

Sung: We are stardust. We are golden. And we've got to get ourselves back to the Garden.

(Please be seated. Good morning St. Timothy's.)

Some of you may have seen the T-shirt expressing the wish that everyone would see us the way our Dogs see us. Our dogs think we are the greatest – greeting us with abundant love, and the expectation that great things are in store whenever we walk through the door. I thought of that while imagining what it would be like to listen to this reading from Isaiah with you this weekend. Because it reminds us to see ourselves as God sees us. Which is not entirely unlike how the dogs see us. ... with a boundless, joyful expectation of good things.

Today's passage states unapologetically that God believes - - in us. It was written during the time the exiles were readying themselves to return home. They were exhausted. They had been wandering in the desert for so long, separated from their lands, their extended communities, and even from themselves. They had endured so many challenges, so much pain, misfortune, persecution, and misunderstanding. They had lost track of who they were. They just wanted to go home.

So Isaiah is attempting to give them some perspective. Not promising them a happy ending – about arriving home and everything was going to be fine and the hard part would be over – but perspective about where they came from, and what is in store for them - - how their sacred origins have empowered them to be healers of the world.

He tells them to consider the rock of the quarry from which they – from which you - were carved-out perhaps on that same stone, some of the dust that arrived to earth on the icy tail of a comet, setting life in motion.

He reminds us  
we who pursue righteousness and seek god -  
of our ancestors who also wandered and hoped –  
and brought forth a nation.

Our glittering rocks. Our faithful ancestors. Our nation. Remember.

Because this is who we are. We are wondrous. We can take the wastelands, the deserts, and turn them back into the garden of Eden once more. That is our inheritance, how God wants us to see ourselves, and to see one another.

Lately our city, our country, and our global community has been faced with news that pushes this way of seeing ourselves into the mostly darkened corners of the room. Murder, disease, terrorism, and even natural disasters have placed us in conversations that, honestly, have revealed some of our bits that might not be so wondrous. But even in these places, I have seen you, and others, engage with vulnerability and courage.

So who gets the final word on who we are, and how we are?

Modern pop-psychologists explain these internal companions of struggling and thriving, of being good and being afraid, by exploring with us something they call the “ads;” sad, mad, glad....”

What do you do with your ads? – Whenever you are sad, or mad? What do you do when you are glad, or mad? What do you do, and who do you become?

We know who we are in our daily, domesticated, pedestrian lives. And we feel, on some occasions, that God might be right. That we just might be poised to do, and possibly even to be, great.

But when things don't go our way, or we get hurt, or especially when we make a mistake, we suddenly feel different. Different about ourselves, and different about each other. But this is when a different kind of revelation happens. This is when you see how patient you might really be. Or how generous. Or how forgiving.

This most recent and most local conversation about race seems to have permeated every conversation. In every news broadcast, social media platform, bible study, coffee shop and grocery store line encounter, we have been forced, as exiles from our regular conversations about weather and the Cardinals... forced to stand in this dimly lit, not often visited, interior room, as a community.

We, like other exiles, began to feel like our identity was at risk. We had to explain ourselves; to be honest about our experiences and opinions regarding race and privilege. Up until two weeks ago, our generic responses to such challenges were enough. I could say “Of course I'm not a racist. I have a diverse group of friends and even family members.” And I got to keep the harder parts of the conversations – mostly - in the dark.

At first, when it was coming at us from every direction, we could get away with diverting our eyes from the darker corners. Bright light has a way of doing that; Of over-illuminating. All of the noisy distractions, talking heads, special interest groups and side-bar stories, and the sheer *volume* of coverage manages to pull us out of our own hearts, into our heads.

Into taking sides, proving points  
and being annoyed or outraged over one thing or another.

But going into the second week, the conversation started changing. It started going deeper, and into the darkness. The glare of all-of-the-attention had exposed many of the truths we have known, accepted on some level, and lived with for centuries.

But when the conversation turned to you, and to me, it changed.  
It moved into that place where we are forced to come face to face with our joys, and our sorrows.

I had to see that maybe I *do* have racist thoughts.

Now what?

Because in the end we can truly see what we thought we were afraid of – or at least were unwilling to face - name it, and *then* decide if it has power over us, or not.

Would we still be God's people who seek justice, when we are exposed by the dark?

You see, there is something about how *darkness*  
has this incredible ability  
to illuminate moments  
that the light misses.

It can be unfamiliar territory, and we might want to revert to the easier responses, excuses, or problem solving. For example. Let's suppose I am in a dark room I'm trying to cross, and I'm not sure what's in the room. The most obvious thing I should do first is - - turn on a light! Then if there's a large obstacle in the middle of the room I need to get around, I have choices.

If I am unable to move it, I can call a friend, or push something else near it so I can go around or over it, or maybe spot a different, slightly more complicated but eventually easier way to get around it, and go.

But if I am in a room and there is no light, and I hit this obstacle, I have to consider *other* choices. Stand there. Ask the questions I wouldn't ask if I could just get the flashy diversions going – questions like - what is

this? Why is it here? How did I not know this would be here? I'm not certain in this moment if this means I have to go back, if I can go around somehow, or if I just need to stand here for awhile.

So you stand there, and you think about the obstacle. Maybe it's someone in your life. Maybe it's our neighbors in Ferguson. Or a diagnosis. Or something else you simply cannot see your way around.

You think about the idea that it might have a purpose. You think about how uncomfortable you might be, standing there in the darkness with no clear way through.

I wish to encourage you to stand there. To see that as a gift. To see what only standing there in the absolute darkness can show you.

Stop. Look. Listen.

Offer yourselves as living sacrifices.

This moment has more important questions for us than the ones we were asking when the lights were on. Don't be afraid. Remember who you are.

This is why it matters to be called back to our identity as some of the people of god in today's reading: God says "listen to me, my people." *My people*.

We know that on the outside there are all sorts of messages encouraging us to not only see others as broken, privileged, destructive or afraid, but to see ourselves that way too. But this is not who we are. We are not our worst parts. Our psalmist today reminds us that we only need to ask, and God will continue to strengthen us.

Maybe we have been wandering in a wilderness, and

maybe we have had our identity shaken up

and we are unsure if we can ever really go home again. Or maybe you haven't. Even so - stand there. Don't be afraid. Be uncertain of an outcome, but do not be uncertain that you were created

to long for justice,

and to heal the world.

See yourselves as God sees you.

When the world looks for us in the dark, and sees us trying with God's help to be steadfast and brave and to stand there together in the wilderness, who will they say that we are?

They might say we are stardust.

We *are* golden.

And we've got to get ourselves back to the garden.

Let's pray. God for the gift of life we give you thanks. For being in us and with us, when we are together, and when we are alone, in the light and in the dark. Thank you for reminding us who we are, and for your vision of our life together. Amen