



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
Jody C. Wright, Senior Minister

APRIL 7, 2019
THE FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT
SIGHT, SOUND AND SILENCE: STILL LENT

The Sights of Faith Exodus 3:1-6; Ephesians 1:15-23; John 9:1-41

You may remember the Peanuts comic strip in which Charlie Brown and Linus are lying on their backs looking up at the sky. Charlie Brown says, "Aren't the clouds beautiful? They look like big balls of cotton . . . I could just lie here all day, and watch them drift by. . . If you use your imagination, you can see lots of things in the cloud formations . . . What do you think you see, Linus?" And Linus answers, "Well, those clouds up there look like the map of the British Honduras on the Caribbean . . . That cloud up there looks a little like the profile of Thomas Eakins, the famous painter and sculptor . . . And that group of clouds over there gives me the impression of the stoning of Stephen . . . I can see the apostle Paul standing there to one side . . . What do you see in the clouds, Charlie Brown?" Charlie Brown answers, "Well, I was going to say I saw a ducky and a horsie, but I changed my mind!"¹

I must confess that I saw more ducks and horses in the clouds of my childhood than I did maps and scenes from the Bible. But, like Linus and Charlie Brown, some of my happiest spring afternoons as a child were spent on the fresh green grass in our front yard, looking up at the sky.

Isn't it interesting that two people, side by side, can look at the same thing and see something different? That is exactly what happened in John's story of healing of the man born blind. We did not read the entire story—it stretches for forty-one verses (an entire chapter) in John's gospel. I suggest you read it this afternoon for it is a fascinating story.

It is a story of faith and healing, but it is also comedy and tragedy. I have often thought it would be delightful routine if told by a pair like Abbott and Costello like their famous story, "Whose on First?" The story begins as Jesus and his disciples see a man who is blind. How they know he was born that way is anybody's guess. And whether from genuine interest or an attempt to appear astute, they ask Jesus about the cause of the blindness—was it the sin of this person or his parents. I am not sure how an unborn child can sin, but that was the question and the beginning of the

¹Charles M. Schulz, *The Complete Peanuts*, Vol. 5: 1959-1960.

absurdity. From that point on there is nothing but confusion and misunderstanding as the people around this man who was healed of his blindness try to come to grips with this miracle. His neighbors and friends who have known him all of his life can't confirm that he is the same person as the blind man that had seen that morning. The Pharisees get all twisted up because it is the sabbath and, in their minds, healing was prohibited on that holy day. Even the man's parents get caught up in the confusion, admitting that he is their son and he is now able to see, but unwilling to acknowledge how he came to see. The only two people who "see" what has happened are Jesus and the man who was healed. The rest of the people are essentially blind because they refuse to see what is right before them.

I discovered somewhere along the way that what I see in the sky is not all up to the clouds. I have to be open to the possibilities of what I might see. My imagination has to be at work. Even a duck or a horse has to be conjured from the billions of water droplets that float up above. It is all about seeing more than the clouds themselves. It is about seeing a story in the clouds.

Richard Rohr, a Franciscan priest and author, has observed that it is not so much what we see that is important but how we see it. In other words, we can observe, analyze, and try to understand something that we see—like a cloud—but if we want to experience the essence of something, we have to expect to see it.² Linus expected to see complex images in the clouds while Charlie Brown, in keeping with his personality, expected something much simpler. It is not that we attempt to see what is really not there. Instead, we allow for the possibility of seeing what might not be obvious or what we have never seen before. The people around the man who regained his sight are essentially blind because there is no room in their spiritual imagination for someone born blind to be healed. Their fear of the Pharisees further dim their ability to see. To them, storm clouds are gathering and they cannot see even horses and ducks in the clouds.

For the most part, we nurture our faith by words that we read or hear, both very good ways to learn. Faith, however, is much more than knowledge; it is experience. As we have discovered over the past few weeks, we can hear our faith in music, in the melodies and harmonies of nature, and even in silence. Obviously we see our faith in nature, but we also see faith in and through symbols, objects, and art. The sights of our faith can be as simple as the clouds floating overhead or as profound as a painting by one of the

²Richard Rohr, *Just This* (Albuquerque: CAC Publishing, 2017), 12-15.

Masters. It all depends of how attentive we are and what we are looking for. Faith is expecting to see something of God in everything.

The obvious example in scripture of faith and sight working together is the occasion in the book of Exodus when Moses is out shepherding his father-in-law's flocks and sees something curious. He sees a fire. In fact it is a bush on fire, perhaps an ordinary occurrence. Looking more closely, however, Moses notices that although it is burning, the bush is not being consumed. That recognition led him to the realization that he was experiencing a holy moment and was, in fact, standing on holy ground. So he took off his sandals and had a visit with God.

How often do we look around and see nothing unique, unusual, or out of the ordinary? How often do we become so familiar with what is right around us that we no longer really see it. Fairly often, I would guess. Close your eyes for a moment and count how many religious symbols you can remember in this sanctuary. Did anyone count ten? Five? Three? Most of us would think of the cross. Some of us might say the Bible. A few might think of our paraments? Open your eyes and look around. This sanctuary is filled with symbols and images of our faith. The paraments and stoles today bear the Chi Rho symbol which are the first two letters of the name of Christ in Greek, reminding us that Jesus is the Messiah. The cross is the primary symbol of our faith and a reminder of God's sacrificial love for all of us. The mosaic on this cross is a memorial gift reminding us of a life ended too soon, but what do you see in it. Wherever you are sitting, you are seeing something different from everybody else because the tiles are angled so that the light dances off of them in different ways depending on where you are. Sometimes it reminds me of the earth. Sometimes it makes me think of the diversity of humanity. What does that mosaic on the cross say to you about God?

