



FIRST CONGREGATIONAL
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— Stockbridge, Massachusetts —

Seeing, Learning, Living

December 1, 2019

SCRIPTURE: Isaiah 2:1-5

The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. ²In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. ³Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. ⁴He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. ⁵O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the LORD!

SERMON Rev. Brent Damrow "Seeing, Learning, Living"

Sean Penn, bad boy actor turned author, has written a series of books, called "The Tales of Bob Honey." The critics have scoffed at his work, yet readers have clamored for it. And while the subject matter may not exactly line up with this season – for, you see, the tales of Bob Honey are the tales of a septic tank entrepreneur turned mallet wielding assassin. That's right, you're right to look quizzical. In case you didn't quite get this, the main character in these books is a septic tank entrepreneur turned mallet wielding assassin. So crazy, it's hard to imagine, let alone believe. But Sean Penn's writing process, the process by which the letters and words appear on the paper, is one we should wholeheartedly embrace for the coming days. He began writing this series in 2015, when the world began spinning in new ways, and when the bad news did not seem to be getting any better. He wanted to write about a character, he said, who had uncommon thoughts on common matters, someone who could break into our existence in ways that startled and provoked. You see, this story that has turned into a series, he says it came as a vision into his head. So captivated by that vision, he says he simply ran after it.

He scrambled to get all of the words down on the page before that vision got away from him. No matter how crazy the endeavor seemed, Penn was dogged in his pursuit, letting nothing get in the way.

I wonder how different it would all be if we had the same zeal, the same dogged stubbornness, as we approach this run up to Christmas, when God broke into our shared existence with Jesus, a character who absolutely had uncommon thoughts about very common matters, someone far more revolutionary and, quite frankly, far more dangerous than even a mallet wielding assassin. Do not forget, the critics of Jesus' time scoffed at him, too. And yet, we know that so many yearned for his uncommonality. So many followed, leaving home and family behind. So many lives were changed.

Friends, Penn became a writer, and he does not even know how to type. But he simply shows the dogged kind of courage to keep going and break out of the mold of who people thought he was, and perhaps what people thought novelists ought to be, too. And that is what we need, if we're going to break the mold of what culture says Christmas should be, or what us good, proper Christians should look like. And instead, follow this new beginning, to be an inverting, in-breaking, life-altering possibility that propels us forward to be nothing short of the same. Whether we think we have the skills or the traits needed for the task at hand. No matter how lovely or desirable an idea can be, no matter how much we know it might be good for us, there are 1,000 and 1 reasons that often get in the way of keeping us from pursuing that idea, until we grind to a halt. With New Year's coming up and the resolutions about to be made, we all know that experience, right?

But Sean Penn knows, as the prophet Isaiah knew before him, that a vision, really seeing something, really seeing how it all unfolds, now that has the possibility to force us into action and keep us moving. For once that vision abides in our hearts, it compels. Just like Sean Penn, we cannot stop. People of faith for millennia have chased after this vision that came to Isaiah, son of Amoz, despite the obstacles, because they couldn't imagine letting it go. And what is that vision that he sees? In many ways, it is this place. Look around. The vision is in some ways this place. Not just the beautiful simplicity of the room, not the garland or the candles, not even the organ or these historic plaques, but rather, whose house this is, and the endeavors we take whenever we come here. Isaiah, you see, saw a vision of people streaming to this place, despite dire predictions of snow just waiting to fall. Isaiah saw a vision of joy, of people saying Come, let us go here, that together we might listen to our still-speaking God, that together we might learn uncommon thoughts about very common matters. Like how the smallest light overcomes the deepest shadow. Like how coming to this table for a tiny morsel of gluten-free bread and a sip of grape juice provides

sustenance to face the most arduous journey. And most importantly, how love wrapped up in the most fragile form makes the impossible possible. Crazy, ridiculous, all of it. And yet, unequivocally true.

We come here, as Isaiah proclaimed, to listen and learn and practice, until we see that vision so firmly entrenched in our minds that we leave here chasing after it, because we cannot imagine letting it go. Until and despite any obstacle, it becomes what it was always meant to be. The “they” in this passage, the ones Isaiah sees doing all this miraculous stuff? I have difficult news for you. That “they” is us. It is not someone somewhere else who has more powers or skills or gifts or artistry than we do. But rather it is us, and what we are called to do – the crazy work of taking instruments of war and turning them into things that till the earth so that all might have abundance. That’s not about anyone else’s work, but our work, here and now, letting nothing or no one stop us. It is not someone else called to take wooden implements designed to impale or kill, and turn them into tools that strengthen the vine and allow for growth. It is you and me, here and now, letting nothing or no one stop us. It is not someone else or somewhere else, not a prince ensconced in some seat of power, but you and I that are called to teach, be, and embody peacemaking. It’s why we practice it every week, following the Prince of Peace until we know his ways and truly walk in his paths.

Tragically, in this day and age, Bob Honey, a septic tank entrepreneur turned mallet wielding assassin, is unfortunately all too imaginable, and all too understandable. For we have seen all too closely how things break down, how easy it is for things to get turned upside down -- individual people like Bob Honey, and well, the whole world, too. But far crazier, infinitely far crazier, is the full truth of the One who is coming to the stable. Far crazier is God pouring out love and entrusting it into unlikely hands. Far crazier is the other vision of Isaiah that a Child shall lead them all. Far crazier is water turning into wine, the lame walking, the wounded being made whole, walking on water. Far crazier is actually the idea that the world can be turned right side up again by none other than a carpenter, a shepherd from a backwater town, who didn’t just speak uncommon truth about common things, Jesus lived them. And the world, well, when you come back on Christmas Eve, with the candles lit, at the climax of the service, we will read the truth from the Gospel of John, that Jesus indeed came into this world. And you know what comes next – the world received him not. The critics scoffed at this crazy, impossible vision. The powers stalked after him until they pierced him on their wooden instruments of pain and torture, but others who saw what he truly was, whether they be shepherd of king, outcast or stranger, old or young, powerful or weak, once they saw the vision, the one that Isaiah son of Amoz saw, the one Jesus brought to life in living echoes of God’s love, the way of fullness of life, the Kingdom of God drawn near, the road it took him down and where it truly ended – not in death, but in life, always in new beginnings. What the Bible tells us is that those people, they went forth to speak those truths no matter what critics said and no matter

what it cost them, and for the earlier followers it often cost them their lives. To walk in those same ways no matter what stood in the way, even though for many the road led to scorn, ridicule and death itself. But they knew it never ended there, so they let nothing and no one get in their way.

May that be our spirit this Advent. May we so see this vision in our hearts and minds, bodies and souls, that we too defy the critics and tell the story, no matter how crazy it might sound. And not just with our lips, but with our lives. To go about the work and way of Christ, no matter what road it may take us down or what it may cost us. Not just to the glory of God, but for the truth of the future, the long arc of goodness.

Friends, the incarnate God is about to appear, the One to embrace all of our tears. This morning I say to you, Keep awake, and let nothing and no one stand in your way.



Rev. Brent Damrow, Pastor