

# "Stop, Look, and Listen!"

Isaiah 51:1-6

August 24, 2014

11<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost

When you were a child, you perhaps learned this short and easy rule for safely crossing a busy street: stop, look, and listen. Stop: stop walking or you'll go right out into the busy street where you'll be hurt or killed. Look: look all around you – where you are on this side of the street, the street itself where you plan on crossing, and across the street where you hope to end up safely. And listen: listen for warning signs (like coming traffic which you can't yet see) or listen for comforting signs (like the sound of a traffic light changing) so you can safely cross the street).

In our text today from Isaiah, the prophet speaks words of comfort and hope to the people of Israel. His message to them which is also his message to us could be summarized in the same short traffic crossing advice: stop, look, and listen.

Isaiah addresses his message to those who are pursuing righteousness and those who are seeking the Lord. The people of Israel had rebelled against the Lord. Not only had they sinned by their worship of false gods, their obsession with wealth and pleasure, and their growing indifference to God's Word, but they refused to listen to the prophets' call for repentance. They felt they had special privileges as the chosen people of God. They could do whatever they wanted to because of their special status. They were wrong.

Isaiah's first word to them is: stop. This is the first step in pursuing righteousness and seeking the Lord. If they continue going in the same direction they were going with their sin, it would be like walking out into the traffic on a busy street. They would be destroyed. They should stop what they are doing. Consider what they are doing and repent. Turn from their sin and turn to the Lord in faith.

That message is an important one for us to hear in our day and age. We are involved in many of the same sins as the people of Israel were. We have our own little idols today which we worship

with our time and resources. We seem, at times, to have insatiable desires for wealth and pleasure. And we easily become indifferent to God's Word – both in reading it and heeding it.

Stop! We don't do that well. We are always on the move – always doing something. It is difficult for us to stop and do nothing. It's even more difficult for us to use that "stopped time" to contemplate our lives and compare them with God's commands. In the liturgies which call for "silence for reflection on God's Word and for self-examination", how long before you lose interest or feel uncomfortable – 10, 15 seconds? It is also not easy, after contemplation and self-examination, to confess sinful behavior. It is much easier and more desirable to justify or rationalize our behavior.

But if we continue on in our sinful behavior, sinful desires, and sinful words unabated, it will be like heading out into traffic. We will die and be condemned. And we cannot think that we have special standing before God simply because we are Lutheran, because we've been confirmed, or because our name is on the membership role of some church somewhere. The answer is a difficult one but one which all of us (myself included) must do and it is to stop – not in the sense of never sinning again (something which would be impossible to do), but stop to repent – to turn from sin in fear and guilt and turn to the Lord in faith and hope.

The second message of Isaiah to the people of Israel and to us is: look. The purpose of stopping and repenting is not just to make us feel bad or turn us inward on ourselves. The Lord draws us through repentance to look, not at ourselves, but to Him and all He does for us.

Isaiah tells the people to look at what the Lord had done for them in the past. "Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug. Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you; for he was but one when I called him, that I might bless him and multiply him." The Lord had called them through their ancestors, Abraham and Sarah, by making a covenant of grace with Abraham. Although they had broken the covenant on their side by their behavior, God would never break the covenant on His side. That gave them comfort and assurance.

Isaiah also tells the people to look at what the Lord was doing for them now. Although they were living in exile as punishment for their refusal to repent, Isaiah reminds them, “The Lord comforts Zion; he comforts all her waste places and make her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of the Lord; joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the voice of song.” The Lord would not forsake Israel, even as she suffered the consequences of her behavior. He comforts the people as they live in exile. Even though exile would not be pleasant, the Lord would turn that wilderness into the Garden of Eden by His very presence and comfort. The Lord would give them joy and gladness; thanksgiving and song.

Finally, Isaiah tells the people to look at what the Lord would do for them in the future. He would lead them out of exile and captivity, through the wilderness and desert, and back to the Promised Land and the Holy City – Jerusalem. They could look to the future, not only with comfort for the present situation, but with hope and confidence for the future.

