

FOR THEY SHALL SEE GOD

By Steve Zeisler

I discovered recently that Peninsula Bible Church and I are the same age. We both just turned 40. Birthdays ending in a zero tend to be times for reflection; for measuring the distance traveled and for charting a course for the future. I propose that we examine ourselves-church at age 40--that we lift our sights from "business as usual" and look clearly at the purposes of God for us. The messages I want to present over the next weeks all have the word "awaken" in the title. They all concern times when God invaded the life of an individual in a revolutionary way, granting them a vital awareness of himself, and new understanding of their own hearts.

We are currently in the process of attending to our church's grounds and facilities through a renovation program. After years of heavy use we need to prop up the sags, oil the creaks, and apply fresh paint. In my own experience, I find it more difficult to prop up the sags; and to deal with appearance takes more effort than it used to. Although external shoring-up is necessary, a more important arena for renewal is in the inner man. As a church, as well as individually, we need to be willing to let God give us new vitality, and to clear out problems that we have allowed to fester.

A REVOLUTIONARY ENCOUNTER

As an introduction to this series, I want to consider two verses in the 42nd chapter of Job that have been a particular challenge to me along these lines. Job 42:5,6:

**"I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear;
But now my eye sees Thee;
Therefore I retract,
And I repent in dust and ashes."**

The book of Job begins with the attention of heaven focused on Job, a righteous man, who loved the things of God and lived a righteous life. He was extraordinarily successful in all of his relationships and endeavors. Then Satan asked the fateful question: Does Job fear God for nothing?

To answer this, God allowed an experiment to go forth in which Job was tested through the loss of all that he held dear. The majority of the rest of the book is a series of discussions between Job and his so-called comforters. At the end of the entire process, God appeared and confronted Job in a whirlwind. Having been overwhelmed by the presence of God himself, Job declared: "I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear; But now my eye sees Thee; Therefore I retract, and I repent in dust and ashes."

There are two main points I want to stress in these verses. The first is Job's analysis of his past: "I had heard, I now see." The second point is the result of his analysis. What is his response? Those will be the two halves of our consideration during this study.

What does Job mean in v.5 by announcing to God that he had heard of him but now sees him? He is not making a distinction between eyes and ears. If we apprehend God through any of our senses we'll find him revolutionary. The difference that Job is highlighting here is not distinguishing one sense from another, but rather in moving from a condition where God is at a distance to a condition where God is close, personal and overwhelming. This is the difference between an impersonal knowledge about God and a life-changing, intimate knowledge of a living God. It's the difference between a vital spiritual life and one that is merely routine; the difference between joy and duty; the difference between a God whom we know inwardly and fully versus one who we know externally and hollowly; the difference between honesty and phoniness.

In spiritual middle age we must face the recognition that we are no longer young. The good news is no longer new. Nor are we yet those whom John calls "fathers," whose service has led to a deep intimacy with God, "you have known him who is from the beginning" (1 John 2:13). The grave danger of being in the middle is that things can become routine, familiar, and impersonal.

Tim Stafford has written about this problem:

"We are forced toward an uncomfortable double vision. The stories and promises of the Bible offer a banquet to fill our hunger, yet we live underfed lives. We drag out of bed in the morning, force our eyes to focus on the words of Scripture, mumble words into space, and get moving toward work where God may not even be mentioned, where he certainly does not appear.

We are so numb we hardly notice our poverty. Occasionally, tragedy forces us to see our lack of satisfaction and we pray more forcefully with the Psalmist, "Lord, show me your face." But the clock ticks on, one day rolls over into the next. We can spend forever asking speculative questions about the whereabouts of God. God who is only heard of, who is only known about and not known in the sense that we long to know him."

GOD IN A BOX

The major portion of the book of Job is a series of discussions that take place between Job and the "comforters" who appear to Job at his absolute worst. After losing his family, his fortune, his business and his health these friends spoke with him as he sat in his sorrow and loneliness.

One of the characteristics of the dialogue is the off-hand familiarity which Job and his friends have with God. It's as if they have a theological checklist that defines his personality; they have him contained within a system. Bildad the Shuhite (in 8:5-8) remarks,

"But if you will look to God and plead with the Almighty, if you are pure and upright even now he will rouse himself on your behalf and restore you to your rightful place.

Your beginnings will seem humble,so prosperous will your future be.

Ask the former generations and find out what their fathers learned..."

