, through their witness.

Do you see the vision of God? Do you believe it?

I'm convinced every day of the grand purposes of God and how God is at work in our midst, stretching my thoughts of Him, seeing the many ways that He surprises me at every turn.

I'm 31, but have been a Presbyterian for only 12 years, younger than many of you. Yet, in the span of the last 12 years, I never imagined that I would sit in the national courts of the church – the highest governing body levels of the Church and serving as vice-chairman of the General Assembly Council -- have influence over shaping the policies of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) on the national level, traveling to almost half of the 50 states, and acting on the hemispherical and global level of Presbyterian witness and mission, working to bring unity in the global Presbyterian family, and, indeed, with the whole Christian Church.

God enlarges our vision. When we find our vision and direction in what God is doing, you will find that your thoughts, your imaginations, your joys, your heart will be enlarged as well, and you will catch that vision – that our living on the earth in the days we are given are not just for ourselves nor for our families – but something bigger and grander – God wants to use us so that the whole world may know of God’s big character; God’s big thoughts, wisdom, and knowledge; God’s big compassionate love and mercy for us; and God’s big vision for the whole world in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ – the Son and Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!

May you see your life and whatever condition you are in within the big vision of God.