

3rd Sunday in Lent
Text: Jeremiah 26:1-15
Rev. Jason Zirbel
March 19, 2017

Ocular Faith

For those of you who know your Scripture, you're already well-aware of the fact that faith is not based on what you see, but rather on what you hear. "*Faith comes through hearing; hearing the Word of Christ.*" "*Faith is the assurance of things hoped for; the conviction of things not seen.*" These are just two prime examples of what Scripture makes very clear throughout; that we are not to base our faith on how things appear to be, but rather on how God says they truly are. Our faith is based on *hearing, not seeing*.

Simple enough, right? Now, if any of you have even a basic understanding of Latin, you already know that the title given to this particular Sunday in Lent—Oculi—is about the eyes. It's about seeing. This is the very first word in the Introit for today—*oculi; eyes*—which means that this is the very first word that people would've heard as the worship service began way back when the worship service was conducted in Latin. "*Oculi mei semper ad Dominum—My eyes are always turned towards the Lord.*" Okay...but faith comes through hearing, not seeing, so shouldn't our *ears* be turned towards the Lord? Maybe this is why nobody really does the old historic one-year lectionary anymore. Maybe it's because those medieval Roman Catholics had it all wrong. Roman Catholics having it wrong...that makes sense, right? ***That must be the problem!***

Nope...at least not in this particular case. Rome still has some **SERIOUS** issues, ***but this isn't one of them***. I'm sorry if this bursts your bubble, but these words aren't Roman Catholic in origin. These are the words of Scripture. These are the words that the Holy Spirit inspired King David to put to paper in Psalm 25.

"*But pastor, faith has nothing to do with seeing!*" That's not true. That's not true at all. Now, can your eyes deceive you? Absolutely. No one, including God, disagrees with this. As I said before, Scripture is very clear throughout that we are not to trust our eyes, ***but our ears***. We are told not to base our faith on what we see, and for very good reason. Our eyes can and do deceive us.

This is what got the Old Testament Israelites in trouble, and that trouble was nothing new. So what was the problem? Basically, they were *idolatrous*. They had some major ocular problems; some major sight problems. For one thing, they looked around at their neighbors, and they competed with them and wanted to be like them. "Keeping up the Jones'" is old as Cain and Abel. Not only that, but they were trusting in all the good and prosperous things they were seeing all around them in their own daily lives. ***Life was good in Israel at this time. They were well-off.*** They were looking around at all the wealth and prosperity; they were measuring themselves up against their neighbors, and they were putting their

trust in their bank accounts, in the bricks-and-mortar, in the full silos and full barns, and all the other benchmarks that the world looks to in order to determine “success.” Worse yet, as Jeremiah tells us in chapter 7, they were looking to the *bricks-and-mortar of the temple*; they were looking to their own actions and deeds performed at the temple, and they were seeing *righteousness and security*. They were looking at all these various things and making the [wrong] connection that all this bounty and abundance and sacrifice and spirited worship, right down to the letter of the law, was all **proof** that God was happy with them and their *works-righteous, idolatrous, self-serving ways*. “*Clearly, we’re awesome. Just look at how God has so abundantly and richly rewarded us!*”

And this is where God sends Jeremiah to speak the Truth to such wretched and damnable error. They didn’t see it, but they were looking to all the **wrong** things *for hope, for assurance, for peace*. They had taken their eyes off of God. They were no longer looking to God. God tells Jeremiah to remind them of how that all played out with their forefathers in Shiloh a few centuries earlier. A little historical background: Shiloh was the “capital city” of the Promised Land. Shiloh was where God Himself had the tabernacle take up *permanent residence*. No more were the Israelites on the move. God had led them to a beautiful, peaceful, abundant pasture land of bounty; a place flowing with milk and honey—Shiloh. This was where the glory and presence of the Lord was to dwell *permanently*.

But...those Israelite forefathers had taken their focus off of God. They got too comfortable, and they began to take it all for granted. They began trusting in their works and their own perceived sense of holiness. They began *going through the motions and punching the clock*, taking God’s grace and mercy and presence for granted. They treated God, His presence, and His house as nothing more than pieces of furniture. They began looking to the sacrifices as their works they could do to win God over and make Him happy, rather than seeing those sacrifices for what they *really* were; *for what God said they were*—substitutes that took the justly-deserved place for those sinful children of Adam; substitutes that tangibly showed God’s grace and mercy to them. The wage of sin is death, and something had died in their place. Something took their place for their sin on that bloody altar, and God’s promise of mercy and grace was attached to all this. ***But...they no longer saw any of that.*** Instead, they only saw boxes to check-off and chores to do and goods they could use to win God over and purchase some of His goodness.

As you can well-imagine, *that didn’t sit well with God*. He had warned them and chastised them and repeatedly called them back to repentance, but they paid no attention. They went about doing their own thing. They kept wandering further and further away from the Light and Life of God. So...God sent the wicked Philistines in to utterly lay waste to Shiloh. And the Philistines did their

job! Shiloh was **destroyed**. Even the Ark of the Covenant was hauled off in that ransacking. Israel was left destitute and barren; a hellish, empty wasteland.

