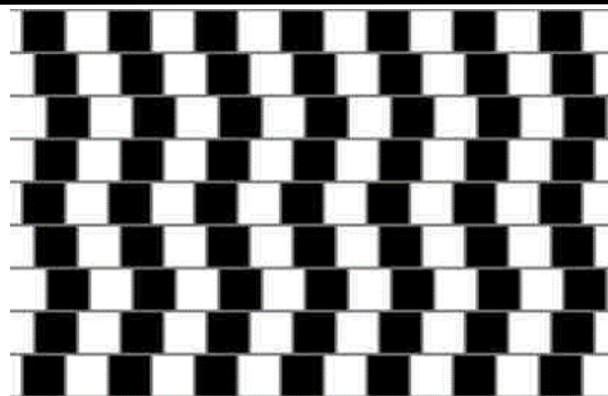

Don't Let Your Eyes Deceive You! (Isaiah 35:1-10)
12/11/2016 Sermon by Pastor Jason Liebenow



Take a look at the image in front of you. Are the horizontal lines perfectly parallel or not? Now look at the image from the side and tilt it away from you. Now how would you answer? This is one of many optical illusions people have created. Our perceptions of the world are not always accurate.



Today, as we continue our Christmas with Isaiah, we will see that in God's kingdom, things are not always as they seem. Today, our God warns us: Don't Let Your Eyes Deceive You!

Our lesson for today is filled with optical illusion imagery. We start with a joyless place and Isaiah tells us that it will be glad. Isaiah shows us a dangerous and lifeless desert but then he says that it will blossom into a lush garden, a place thriving with life and vegetation! We see people who have weak hands, staggering knees, and anxious hearts, but Isaiah tells them to be strong, because their God is coming.

Isaiah then, in verse 4 and onward, tells us what God's coming will look like, and again, it will be characterized by these optical illusions. You see people who are blind? God's coming will make them see. You see people who are deaf? God's coming will make them hear. You see people who are lame and mute? God's coming will make them leap and shout for joy!

Isaiah then brings us again to that lifeless place we call a desert, and he tells us that life-giving water will flood out of this dead place. The desert will become a pool and even be filled with plants that only grow in water!

Fast forward to our gospel lesson where we see Isaiah's words so clearly fulfilled. In our gospel lesson, we find John the Baptist, that great prophet, that great forerunner of God's coming Messiah! He was the one who was privileged to announce the fulfillment of God's promise of salvation for the entire world! What more glorious purpose could God give to any human being?

But we don't find this glorious man in glory, do we? He has not found the good life. He does not have health, wealth, love, happiness, the admiration of his peers. Instead he sits in a dungeon. All of his faithful work has only rewarded him with the punishment that a common criminal would receive. What was the point of all his efforts?

John, understandably, may have begun to feel some doubts at this point. Even though John had seen the Holy Spirit descend on Jesus announcing him to truly be the Messiah, things really didn't look like the Messiah had come.

But even if John didn't have doubts, his followers certainly did. John had been this powerful prophet. He had spoken boldly and been a dynamic leader. He had boldly pointed out the sins of their society even to powerful leaders, but still, as John sat in a dungeon, it seemed that all of John's efforts had been for nothing.

But even in this bleak desert, even in this place that seemed spiritually dead, life was blossoming. As John's followers come to Jesus to ask if he truly is the Messiah, Jesus points them back to Isaiah's words. The blind and the deaf see and hear. The lame and the mute jump and shout for joy!

Jesus did not simply heal those many people 2000 years ago so that they could live a more enjoyable life for a few more years. Jesus healed them, more importantly, to show that God's promises were coming true. Promises like we read in Isaiah!

Jesus wanted to strengthen John's feeble hands. Jesus wanted to steady the knees of John's followers which were giving way. And Jesus wanted to say to everyone with fearful hearts, "*Be strong, do not fear, your God has come!*"

Do you ever see the world like John and his followers did? Do you ever feel like our society is a spiritual wasteland? People don't seem to care about God or the church. Immorality runs rampant! It looks like the ravages of sin are going to dismantle the very foundations of the society we live in.

Do you ever feel like the Church has lost the life it once had? There are people who call themselves Christians and yet fall into these hideous scandals. Faithful Christians who are serving God seem to end up just like John. They seem weak,

lonely, broken. Even at our church here, we aren't seeing huge growth, but decline.

Do you ever feel like your own soul is a spiritual desert? Do King David's words from Psalm 51, "*Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me,*" do those words ring all too true for you? Do you feel that all the time you have spent in God's Word and serving God has left you in a place similar to where John the Baptist found himself? Do you feel inadequate to live the kind of life that God demands in his word?

Dear Christian friends, today Isaiah speaks to us. He says, "Strengthen your feeble hands. Steady your knees that give way. Be strong. Do not fear. Your God will come." Don't let your eyes deceive you! At Jesus' first coming, he brought life to this desert of a world. He, by his perfect life and innocent death, has shown himself to be the water of life which is gushing into our spiritual desert!

And ever since Jesus ascended into heaven, history has shown spiritual life blossoming from this world of sin as the gospel has spread from a tiny country called Israel and has reached the farthest corners of the world! Even today God's love is leading people to repentance and forgiveness of their sins.

Look at what our God is accomplishing in places like China where Christianity is illegal and the church must stay underground. But speak to our missionaries there and you will hear about the incredible droves that are flocking to our God!

Go to an LWMS rally and hear the stories shared by missionaries all over the world and even here in our own country; stories about sinners turning from their ways and experiencing the blossoming of the new life that Christ brings to this world.

Even in this place, whatever the future of the United States is, we know that we are citizens of a greater nation, a greater kingdom: the Kingdom of Heaven. And that nation will never fall apart. Instead, it is daily gushing forgiveness, the waters of life, into the lives of thirsty sinners.

And God is bringing that new life to you as well. Going back to Isaiah 35, he speaks of a highway that has appeared in this formerly dead place which has blossomed with life. He calls that highway the Way of Holiness. This is the path

back to God. And by God's grace, you are walking that path. By faith in Jesus' good works and in his death in our place, you are walking that holy path back to God.

And notice what Isaiah says is not on that path. The unclean are not there. Whatever sins have soiled your life, whatever wrongs have made you unworthy to stand before God, whatever deficiencies you perceive that keep you from God and his ways, God has washed them away through his Son Jesus. Therefore you have been made clean by Jesus' blood and you belong on the Way of Holiness.

Wicked fools are not there. Whatever foolish things you have done, whatever actions that haunt you with regret over the past, God has made you wise in the most basic and essential way. God has made you wise for salvation. Therefore you have been cured of your foolishness and you belong on the Way of Holiness.

Ravenous beasts are not there. Whatever harm you have brought to others, whatever ways you may have been destructive to God's church, Jesus has forgiven you. He will heal any pain you may have caused and he will bring you healing for the pain others may have caused you. Furthermore, God by bringing true spiritual life to you has made you a light so that you may point others to Jesus, the true water of life. Therefore you have been made a constructive part of God's kingdom and you belong on the Way of Holiness.

Isaiah concludes his words for us today with this comfort: whatever our eyes may see, God has told us that his people will enter heaven with everlasting joy crowning our heads. Gladness and joy will overtake us, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.

Therefore, don't let your eyes deceive you. Strengthen your feeble hands as you fight sin in your own daily life. Steady your knees that may want to give way as you stand up for what is right in this sinful world. Be strong and do not fear, no matter what you may see. Because your God will come. Amen.