

*<sup>14</sup>I have been silent for a long time.  
I have kept still. I have restrained myself.  
But now, like a woman giving birth, I will scream.  
I will gasp and pant.*

*<sup>15</sup>I will dry up mountains and hills.  
I will make all their grass wither.  
I will turn rivers into islands.  
I will dry up pools.*

*<sup>16</sup>I will lead the blind on a way they do not know.  
Along paths they do not know I will direct them.  
Ahead of them I will turn darkness into light  
and rough places into level ground.  
These are the things I will accomplish for them.  
I will not abandon them.*

*<sup>17</sup>They will be turned back and completely disgraced—  
those who trust in an idol,  
those who say to molten images, “You are our gods.”*

*<sup>18</sup>You deaf ones, listen!  
You blind ones, watch carefully so that you can see!*

*<sup>19</sup>Who is as blind as my servant?  
Who is as deaf as my messenger whom I sent?  
Who is as blind as my associate,  
as blind as the servant of the LORD?*

*<sup>20</sup>You, Israel, see many things, but you do not observe.  
Israel opens his ears, but he does not hear.*

*<sup>21</sup>Because of his own righteousness,  
the LORD was pleased to make his law great and glorious.*

God had kept still for a while. Lurking. Waiting. His people had turned their backs on him. Sure, some still went through the motions, but that’s about all they did. So, he waited. He did not send forth either judgment or salvation. God did it because he was providing time for repentance, time to recognize that they had been chasing the wrong things. But even God’s infinite patience eventually comes to an end. Now was the time to act.

The illustration God uses here is a sharp one. He compares himself as a mother ready to give birth. The last nine months have led up to this moment, and she’s been getting more and more uncomfortable with her situation while also getting more and more excited for what will come

at the end. So too, God longs to deliver and hold his children in his arms, those same arms that would be stretched on the cross for those same children. God would bring forth both justice and deliverance, incredible destruction and incredible joy.

But how would God use his power? In verse 15, he uses his power in nature as the example. We see his might in the natural phenomena of the world. We see storms rage and rivers run. We watch mountains crumbling and geysers spouting. God is powerful to make swift and complete change where and when he desires. We understand how completely terrifying and incredibly comforting these words are depending what side of God you stand on, whether he is with you or against you.

Who is it that's against God? It's those who turn their backs on him. It's those who turn to idols and all the work-righteousness that comes through idolatry. What will be their end? Their strivings will fail. They will be turned away in disgrace. It's hard to read this section of Isaiah without thinking of Jesus' parables of people being tossed out of the Master's house and God saying he does not know them. The end for those who pit themselves against God is complete and total separation from God.

Are we against God? I would hope not. I would hope none of us are idolaters. But what is idolatry? It's not just bowing down to stone shrines. That's open idolatry. But there is a sort of hidden idolatry too, where things and people are put ahead of God. This is the most common form of idolatry. It's the way people often break the First Commandment. The First Commandment says, "You shall have no others gods." And Luther explains it with his "What does this mean?" He says, "We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things."

So, when does love and appreciation of God's blessings turn into us idolizing them? When do we end up fearing, loving, and trusting in things and people above God? That was the issue with the Israelites. They began to love the things of this world more than God. Sometimes it turned into open idolatry. The Israelites bowed to the golden calf. They fell into the pagan worship practices of the people who lived around them. But sometimes their idolatry was hidden. They hid behind going through the motions of faith in God, but their trust was really in the other things of life.

When we put it that way, does it create a little more unease in your heart? Do we ever talk about "getting church out of the way" on Sunday so we can get to the things that we really want to do? Does time with God in his word and prayer become a backburner goal, where we do those things only if we have everything else done, as if all those other things are more important? Does loving and serving our neighbor – living out our faith – become less important in our lives than loving and serving ourselves? Or maybe it's even more devious. Maybe we take the things God has given us and use them for self-righteous purposes. We go to church only because we think it gets us points for heaven. We study the word, so we can figure out

what God wants us to do so that we can stop feeling afraid of going to hell. We give to the food pantry as some twisted form of penance, thinking a few cans of corn and carrots will pay off some of the sins we feel pressing down on us. This is all idolatry. And with any form of idolatry, whether open or hidden, the greatest false God we worship is ourselves.