Isaiah calls us to “look” as well. Through stopping and repenting, the Lord invites us to “look” at what He is doing for us. The Lord invites us to look at what He has done for us in the past. He has made a covenant with each of us in our baptism. There, He joins us to Christ and all that Christ has, all the Christ achieved, and all that Christ won for us in His ministry. You are joined to His holiness which He has by His perfect obedience to the Law of God in our place. You are joined to His forgiveness for all of your sins which He achieved for us by His suffering and dying on the cross. You are joined to His new life which He won for us by rising from the dead. While you may (and often do) break this covenant on your side, He will never break this covenant on His side. Look to your baptism and the Lord’s work there in your past.

The Lord also invites us to look at what He is doing for us in the present. As we live in exile here in the the wilderness of this life, we can look at all the Lord does for us. While not giving us a Garden of Eden to live in now, nevertheless He comforts us in our earthly exile with His presence. He speaks comfort and peace to us in and through His Word. He feeds reassurance and hope to us

with His body and blood in the Sacrament. He gives us joy and gladness, thanksgiving and song in our worship.

Finally, the Lord invites us to look at what He *will* do for us in the future. Even with all of His comfort of the past and present, the future can look pretty bleak at times. It seems so uncertain and fearful. Will our planet be destroyed in war, in an ebola pandemic, or by global warming? The Lord quiets our fears and give us hope by encouraging us, not to fear the future or hide from it, but to look to what He will do. He says, "Lift up your eyes to the heavens, and look at the earth beneath; for the heavens vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment, and they who dwell in it will die in like manner;but my salvation will be forever, and my righteousness will never be dismayed.

Yes, the present earth will wear out and the present heavens will vanish, but the salvation which has gone out to all the earth draws near. The victory which He has accomplished through Jesus Christ will last forever and never wear out or vanish. There will be a new heaven and a new earth where we will dwell with resurrected and glorified bodies. As Paul wrote to the Philippians, "we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself." (Philippians 3:20-21) Look up to that and have hope!

The third message of Isaiah to the people of Israel and to us is: listen. Twice the Lord says that to Israel, "Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness, you who seek the Lord....Give attention to me, my people, and give ear to me, my nation." Why does He say this? The ultimate problem with Israel was not the sin. The Lord knew that would happen. The big problem was that the people would not listen to the Word of the Lord spoken through the prophets. As a result, they refused to repent, preferring to stay in their sinful behavior. They refused to trust in the Lord, preferring to trust themselves or their heritage instead. The reason the people of Israel were exiled to Assyria and the people of Judah were exiled were exiled to Babylon was not because of their sin, but their refusal to

listen. So the Lord says, "Listen to me...give ear to me", not just in the sense of hearing the message, but listening to it and letting it transform their lives.

Even though we have been saved by grace in our baptism, offered forgiveness and assurance in the Word and Sacrament, and promised a glorious hope for the future, do we prefer to remain in our sin rather than repent? Do we prefer to trust in ourselves or our Lutheran heritage to get us through rather than trusting fully in Christ?

Then listen! Listen to what the Word of the Lord says to us today! Listen to the Law of the Lord which completely condemns us in our sin of thought, word, and deed, our sinful self-centeredness, and our trust in anyone or anything apart from Jesus Christ. Listening to the Law of the Lord is an unpleasant, yet necessary thing because it drives us to our knees and points us to our only Savior, Jesus Christ.

Listen to the Gospel of the Lord which fully and freely forgives all of our sins, no matter how many and no matter how awful they are. Listen to the Gospel of the Lord which frees us from self-centeredness and frees us for selfless service. Listen to the Gospel of the Lord which feeds and strengthens a faith which trusts in Christ and Christ alone.

Listen! This means being where the Word of the Lord is spoken – the Divine Service, Bible Study, Bible reading, and family devotions – and being there frequently. It doesn't take much to slip up. Satan's first and most frequent temptation begins with, "Did God really say....?" Think of listening, not as a duty which must be performed, but as the way to receive the medicine which cures sin, death, and hell and gives us a right standing before God now, a new life, and heaven.

Stop...look...and listen is simple advice for anyone (not just children) to cross a busy street safely. Stop...look...and listen is also a very simple way for anyone to cross through this wilderness of sin and death and to life and salvation. Stop – stop the direction you are going and repent of your sin. Look – look at all God has done for you in your baptism, all God is doing for you in Word and Sacrament, and all God will do for you in the future through His victory which draws near and His

salvation which has gone out to the world. Listen – listen to the Word of the Lord which gives repentance, forgiveness, faith, and hope. Stop, look, and listen! Amen.