What else do you see? The flowers on the altar are a symbol of life. The stained glass windows tell stories from Jesus' life and teachings. Each one has multiple symbols within it. Have you noticed the transom windows above each door? They highlight elements of our faith that we value like scripture and music as well as marriage and acts of mercy. There is more. More crosses adorn the walls of the chancel. The Communion Table reminds us of the sacrifice of our Lord and the ways we remember him through the bread and the cup. I have noticed in the slate floor contours of the tile that conjure up biblical stories like the burning bush, Elijah's experience of hearing the still, small voice of God on the mountain, and the Hebrew people's affirmation to choose life as they followed God into the Promised Land. The

Palladian Window which welcomes light into the sanctuary is a reminder for us to always look out on the world and the needs that abound there. It is also reminds us that other people are looking in and watching our witness to Christ. This building itself is a symbol of faith. Looking up, you will see that the ceiling resembles the hull of a boat turned upside down. For centuries the church was compared to a ship carrying people safely over the sometimes troubled waters of life.

What might you see if you came into this sanctuary on a Sunday morning or some morning during the week and looked around, contemplating the symbols that inform our faith? What might you see if you took the time to stand before each of the stained glass windows and let them speak to you? What might you see of God if you sat here each Sunday morning, still and quiet and expectantly waited for any or all of these beautiful symbols to speak about God to you? You might see horsies and duckies, so to speak, or you might see the amazing love of God at work in you and through you.

Another way to allow our eyes to enrich our souls is to visit art galleries or choose an object of art from a book and simply contemplate it. Museums are filled with religious art that invites us to receive the stories of our faith through our eyes. Most of us have at one time or another seen a copy of Rembrandt's *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. It pictures the repentant son back at home, looking every bit the swineherd in ragged clothing. All his hair gone. He is thin and dirty. Kneeling before his father, he buries his face in his father's robes. To the right and almost out of the picture is the older son, arms crossed in judgment of his younger brother. The father, in particular, draws our attention. In his face we see the weariness of compassion and the relief of his worry. His hands rest on his son: one on his shoulder and the other on his back. If you look closely, you will notice something unique about those hands. The one holding onto the boy's shoulder is large and strong while the one resting on his back is smaller, even feminine, suggesting the mothering and fathering natures of God. Through this beautiful painting, Rembrandt interprets one of the most poignant and revealing stories of our faith. We see the words of scripture come to life and feel the emotions and complexities of each of the characters. I suspect, if we are open to it, we might also find ourselves somewhere in that painting? How would you paint that story? What would you emphasize? What would you reveal about God? About each of the sons? About yourself?

In his letter to the believers in Ephesus, the Apostle Paul made a plea for their faith:

I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. Ephesians 1:17-19

“With the eyes of your heart enlightened,” Paul said, you will see all that God offers to our world. When we look with our hearts, we see things that are not always obvious, things that are not always logical, and things which reveal the character of God. To see with our heart, we must look with our heart, expecting to see what God sees.

Seeing is a spiritual practice, one that Richard Rohr calls “beholding.”³ In the Bible we read about a lot of people “beholding” whenever God is around. Beholding is more than simply looking at something. It is contemplating it. Allowing time for the shape, the contours, the texture and colors, the shadows and light to present themselves to us. Beholding is opening ourselves up to the ways God might speak to us through a stained glass window, a religious symbol, a work of art, even a cloud in the sky. Look beyond the obvious, expecting to see something you have never seen before. Take in everything that is before you and let what you see become a prayer for you. Let God speak to you through what you see with your eyes and your heart.

We would do well to take some time to be still and allow God to speak to us through the things around us. Who knows, we might even be healed of some of our blindness! May it be so with us all! Amen.

³Rohr, 100.

April 7, 2019

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

Each day of life is an opportunity for us to recognize your presence and experience your grace, Holy God, but in the beauty of springtime, your generosity is especially apparent. The renewal we witness all around us serves as a reminder of the joy we know in receiving the gift of new life in you. The variety of colors and textures and fragrances in every yard and field signify your love of diversity and the artistry with which you created our world. Warm breezes and gentle rains soothe and renew the earth just as your Holy Spirit offers the comfort and vitality of your constant presence with us. Every corner of our world bears the imprint of your creative handiwork and every creature sings forth your majesty. In the midst of such splendor, Gracious God, how can we not be filled with wonder and gratitude as we recognize the abundance of gifts which give meaning to our lives and move our hearts to worship and praise?

But we confess that there are days when even the warmth of the sunlight and the multitude of blessings we receive from you cannot overcome the darkness and discouragement in our lives. There are days, even seasons, when we search desperately for a sign of your nearness but find only doubt and loneliness. Sometimes the clamor of noises that surround us and the confusion of fears and anxieties that swirl within us cause us to strain to hear faint echoes of your voice or catch fleeting glimpses of your reflection in our world.

Give us eyes to see and ears to hear so that your presence is evident to us in all the circumstances of life, Merciful God. Attune our hearts to sense your closeness in both the joys and challenges we face, believing in your promise that you will never leave us or forsake us. Help us to know, in the guidance of your Word, in the companionship of one another, in security and serenity of this sacred place, in the smallest expression of kindness, or in the grandest of miracles, that you abide with us and that your love is unfailing.

And equip us, Gracious God, to reflect the light of your presence for others who, because of illness or grief, poverty or hopelessness, violence or injustice, have long felt distant from you or wonder if you are there at all. Fill our hearts with compassion and courage instead of condemnation and fear. Strengthen our hands to reach out with acceptance and healing rather than promote division or lash out in anger. Guide our feet to places of service, and enable us in all things to make evident your life and light so that others might experience the grace you have so freely given. In the name of the Christ who came to dwell among us and by the power of your Holy Spirit who abides with us still. Amen.

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