Sadly, there's nothing new under the sun, and the fruit never seems to fall far from the tree. The Israelites in Jeremiah's time hadn't learned a thing from their forefathers. Like dogs, they went right back to the vomit, and they were doing the same exact things their great-grandparents had done a few centuries earlier, only now they had a **big, huge, beautiful stone temple in mighty Jerusalem** to point to and marvel over and take pride in. They had truly progressed!

Jeremiah obeys God, and enters into that holy house of the Lord, boldly proclaiming the Truth...a Truth that our Lord Christ would proclaim to His cocky apostles 600 years later in the same setting. *"See all this? It won't last. It's all coming down. Not one stone left standing upon another."* Jeremiah says to all these people (in the very house of the Lord), ***"See all this? Go take a look at Shiloh. Shiloh's history is your future. Turn around. Stop the insanity. Repent! Turn and look to God! Shiloh's fate doesn't have to be your fate."***

And we all know that Jeremiah's faithful messenger service wasn't exactly well-received. In fact, it was utterly rejected. It all makes **perfect sense** to us, though, doesn't it? What a bunch of works-righteous fools those Israelites were, right? Kill the messenger? That's exactly what they aimed to do! *"God is angry with us? God is going to make us like wretched Shiloh? Who do you think you are?! Look around. Look at how awesome we are. Look at how "blessed" we are. Kill him! Clearly he is a witch! Clearly he is in cahoots with the devil!"*

And here's the thing: I know it's very easy to hear all this and make the connection to our day and age. And you know what? You're absolutely right in making the connection! **Things need to change!** We need to turn around and turn back to God. We **need** to get our focus back on God and His Truth. We **need** to turn back from the darkness, and come into His marvelous and life-giving Light. But...before you break out the torches and pitchforks; before you armor up in your Crusader gear, **take a good long look in the mirror**. What do you see when you look in God's holy Word? What do you see when you cast your eyes upon His holy Law? I confess: I look into that holy and perfect Word, and all I see is a **corpse** staring back at me. I suspect your reflection in that mirror looks the same, although you may not want to see it.

Where do you look for peace, for comfort, for assurance? A little **exegetical** background: The word "Shiloh" in Hebrew isn't just the name of a city. It's also a proper noun that refers specifically to the Messiah—the Son of God. Think about that. Let that all marinate and sink in a bit. The Shiloh of God—the sent Messiah;

the Good Shepherd Son of God—He is the *permanent dwelling place of God's abundance, providence, and peace*. It's so very pastoral and beautiful.

So...I'll ask again: Where do you look for peace, for comfort, for assurance? When you look to "Church," what do you see? Maybe a better question is: **What are you looking for?** A tax break? A country club with good potlucks? Free therapy? Something to keep you busy and help you feel good about yourself...*at least better than your neighbor?* Folks: Here is God's Shiloh. Here is the peace of God; the dwelling place of almighty God...with you. Here He is, with you always, and with you right now! **Trust what He tells you.** What goes in the ears opens and enlivens, not only the ears of faith, but the eyes of faith.

In faith we do see things differently, don't we? Just look at this cross. By all worldly standards, all you see here is defeat. All you see is the loser. But...the eyes of faith, opened by the life-giving Word of God, see things in a different light. We see victory. *Yes, we do still see death, and thank God we see death!* **Without this death, we have no peace, no comfort, and no assurance!** We do rightly see God's wrath and punishment against sin here. We see Shiloh being utterly laid waste and made desolate...all for us; all out of the *unconditional and incomprehensible love* that God has for us. Through the eyes of faith we look here and we see God's love; love made flesh and hung on a cross to die for us. That's why we refer to this as "Good Friday."

"*It is finished*" was victoriously proclaimed here! **Trust this Word.** This is where our Lord focuses us to look for all peace, all comfort, and all assurance—*Shiloh*. And it's not even a look to the distant past, once upon a time. Right here at the font; right here at the rail, your Lord brings this cruciform victory to you, bringing to you His body and His life-blood. You hear His Word of promise. "*Take eat, take drink...for the forgiveness of all your sin.*" You hear this Word, and you see it. You get it. You don't believe because you see; rather, you see because you believe. *You don't see what the rest of the world sees.* You don't see plain old bread and a little bit of wine. **You see Christ.** You see His victory. You see His peace, which surpasses all understanding. You see God's holy Shiloh—the Good Shepherd coming to you to feed you, nourish you, richly and daily and abundantly provide you with all that you need for this body and life; life everlasting, in Him and because of Him.

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ: May you never stop seeing this. May you never look anywhere else for this sure and certain peace of almighty God. ***May there never be a disconnect.*** Faithful seeing and faithful hearing go together. May your eyes of faith follow your ears of faith, and may your focus be ever and always on the Word of God—the Word made flesh...for you.

AMEN