Do you think of yourself as an idol? It sounds pretty crazy at first. It sounds almost narcissistic. But when I decide something or someone is more important than God, I'm deciding that my valuation is more important than God's. I place myself on God's throne, to judge what is good and evil instead of him, to decide which things he labels sin are actually wrong and which ones he missed the mark on. And in arrogance, I overrule him when he says "no" to something that I decide is actually harmless. Or my idolatry of self leads me to view myself as my own savior. I need to clear the path to God. I need to factor into the equation, whether it's as much as living a life worthy of salvation or as little as making a choice for Jesus by my own will.

This is the warning God gives to his people in verses 18-20. God's people had grown apathetic to their spiritual condition. And what had it created? "Servants" who were blind. "Messengers" who couldn't hear. "Associates" who could not see. These kinds of people would be useless for God and unfit to wear those titles. Add to it, Isaiah 42 tells us Israel saw what was going on but didn't observe it. Their ears were open, but those ears were not hearing.

Sadly, the reality is, we find ourselves always at risk of standing on the outside looking in when it comes to our relationship with God. We don't see things with the complexity that God does. God sees things with the depth of the seas, and we see things with the depth of a puddle. Take this for example: We see God's law as a headwind that keeps us from doing what we want. We think of the Christian life like a fraternity or sorority, that God is putting us through the paces as a sort of initiation test, that his instructions actually make our lives worse. This is obviously not the case. God's law is only disagreeable to our human nature because our nature is bound up in unhealthy, sinful desires that ultimately hurt us instead of helping.

The idols of short-term pleasure and a path of temporary ease stand in front of you. And your greatest idol, the one you find in the mirror, is all too quick to bend the knee to them. This is what God was warning the Israelites of, and this is what he warns us of too, to keep from living in blindness and instead see things the way he does.

But God gives us sight to see his power and mercy. As you know, blind people cannot find the right path on their own. Their blindness keeps them stuck in place, going the same wrong way again and again. But God promises to move them. Notice who's acting in verse 16: "I will lead." "I will direct." "I will turn." We don't find our way to God. He comes into our darkness and takes us by the hand to lead us.

And he doesn't just shine a beam of light into the dark. He changes the whole environment of our darkness. He turns darkness into light. No longer are we stumbling and grasping for a God we don't know. God reveals his full truth in his word, opening our eyes to see ourselves, our world, and God's plan of salvation for what it really is. And he turns bumpy terrain into level ground. All the rough places of sin, guilt, and the consequences of our idolatry are leveled by him.

We see this all so clearly in Jesus. Jesus walked the roughest path so that our path to the Father would be smooth. Jesus endured the darkness of the full punishment of sin so that we could remain in the light. This is what God is talking about in verse 21: "Because of his own righteousness, the LORD was pleased to make his law great and glorious." God does not ignore the law we broke. Instead, he magnifies it and makes it glorious. How is the law made glorious? We see it in Jesus' obedience. Jesus looked at the law of God which we saw as a headwind, but he saw it clearly, as the Father's beautiful and perfect will. And he fulfilled that will without mistake in our place. At the cross, the law's demands were met. God's justice toward sin and mercy toward us met there as the two wooden beams crossed.

Christ lived and died for a world full of sinners, but how God apply it to us? How does he open our eyes to the truth of our sin and his grace? He does it through faith, faith worked in our hearts as the Holy Spirit uses word and sacrament to reveal Christ's love to us. It's God's word which discredits the idols of our lives, revealing that they had no power to save or satisfy. And that same word then shows us Jesus. It leads us to trust in him, to find our rightness before God in his holy and precious blood.

Blindness to sight. That's what God promised to a people who had allowed their idols to empty them of any meaning in their lives. It's the same promise he makes to us, who were full-blown idolaters by nature and are still tempted down the path of blindness today. He gives us sight through his Son, the one who lights up our life with his promises to satisfy us fully by the light of his word. Amen.