

## ***Dealing with Our Blind Spots***

*a sermon preached by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on May 30, 2021  
based on Isaiah 6:1-8*

Here is a true, first person story, from a middle-aged woman. It's a kind of confessional. I will be reading her own words ...

*AS A YOUNG WOMAN, I FELL IN LOVE with a married man ten years older than I. Steve was intelligent, successful, worldly, strong, and many other things I was not, but wanted to be. To my great surprise, Steve fell in love with me, too. We had a brief, passionate affair — one to which I have since compared all other romances.*

*At one point, Steve told me his wife had sensed something was different between them, and he'd almost told her about me. I was startled. I had never thought of myself as a threat to their marriage. "I wish I could give you everything," he told me once, and I cried to think that he loved me that much, but I had never envisioned a life with him.*

*A few weeks later, I felt a change in Steve. He became distant and started treating me like his mistress, not his lover. I knew immediately what was going on: he had been considering leaving his wife for me, and now that he'd decided not to break up his marriage, he didn't want me to settle for a relationship confined to secret meetings and telephone calls. So, out of kindness, he'd begun to act as if he didn't care for me.*

*I didn't let go so easily, however. I hung on as the relationship deteriorated. Finally, I moved thousands of miles away to keep from seeing him. But I never stopped loving him. Even after getting married, I still thought of Steve and missed him. I'd wonder how he was, and how it would be if we saw each other again.*

*Recently, I came to a realization: I've been lying to myself all these years. The truth is, Steve stopped acting like he loved me because he stopped loving me.*

Blind spots. We all have them. Isaiah the prophet had one, too. He admits to it in this morning's text.

Isaiah was a very respected religious leader. A priest in the holy temple built by Solomon, he had all the luxuries a member of the elite of his day could enjoy, including a royal apartment in Jerusalem courtesy of King Uzziah.

Uzziah was something like Franklin Roosevelt — long ruling, lots of charisma, a bit aloof, much revered. His times were good times. It seemed like they'd go on forever, kind of like the economy in the 1990s before the dot-com bust.

Then suddenly, the king just died and his death created a sea of anxiety in the kingdom, especially among members of the elite like Isaiah the priest. Isaiah felt a vacuum within him and fear came to fill the space as it often does when what we count on just vanishes. "What will become of me," he must have wondered?

What is interesting is what occurs to Isaiah when his world comes crashing down. Looking carefully at the text, you can see that though Isaiah is crushed by the loss of his regent benefactor, Isaiah, in that terrifying vacuum, finds out who the REAL ruler of the Universe is — he puts it this way: "In the year King Uzziah died, I SAW THE LORD."

Isaiah had a deity-sized blind spot when it came to the foundation his life was built upon, and he was just finding that out.

When all the false underpinnings of life fall away and we go into free-fall, what happens to us? We can grow cynical, or we can fall apart, OR, we can look for surer footing like people in 12 Step programs who, like Isaiah — hot bottom and then begin to trust what they often call a "higher power."

I'm sure it took awhile, but Isaiah found what he felt was solid ground. When that happens, the world can begin to look different to you.

I remember a dear friend; I'll call her Susan. She and I got together for a walk on the beach at Cape Lookout a few summers ago. I remember Susan to have been a highly retiring type. Terminally shy. I always knew she had gifts, but she seldom used them. She hung back with her even shyer husband, John.

But John had died three years before after a long illness and since his death Susan had become a different person. It was as if she had come out of her shell. She was volunteering right and left. She was singing in public, something she hadn't done in decades — even soloing."

I was amazed. "What happened," I wanted to know? "Well," said Susan, "when what you fear the most happens, what is there left to fear? After John's death I found out I could face anything."

All of this is preamble to the following words of Fr. Richard Rohr about faith. "Faith," says Fr. Rohr, "is finally to stand in nothingness, with nothing to prove, and nothing to protect."

That, may be as good a definition of faith I have ever heard ! And it may also be the most Biblical. It does perfect justice to Isaiah chapter six.

Isaiah lost what he thought was his safety net, but it was never a true safety net in the first place. Power flows by nature, and economies are built on sand.

A Pew research poll that came out before Covid-19 found that countries where people are most optimistic about their futures were Vietnam, India, South Korea, and Poland. Canada was also considered fairly optimistic.

The United States was way down the list. We were located right between Kenya and Ghana. Kenya and Ghana -- imagine that? Venezuela was dead last.

Vietnam and India were not the richest countries in the world by far, but their people firmly believed that they were on the right road. That things were just going to get better.

Both countries weathered the first wave of the pandemic but now things are looking dire in India and scary in Vietnam. Things can change quickly.

The pandemic aside, let me pose a question. Was their optimism a good thing or a bad thing? For Vietnam, I mean? And how about our own relative pessimism? I mean, when it comes to an outlook economically, where is the best place to be, I mean psychically?

Of course, anxiety takes a terrible toll on people. We know this. But how about numbing optimism? -- the kind Isaiah confessed to? I doubt there are any longitudinal studies on that.

It's been twelve years now since the 2008 economic downturn. Thousands of people lost jobs, or they lost 40% or maybe 80% of their retirement income. It was a time of great stress. But the flip side was that an upheaval as profound as that helped some people find deeper sources of peace. Former ground to stand on.

