

Quit Squinting

Dear Josiah,

If my close friends knew what I was doing now, they'd be scoffing. You're doing what? You're giving advice to a young minister? They would tell you to get your career counseling from someone else. They've been shaking their heads over my decisions for years. Why, they ask, would anybody in his right mind transport his young family from a solid pastorate in Oregon to teach at an obscure Christian college in Tennessee? Or walk away from a college vice presidency to pastor an urban church? Or later leave that growing Indianapolis church for one just half its size in the Arizona desert?

Why would one assume the presidency of a Christian college in California while remaining as pastor of the Arizona congregation, by then a mega-church, and still be at both jobs eight years later? Many of my friends also disapprove of my motorcycle, shake their heads at my bungee jumping, and question other activities. Surely, they would scold, you don't want any young ministers to become like you!

They're right. You shouldn't imitate me. Or any other minister, for that matter. God called you to be yourself—your best self—and nobody else.

My only advice for you is this: Practice the *Isaiah Principle*. You'll find it in Isaiah 6:1-8, where this shaken future prophet confronts his God, to his initial dismay. He has soiled his soul and cannot clean it up. He is trespassing where

only holiness belongs. He has no right to be in the temple—neither he nor any of his kind.

Then comes the purifying touch of burning coals. Thanks to this grace, Isaiah now can dare to hear and even serve God. *Here am I*, he says, *send me*. And Isaiah's words, slightly altered into the Isaiah Principle, have guided me for four decades: *Here am I; Use me*.

Like Isaiah, my ministry commenced with this dual vision of God's holiness and of my nearly paralyzing unholiness. The result of this double vision is the tic I've developed. I tend, when looking toward God, to squint. Isaiah worried about his unclean lips; I fret over my unseeing eyes. We can't dwell in the midst of a people of little faith without sinfulness and cowardice infecting us too. Even when convinced of our calling, we still squint. To look boldly toward our Savior or those mountains He challenges you to move is beyond us. Conservatism, laziness, fear—what word accounts for your timidity when God lays His challenges before you? Why do you narrow your field of vision to the merely manageable?

After a lifetime of ministry, I have few regrets. One that nags, though, is this: I can't help wondering what adventures He would have empowered me to undertake, if only I had trusted Him more boldly. T. S. Eliot's J. Alfred Prufrock lamented, *I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker . . . and in short, I was afraid*. I quote him with more empathy than I like to admit.

Here's just one example of my shortsightedness. When I was on the campus of Pacific Christian College to be interviewed for the presidency, one of the vice presidents and I were surveying the campus from the second story of the

main building. The view was less than awesome. The diminutive college of 500 students was squeezed onto eleven densely packed acres, bound by California State University at Fullerton on the north and businesses and apartment buildings on the other three sides. *Well, my disappointment sighed, there sure isn't any room for expansion, is there?*

There's plenty of room, the vice president retorted.

Where? I asked.

He pointed skyward as he answered, *Up. This area is zoned for ten stories.* He was right, and today I'm writing from the seventh floor at Hope International University. I'm continuing to look up without squinting.

If I had these forty years of ministry to do over again, I'd open my eyes wider. Instead of routinely asking of every new proposal, *How can we possibly do it? How will we fund it?* I'd be quicker to ask, *Why not?* Doesn't James 4:2 say, *You have not because you ask not? (KJV)*

And doesn't Jesus insist, *Everything is possible for him who believes* (Mark 9:23). And what about Matthew 7:7-8, *Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you?*

Even as I cite these references, though, something in this minister emeritus starts to explain what is really meant by them, how we have to consider the context, the extenuating circumstances, the difference between Jesus' day and ours—in other words, I still haven't cured this tic, this self-defeating propensity for blinking away the possibilities.

Peter had it right. When his gaze was fixed on Jesus, he could walk on water (Matthew 14:25-33). When he diverted his eyes to the wind, he sank.

Diverting your eyes—that's just a less obvious form of squinting, isn't it?

This, then, is my advice, applying the Isaiah Principle. First, deliver yourself to the Lord to be cleaned up. Second, offer yourself to be used in any way He desires. Finally, always fix your gaze steadily on Him and the opportunities He lays before you.

And don't squint!

Yours in Christ,

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Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever! Amen.

Ephesians 3:20-21