

Isaiah 32

“See” “Behold” “Imagine”

Objectives:

- **To invite us as a community to imagine possibility and open up to the Spirit.**
- **To invite us to be honest and risk action**
- **To invite us to hold the tension of the present moment and imagining possibilities**

“See”

“Behold”

“Imagine...”

The prophet and author of the first part of Isaiah, calls us to “see”.

Not literally to see with our physical eyes, but to imagine.

To see in our minds ‘eye’ – a nation where leaders’ first concern is to look after their people.

To address their needs.

Don’t we all long for leaders who would set up systems to:

- Hide us away from wind and shelter us from storms
- Provide streams of water when we thirst
- Sustain us with shade and a resting place when we are weary?

Whatever the office - Queen, Prime minister, Mayor, CEO, Priest, Bishop, parent.

Humanity is looking for leadership that is fair and servant-like.

Something of what Jesus modelled.

Leader who will rule with justice and right-relatedness to bring peace.

Let me give you a little background to this scripture passage.

It’s a bit dense, but bear with me.

When Isaiah wrote chapter 32 - it was around mid 8th century BCE.

You will remember that at this time Israel’s leaders like Moses and Joshua, Samson, Deborah and the other Judges were no longer perceived as sufficient. The nation was discontent and asked to be governed by a king.

Saul was their first King (started well and ended poorly), David was their second (and most favoured King), and Solomon their third.

After Solomon, the nation divided into two - the Israel and Judah.

And then there were many Kings...

Some did what was right in the eyes of the Lord and some did not... the books of Kings and Chronicles describe the ups and downs of the monarchies of Israel and of Judah.

Judah was in poor shape – King Ahaz would not listen to the words of God spoken through the prophet Isaiah. Ahaz led Judah into an alliance with Assyria. This ultimately assisted Assyria to capture their neighbour Israel. Once their kin.

Israel was certainly not blameless - they were fixated on silver and gold and their rulers were exercising unjust power. Isaiah's words to Israel are harsh. He announces that they would soon they would be attacked by the Assyrians, as God's punishment.

Chapters 28-31 gives a picture of Unjust Kings, Judgement, more judgment, AND THEN...

AND then Chapter 32

Our first scripture this morning, breaks the pattern, with the word "See"

See
Behold
Imagine.

Imagine... Imagine it was different.
Peace, rest, shade, unity.

I grew up with a vivid imagination. I could sit for hours in the same chair and dream.
Dreams are powerful. And imagination is a creative act.
My Mom would jokingly say: sometimes Sharon sits and thinks and sometimes she just sits!
The well-known words of A.A. Milne (author of Winnie the Pooh).

I had a whole world in my mind.
Some of this world was shaped by my faith in God.

Our faith as followers of Christ is fueled by our imagination.
An imagination informed by reason, by scripture, by tradition, and by the wisdom of past experience.
It is a creative act to imagine the world a different way. It takes practice.
We do it best in community.

I remember a day we gathered in Johannesburg South Africa. It was 1996.
My late husband and I were leaders of a church plant and we had a growing youth group of 25 high school kids, mostly Caucasian.

We sat on that day with Cindy and Mark, Xhosa speaking friends. They ran a growing youth group of 20 kids mostly Xhosa speaking.

Imagine if it were different... and we began a process of combining the groups.

Imagination informed by reason (better use of resources), informed by scriptures (God favours unity in diversity), by the wisdom of past experience (our apartheid schooling damaged us – let's do something better for these youth).
And we discovered new possibilities...

Isaiah invites us to join him in something Walter Brueggemann calls prophetic imagination.
To see, to imagine. To re-imagine...

To imagine a way forward beyond just the way things are at all levels of society.

- Where governing systems are held accountable to be more just.
- Where economic markets really do trickle down.
- Where we gather in church to be transformed, to engage in thinking critically about our context and the way of Jesus...
- Where our families and friendships energize us to make a difference...

Isaiah invites us to join him in his prophetic imagination.

But what is prophetic imagination?

What is Isaiah calling us to “see with our minds eye”?

(1) First what prophetic imagination is not?

- **Prophetic imagination is not** idealizing the future to escape the past or present.
 - o The most extreme example of this is dissociation – when during a traumatic experience a person's mind transports them out of the circumstance to somewhere else in order to cope with the pain.
 - o We can create idealized futures in other ways too – we dream of recapturing the way things were in the past (with this government or that Priest) and we distance ourselves from the present.

Prophetic imagination is not idealizing the future to escape the past or present.

- **Prophetic imagination is not** about critiquing ‘them’, those people South of the border or elsewhere – it is also about taking a good honest bold look at ourselves.
- **Prophetic imagination is not** about grand gestures or speeches, it is living a new way in all of life... often the hardest thing to do.
- **Prophetic imagination is not** only complaining – although it usually starts there...

What prophetic imagination is not... now what it is...

- (2) **Second - what Prophetic imagination is:** And for this I turn to a contemporary example in Northern Island.

Padraig O Tauma is a Northern Irish catholic. That is important information when you are from that part of the world.

He is part of a spiritual community that offers refuge to Protestants and Catholics.

Imagine that...

"Over cups of tea, and over the experience of bringing people together," Pádraig says, it becomes possible "to talk with each other and be in the same room with the people we talk about."

- **Prophetic imagination starts with where we are.**

In Padraig's book "In the Shelter".

He offers a helpful spiritual practice. For the process of re-imagining.

It starts with a simple hello.

To say hello to here.

To simply say hello to what we are experiencing at a given time.

He invites us into honesty with ourselves in all its complexity.

Today - I might say - Hello to the excitement of starting at St Catherine's AND hello to the sense of weightiness of taking on this task.

You might say hello to excitement of a new Vicar AND hello to the grief of saying goodbye to Sharon 1.0 (Solomons)

We might say Hello to Canada Day and hello to all the years of indigenous peoples' oppression.

Padraig says that saying hello to all that we are experiencing, stops us from taking the leap forward into an uninformed imagination. One that is disconnected and idealistic.

God is in our now. And invites us to be present to all that is.

Hello to here.

Prophetic imagination starts with where we are...

- **Prophetic Imagination takes practice**

Padraig offers a rather innocent imaginative exercise.

In prayer, he invited a group of young people to close their eyes and imagine themselves taking a walk. This walk was to a pleasant place of their own choosing, at a time of their own choosing. At one point, they see a stranger coming toward them and they realize it is Jesus. He greets them by their name and then if they chose, they say something to him. And wait for his response.

"I asked Jesus why my gran had to die" He said: "there was a lot wrong with her" and then he held my hand, like a friend.

“Jesus was like a therapist” one girl said. “He listened to me”.
“I asked Jesus why he made protestants” I’m still waiting for his reply.

Hello to honest questions. Hello to expanding imaginations.

Prophetic imagination is:

1. To open ourselves up to the things God cares about in a moment of risky honesty
2. To complain, to critique, to speak out... and then
3. To open up to a different perspective... to new possibility.
4. To SEE, BEHOLD, IMAGINE
5. Awaiting the stirrings of the Spirit of Christ...

Prophetic Imagination holds despair and hope together.

After chapters of judgement and complaint, Isaiah invites us to see differently. To imagine.

I invite you to pay attention to what the Spirit is stirring in you...

Whether it’s a government policy, your neighbours next door, a colleague at work, recycling.

To notice it – say hello to it.

And to talk about it... with the intention of opening up to “see” differently.

To pray and imagine possibilities...

To try things out.

As Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu says:

“Without God we cannon, without us God will not”

See.

Behold.

Imagine.