Bildad is voicing the general sentiment expressed by both sides in the dialogue: "I know what God is like, and if you would just do as I say, God is bound to do his part. Unfortunately, Job answers in much the same way. in Chapter 23, he says:

**"If only I knew where to find him;
If only I could go to his dwelling!**

**I would state my case before him and fill my mouth with arguments.
I would find out what he would answer me, and consider what he would say.**

**Would he oppose me with great power?
No, he would not press charges against me.**

There an upright man could present his case before him, and I would be delivered from my Judge."

Job's answer echoes Bildad's: "I am completely familiar with God, and I know what he's like. If I could find my way to him we'd have a discussion, and I would be delivered." This was Job's "heard of Thee with the hearing of the ear."

UNPREDICTABLE

One of the geniuses of C.S. Lewis in "The Chronicles of Narnia" is that the Christ figure is drawn as a lion whose roar throws worlds into existence. A refrain in the last of the series states, "Aslan is not a tame lion."

He is holy and merciful, gentle and terrifying; but not tame. In our desire to make God containable he becomes familiar and predictable. We want the information to all line up, and the boxes to fit neatly together. When we react this way, we become like Job, hearing of him with our ears; but losing sight of God as a person.

The same phenomenon can occur in marriage. Not long ago a woman came alone to see me for marriage counseling. I suggested she and her husband come together but she didn't think that was necessary. As we began discussing her situation it became apparent that she had defined who her husband was by the pattern of his reactions to her. She used the words "never" and "always" to explain what he was like in their relationship. I would suggest trying different approaches in dealing with him, but she would rebut any suggestion I made by explaining with certainty, how he respond to each new effort on her part. I realized, the longer we talked, that she had stopped treating her husband as a living person-he had become a pattern of predictable habits. She had. simplified the complexity of his character into a series of external responses.

On the "Sergeant Pepper" album, the Beatles sang about a teenager who ran away from home. After her parents found a note explaining that she had gone, they discussed their feelings: "We gave her most of our lives, sacrificed most of our lives. We gave her everything money could buy. We never thought of ourselves, never a thought for ourselves. We struggled hard all our lives to get by." The refrain running on in the background is "She's leaving home, after living alone for so many years. Bye, bye." The point is the same. Knowledge, information, investment, concern, everything money could buy, and yet she was living alone. Isolated from people who desired to know her in her uniqueness, she had given up hope and run away. Likewise, too many of us live that kind of relationship with God. We fill ourselves with information about him, but have very little touch with a real person who can be known and is willing to know us.

HOW SHALL WE RESPOND?

What is the reaction of the man in Job's condition who is confronted in a radical way by the presence of God? Suddenly Job realized that God was immense, powerful, and knowable; God speaks. What results would we predict for someone encountering the Almighty in this way? On a shallow level, many of us might expect Job to raise in stature. A lot of "pop" Christianity suggests that when God draws near, individuals immediately become more electric, more powerful, more impressive. They can do. more and say more, the miraculous takes place, signs and wonders burst forth, preaching becomes powerful. In contrast, that is not what happens in Scripture when a revolution of knowing God takes place. Inevitably, the person ends up falling face down. As with Job, they find that there is the problem of rebellion, pride, a covering up of sin that they had been unaware of throughout their lives. With the white-hot presence and light of God shining in their lives, they hate the sin that they have covered and previously disregarded.

Remember Jesus's words on the Sermon on the Mount: "Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name?" That is, we had a lot to say about you Lord. We spoke incessantly about you and in your name drove out demons and performed many miracles. Signs, wonders drama, power, authority. "And I will tell them plainly I never knew you. Away from me you evil doer."

THE NEED FOR REPENTANCE

Our drawing near to God as he really is must lead us first into the experience of seeing our own sinfulness and failure, our personal need for a Savior. It eventuates in the Lord standing us on our feet again, cleansed to serve him. However, we cannot proceed from point A to point C without going through point B, the acknowledgement of our need. That was Job's word: "Therefore I retract and I repent in dust and ashes." He is confessing, "Oh Lord, it was an absolute affront to you that I spoke of you the way I did. It was a horrible, prideful, love of myself that ever allowed me to treat you as if you were not sovereign. I repent of it all."