Some people found that peace and meaning was never available in their 401ks in the first place. It had to come from somewhere else; somewhere where "neither thief could steal nor moth devour," as Jesus once put it.

Nearly 700 years ago in Germany, there lived a man named Meister Eckhart. Eckhart was a mystic. He was so wise that during his lifetime it was said of Eckhart that he was someone "from whom God hid nothing."

He was one of the greatest preachers of his or of any day. In his writings you can find what some have called a "spirituality of subtraction." Let me illustrate it in reference to a sermon in which he recommends to us an inner poverty.

We may know what outward poverty is — patched jeans and little idea about how you will pay next month's rent.

Inner poverty is like the vacuum Isaiah felt, or my friend Susan's unspeakable loss. It can, maybe be a poverty that God relishes making something out of – a place where our hearts can be refashioned – get a reset.

"To be empty of everything is to be full of God," says Meister Eckhart.

"To be empty of everything is to be full of God,"

The ultimate experience of letting go in life is to let be. To live properly one needs to come to accommodation with things, and creatures, and events. Once one understands them, not for their usefulness, but for what they are intrinsically, one can let them be; and one can find a certain "happiness."

One no longer thinks of retirement income, or spouses, or presidents like Franklin Roosevelt purely in relation to one's self. One learns to value them realistically, knowing they are, like everything, temporary; everything has a shelf-life.

Once you come to terms with this, you don't over inflate the value of things. You can learn, like Susan did, to fear life less. When you watch news clips of children in what our last president called, "blank-hole countries," why those kids often look so darn happy. They have next to nothing to and their smiles light up the sky.

It's what Jesus was after in his sermon on the plain when he said, "Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

"In the year King Uzziah died, I saw the LORD," said Isaiah.

"In the year my husband died . . . said Susan.

"In the year they downsized me . . .

In the year I gave up my dream to . . .

"In the year they gave me my not-so-golden parachute ... I saw the hand of a higher power at work.

Of course, it's not at all easy. Such times are mostly just awful but that doesn't mean they can't transform us.

Annie Johnson Flint writes about the times in life when something bears down on us like this pandemic, or serious illness, and creates in our lives a point of demarcation between yesterday and today; one we cannot ignore. She calls these, our "Red Sea" places.

Remember Moses and the Red Sea? The waters part and the Israelites go forward and behind them comes Pharaoh and his chariots. She writes about it this way:

Have you come to the Red Sea place in your life where, in spite of all you can do, there is no way out; there is no way back; there is no other way but through?

Pema Chodron has spoken of this in her book, *When Things Fall Apart*. I find her wisdom amazing. This pulls together everything we've been considering here ....

*The very first noble truth of the Buddha points out that suffering is inevitable for human beings. As long as we believe that things last – that they don't disintegrate, that they can be counted on to satisfy our hunger for security. From this point of view, the only time we ever know what's really going on is when the rug's been pulled out and we can't find anywhere to land. We use these situations either to wake ourselves up or to put ourselves to sleep.*

*I remember so vividly a day in early spring when my whole reality gave out on me. Although it was before I had heard any Buddhist teachings, it was what some would call a genuine spiritual experience. It happened when my husband told me something terrible. We lived in northern New Mexico. I was standing in front of our adobe house drinking a cup of tea.*

*I heard the car drive up and the door bang shut. Then he walked around the corner, and without warning he told me that he was having an affair and he wanted a divorce.*

*I remember the sky and how huge it was. I remember the sound of the river and the steam rising up from my tea. There was no time, no thought, there was nothing—just the light and a profound, limitless stillness. Then I regrouped and picked up a stone and threw it at him . . .*

*The truth is that he saved my life. When that marriage fell apart, I tried hard—very, very hard—to go back to some kind of comfort, some kind of security, some kind of familiar resting place. Fortunately for me, I could never pull it off.*

*Instinctively I knew that annihilation of my old dependent, clinging self was the only way to go. That's when I pinned that sign up on my wall: "Life is a good teacher and a good friend."*

Life **is** a good teacher and a good friend. Things are always in transition, if we could only realize it. But, as I said at the outset, we all have our blind spots.

Nothing ever sums itself up in the way that we like to dream about. The off-center, in-between state (The Red Sea place) is an ideal situation, a situation in which we find we can't stay put forever.

It's the place we find, if we are lucky, that we can open our hearts and minds beyond limit. It's a very tender, non-aggressive, open-ended state of mind.

To stay with that shakiness--to stay with a broken heart, with a rumbling stomach, with the feeling of hopelessness and wanting to get revenge – examining it, that can be the path of true awakening.

Sticking with that uncertainty, getting the knack of patience in the midst of chaos, learning how to breathe in the midst of that so as not to panic--this is the spiritual path.

In the year King Uzziah died everything fell apart . . . God became real for Isaiah for the first time. And the same can be true for us.

Are you maybe at a Red Sea place in your life? Might you find yourself being pulled by some magnet we might call God (or a higher power) toward a new future? A new life? A different level of meaning and purpose than you have known before?

Might life have dropped a question on your plate – a question that asks you if you will be willing, now, or soon, maybe, to step forward and accept a call of some sort you may have put off for a pretty long time?

Isaiah said, “Send me,” but who knows how long he said, “Send someone else” before he finally gave in ... to God – to himself ?

The good news and the bad news is this: To be empty of everything is to find yourself full of God.

Amen