

Isaiah 29:11-19
“Wonder Upon Wonder”
14th Sunday af. Pentecost

August 26, 2018
Our Redeemer Lutheran Church
Vicar Otterman

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God, Our Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Amen.

[Introduction]

Brothers and sisters in Christ, I remember that when I was about six or seven years old, I used to lay on the sofa in our living room with my feet up on the cushions where my head should have been and my head hanging over the edge of the seat where my legs should have been. I laid upside down like that for as long as I could and imagined that it was not me but the rest of the world that was flipped upside down.

From that position it looked like the coffee table, T.V., and my mother’s piano were all stuck inexplicably to the ceiling. Sometimes my sister would walk through on her way to the kitchen, and I watched closely, expecting her to fall at each gravity defying step, only to have her turn and make a face at me as if I were the strange one!

If I laid there long enough, I could almost convince myself that the world really was upside down, even feeling an uneasiness in my gut that if I released my grip on the sofa cushions I would fall and crash into the overhead light.

As easy as it was to imagine the world had flipped upside down, it is even easier, if not our normal condition to view the world upside-down spiritually and believe that what we see is right-side-up.

[God’s people turn things upside down (vv 13-16)]

In our scripture reading from Isaiah, God addresses his people saying, “Ah, you who hide deep from the LORD your counsel, whose deeds are in the dark, and who say, ‘Who sees us? Who knows us?’ You turn things upside down! Shall the potter be regarded as the clay, that the thing made should say of its maker, ‘He did not make me’; or the thing formed say of him who formed it, ‘He has no understanding’?”

Humanity's sinful instinct is to become independent from God. In the ancient world, nations forged idols, believing an upside-down fantasy in which they thought they had power and influence over their false gods through ritual and sacrifice.

Israel too, decided again and again that it knew better than God. In their attempt to create a great and glorious kingdom, Israel's kings turned away from God and put their trust in the strength of their neighboring nations. Instead of trusting their God who had parted the Red Sea and rescued them from Egypt, the God who gave sons to old men and barren women and who toppled the walls of Jericho, Israel put their faith in foreign armies and false gods.

Even as they sacrificed in the temple, giving the outward appearance of devotion, they did not trust their creator to protect them. They saw the mighty men of invading nations, fear overtook their hearts, and their world flipped upside-down.

[Our upside-down world]

Society throughout the ages teaches us to see strength in terms of success—in money, independence, and popularity. As members of God's family, even if we are stalwart in His Word, there are moments and areas of our lives in which we may not even realize that we have twisted our sight upside-down.

We are upside down—

- When it sounds like too much effort to love someone on the peripheral.
- When we think we don't need to go to church because we're doing just fine on our own.
- When we only evangelize to the people we like.
- When we are unwilling to bless others with our money, because it's ours.
- When we hold back our forgiveness, because so-in-so doesn't deserve it yet.

Just like the Pharisees in Mark's Gospel, it is easy to fall into the trap of focusing so closely on our own holiness that we praise ourselves for not being like this

hypocrite over here or that sinner over there. We forget that nothing in us is holy except what we receive from Jesus.

We put on airs inwardly and outwardly, because we know better or look better or act better than other people. We are all saved by God's grace, but surely, we must deserve it at least a little more than that guy! God owes that much!

[Wonders upon wonders]

God does not want us to live upside-down. In fact, the whole story of Israel and the church, which are united in Jesus is about God turning things right-side-up again. The hard part is that before we can see the world rightly, God first has to destroy our upside-down fantasy. In Isaiah God does this for Israel by performing wonder upon wonder among his people.

In the Old Testament, the word for wonder often refers to God's mighty deeds, like splitting the red sea, or his constant authority over the winds and the waves.

As you've been learning over the past year, God's will is that we are saved and have eternal life, but sometimes His methods, these **wonders**, don't seem very helpful. It can feel like God is tearing us down instead of building us up.

God sent Assyria as the tool of his judgement upon His people who had discarded Him. All of their self-confidence and self-righteousness was destroyed thanks to the Assyrians. Israel was not strong enough to protect itself, and what strength they thought they had was taken away completely. The cities were pillaged and plundered, and the people were carried off into exile. They wouldn't humble themselves, so God had Assyria do it for them.

But then God performed another **wonder**. He promised restoration, and indeed, thanks to His servant, the Persian king, Cyrus, the remnant of Israel was sent home. Israel had no doubt that their fate was not in their hands but in God's, and having learned this, God came to their rescue.

[The greatest wonder]

Sometimes we need to suffer a little to begin to shake us out of our upside-down fantasy and turn us right-side-up again. It's usually not as harsh as being invaded by an Assyrian army and cast into exile, but it does hurt.

Sometimes it's simply the prick in our conscience when the Holy Spirit convicts us of our sin, and we realize that we haven't loved our family, friends, or neighbors the way we know we should.

Other times, our sinful actions have consequences that shake our lives, our relationships, and our confidence.

And occasionally it seems like our lives are torn apart for no reason at all.

But because of Jesus, we know God's will for our lives, that we are saved by the **wonder** he performed on the cross and joined to him in his suffering so that we can share in new life for all eternity.

As hard as it sounds and as upside-down as it seems, when we feel shaken and it feels like God isn't on our side, his Holy Spirit within us calls us back to God's Word, to remember our baptism as the mark that we belong to God's family, and to the Lord's Supper in which we regularly receive Christ's gift of forgiveness bought with his own suffering.

In those moments when God seems cold and distant, Jesus walks along with us, assuring us of his love, and as the church, we walk along with one another, comforting and caring amid suffering, because Jesus has already comforted us.

[Conclusion]

Our passage in Isaiah ends with the prophesy that the deaf will hear and the blind will see. The meek will find joy in the LORD, and the poor shall rejoice in the Holy One of Israel.

That Holy One of Israel is, ultimately, Jesus, whose Spirit daily resides in our hearts, doing wonders and flipping us right-side-up, so that when the world seems upside-down and crashes all around us, we can have hope, peace, and eternal life with him.

“Now may the God of peace... equip you with everything good that you may do his will, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.” (Heb 13:20-21)