Here is Isaiah's account of his experience of seeing God high and lifted up:

"In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphim, each with six

wings and they were calling to each other, 'Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty. The whole earth is full of his glory.' At the sound of their voices, the doorposts and thresholds shook. The temple was filled with smoke. 'Woe to me,' I cried, 'I am ruined, for I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips. and my eyes have seen the King the Lord Almighty.' Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the alter. With it he touched my mouth and said, 'See this has touched your lips, your guilt is taken away, your sin is atoned for.'" (Is. 6:1-7)

An old friend of mine and I were walking and talking together the other day. He is a man trying to do right in a relationship that is important to both him and God. He talked about the revolution in his understanding of the depth of his sinfulness. In the past when he had thought about his own sin it usually had to do with such things as anger, lust, prejudice, or greed. He knew he was capable of unhealthy habit patterns, engaged in them, recognized them to be sinful, and repented. As a result of this relationship, however, desperation had dawned on him that his best efforts were laden with sin. Even when he determined that he would pray first, apply the biblical principles, listen to his counselors, and do the righteous thing in the fullness of hope, that even then he contributed sinful, negative things to the mix. He had come upon the awful realization that his best efforts were not good enough.

As he spoke, I observed that God is building a man. He is taking my friend through the plaintive call of Isaiah, "Woe is me, I am undone," so that the touch of the coal of God on his lips can bring forgiveness, restoration, and wholeness. The process must include the humbling realization that the nearness of God reveals us as we are, and should elicit a cry from us that there is something terribly wrong that we must face if we are to be healed.

In his book "The Cross of Christ," John Stott says,

"The kind of God that appeals to most people today would be easy-going in his tolerance of our offenses. He would be gentle, kind, accommodating. He would have no violent reactions. Unhappily, even in the church we seemed to have lost the vision of the majesty of God. There is much shallowness and levity among us. Prophets and psalmists would probably say of us, "There is no fear of God before their eyes".... It is more characteristic of us to clap our hands with joy than to blush with shame or tears. We saunter up to God to claim his patronage and friendship; it does not occur to us that he might send us away. We need to hear again the Apostle Peter's sobering words, "Since you call on a father who judges each man's work impartially, live your lives. . in reverent fear." (I Peter 1:17) In other words, if we dare to call our judge our Father, we must beware of presuming on him. It must even be said that our evangelical emphasis on the atonement is dangerous if we come to it too quickly. We learn to appreciate the access to God which Christ has won only after we have first cried, "Woe is me for I am lost."

CLEANSING AND RESTORATION

My point is not to dwell on the sinfulness of man, our own uncleanness, and end there. Isaiah was cleansed by the activity of God. Job repented, and was given life in the sight of God again. We finally appreciate the cross because we have had to face the terribleness of our rebellion. We should not end in morbid self hatred, but neither can we get to a holy, vital, cleansed relationship with God by leaping there immediately. When he invades, we must go through a cleansing process.

The apostle Paul says in I Corinthians 13 that we now see only through a dark glass, but that the day is coming when we will see God face to face. There is no time in this life when we will be permitted to encounter God fully because we do not yet have resurrection bodies fit for such an encounter. There are times, however, when the Lord reaches out to us and invades our experience in such a way that he is more clearly seen than he was before. The glass is less dark and he is more personally known-- "now my eye sees Thee, therefore I repent."

What response can we make to these things? We cannot bid God to appear to us. Even so, we can make choices. We can live expectantly. We can start choosing to look for God in our lives, in creation, in history, in Scripture, and in Christian fellowship. No encounter need be "merely human." Every created thing can teach

us something about the Creator. When I read the words of Scripture, I must ask what the heavenly Author of the words is saying to me personally. We should live expectantly, refusing to settle for the innocuous, routine, spiritual living that comes with knowing God at a distance.

Most importantly, we can be willing to see ourselves as we are. The cosmetics industry, the fashion industry, the diet industry, the plastic surgery industry all are testimony that most of us would rather not face reality. Yet we must be willing to say, "Lord, I want to know you, and I'm willing to look at myself in the process. I am willing to undergo what men and women in other ages have undergone, falling to my face, calling out for help, requiring the work of the Savior."

Isaiah 64:1-9 is a prayer that expresses longing for God and confession of sin. I call upon all of us to pray with the prophet of spiritual renewal:

"O that you would rend the heavens and come down. That the mountains would tremble before you as when fire sets twigs ablaze and causes water to boil. Come down to make your name known to your enemies. Cause the nations to quake before you. For when you did awesome things that we did not expect, you came down and the mountains trembled before you. Since ancient times no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you who acts on behalf of those who wait for him. You come to the help of those who gladly do right, who remember your way. But when we continue to sin against your ways you are angry. How then can we be saved? All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags. We all shrivel up like a leaf, like the wind our sins sweep us away. No one calls on your name or strives to lay hold of you. You have hidden your face from us and made us waste away because of our sin. Yet, O Lord, you are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter. We are all the work of your hand. Do not be angry beyond measure, O Lord; Do not remember our sins forever. Oh, look upon us we pray, for we are all your people."

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