

## Those Things Not Seen

The lectionary reading from the Letter to the Hebrews was much longer than the few verses which were read this morning. The complete selection included not only Hebrews 11:1-3, but also 8-16 which speaks of Abraham's obedience to God's initial call to leave his father's tent and journey to an unnamed place which God would show him. Upon his obedience he would then receive this place as an inheritance. The story of Abraham and his journey is a foundational story of faith—although if examined closely, there are clearly many ups and downs within that journey on Abraham's part. What seemed to resonate strongly from this text both with the Isaiah passage and the gospel text were those first few verses which actually seem to define faith: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith, we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible." We as human beings have a great deal of trouble dealing with those things that are not visible. Our focus is almost always on those things that we can see, touch, count, and yes, possess. That is probably why one of the most frequent things Jesus says as he is calling and teaching his disciples is some version of the phrase which begins the passage from Luke this morning: "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." Because once we have those things that we can see, touch, count and possess, we almost immediately experience the fear of losing them. For much of Jesus' ministry, he proclaimed that God's kingdom or reign was near. It seems that human beings have a hard time seeing the nearness of God's kingdom. That is one of the things that to us falls into the category of things hoped for, but is for the most part remains unseen. Isaiah 1:1 tells us that the prophet was a visionary; in short, he did not see the world as you and I see it. In fact, one of my current favorite authors and theologians, Walter Brueggemann, contends that all of the prophets were visionaries because they did not see the world as others did. Instead they saw it as God called them to see it. God called them to see it as God had created it to be. When Jesus proclaimed God's kingdom near, as when he took the scroll of Isaiah in Luke 4, and proclaimed that scripture had been fulfilled in their hearing what was proclaimed was this: "he has appointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year the Lord's favor." That Isaiah passage referred to the plan laid out for how the people of God were to live in community here on earth—not to some reign that would only happen in heaven, a distant place with a God that was distant from them here on earth. This plan was contained in the extensive laws found in Deuteronomy. It was given to the people as God led them and was among them in the desert on the way to the Promised Land. Throughout scriptures we have the record of God's calls to people; God's clear statements of what he desires from them in this relationship initiated so long ago. Our passage from Isaiah this morning seems to be a critique of what we offer instead of what God desires. At this point in history, Judah, at least those at the top of the economic scale were living well. However, the gap between rich and poor was wide and getting wider. The plan which God had designed for his covenant people was based on equity, there was no gap. That had equity had disappeared. What Isaiah describes is the enthusiasm of the people at the top for costly sacrifices—the bringing of burnt offerings and incense; the appointed festivals and solemn assemblies while ignoring those who

were marginalized. God's response to these offerings of theirs is: "they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them." God's critique is rather harsh: When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers I will not listen; your hands are full of blood." Of course, God is ever full of mercy and grace, so this rejection is not left at that; it is not permanent. Instead, immediately we have the call to return to the ways of the covenant. "Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice; rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow." In other words, the appearance of righteousness in the covenant community in which systemic injustice is allowed to exist does not find favor in the eyes of God. That type of worship is a type of self deception for the worshiping community. It reinforces what the people want to believe about themselves and their world; it allows the comfortable the ignoring of uncomfortable reality and requires no change in them or their lifestyle. The juxtaposition of the human vision and God's vision of reality seems to be a clash between what is seen and what remains unseen. Jesus said the kingdom is near. Could it be that simple—or that hard? In this passage from Luke, Jesus' gives this instruction, "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." This is followed by: "Sell your possessions, and give alms." Jesus is affirming God as always, desires for us to live within God's reign; the invitation is always open. Jesus also seems to be telling us that there is a connection between our holding on to the things that are visible; those things that we not only see but possess can be an issue because the possession of those things often comes between those things that God desires—the caring for the vulnerable, the living together as the covenant community; in fact, to the inability of God's reign to come to earth. Jesus then instructs us to make purses for ourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. Verses like these are difficult for those whose faith is rooted in God's grace and mercy. Unfortunately, in our human nature we like to cling to them. Much like those to whom Isaiah spoke about the burnt offerings and the solemn assemblies, these can seem to indicate that our actions can "store up" God's favor. The truth is that we cannot "earn" God's grace. Remember, Jesus tells us that it is God's good pleasure to give us the kingdom. But then we are urged not to accumulate, and in Luke's passage this is done with some urgency. Because, the more we accumulate, the more those possessions assume importance; the less importance God and others have in our lives. In God's vision, community and relationship between God's self and members of the community are what is important. We sometimes fail to distinguish between "having to do something" to earn God's love—which is a gift, and the response which is called forth when we realize and accept the gift that God's love and mercy are in our lives. God's love and mercy toward us does call us as those who follow the teachings of his Son to witness to those teachings, to try to live out those teaching of love for our neighbor and our enemy, to see the world and others as our Lord would have us see—to see the unseen kingdom of God among us and give thanks for God's grace and mercy in our lives. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.