

“TO SEE THE WONDER”
Psalm 19:1-4; John 9:1-12, 24-25

Sometimes we tend to forget that behind the words of faith we say and sing in church are experiences of ordinary people like you and me—experiences of beauty that make your heart rejoice, experiences of fear that leave you trembling, experiences of love that lift you outside yourself. Religion begins, not in the rituals of corporate worship, but in the realities of daily life--in life that is lived intensely, with eyes open to the wonders all around us.

Have you ever noticed how often the little word **“Behold”** appears in scripture? Some newer versions of the Bible translate it simply as **“Look.”** *“Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.”* *“Look, your salvation draws near.”* **Behold! Look!** says scripture. Pay attention to what is going on around you. Look and see, for **“the heavens are telling the glory of God and the earth proclaims God’s handiwork.”** (Ps. 19)

In the story we just read from the Gospel of John **visual imagery** is front and center as Jesus restores sight to a man born blind—a man bereft even of “memories of light.”¹ At first hearing, the story may seem to be simply the report of a miracle that happened once upon time. But I think that it is more than that. It is a parable of the ongoing miracle of our own coming to faith, here and now.

Few, if any, of us were “born blind,” physically. But all of us see only a tiny sliver of reality. Time and time again we fail to see the wonders of life in creation. Over against our persistent blindness, the gospel declares that Jesus has come to open the eyes of the blind. **Our eyes!** The question, of course, is **how**. How does Christ open our eyes to the wonders of life? What means does he use to enable us to see for real?

In the story we just read from the gospel of John, strangely enough, Jesus seems to use mud and spittle to open the eyes of man blind from birth. And sometimes, stranger still, he may even use preachers and sermons like this. But more often, I suspect, he opens our eyes to the wonders of life in God's creation through poets and artists... and through scientists.

Albert Einstein once wrote that “The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science.” But, he warns, “Anyone who can no longer pause to wonder, and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead; his eyes are closed.” **Blindness!**

And that wonderful writer **Annie Dillard**, who ponders nature with the eyes of a mystic, calls our life “a faint tracing on the surface of mystery.” She asks, “Could it be that our faithlessness...is a massive failure of the imagination?”² Could it be that our faithlessness... is a massive failure to peer deeply into the mysteries all around us and to respond with awe and wonder? So, “behold”, “look!” Open your eyes...and see!

And when you *do* –when you let your imagination be spurred by those who have delved most deeply into the wonders of creation—my goodness, what a strange, awesome

world this is! The more we learn about the universe, the stranger it appears-- with “dark matter” so dense it does not even emit light,

with “black holes” that swallow up everything around them,

with quantum particles that no matter how far apart they may be separated still influence each other in ways that Einstein himself called "spooky."

The more we learn about the universe, the more we come to see that it is stranger and more wondrous than anything we can ever comprehend.

It is not only scientists who open our eyes to the wonders of creation. Most of all it is poets and artists and photographers. They serve as the “point guards” of the imagination. They offer us images of wonder--metaphors of mystery--that tease forth the sense of awe at the heart of all religion.

Several years ago my wife and I were invited to a program at the Peace Center given by Dewitt Jones. At the time Dewitt Jones was a photographer for *National Geographic* magazine. As he spoke, he showed some of his wonderful photographs. But the point of his presentation was not to amaze us with the remarkable images on the screen. His point was to encourage us to look at life with what he called “**new vision, passion, and creativity.**” “Look at the ordinary,” he said, “and see the extraordinary. The whole world is extraordinary when seen through eyes of love.” Think about that for a moment—think about it for a life time. “**The whole world is extraordinary when seen through eyes of love.**”

Dewitt Jones went on to say that the art of photography is not just the art of seeing. Even more, it is art of **believing**. It is the art of believing that there is beauty waiting to reveal itself to those who see with more than just their eyes--those who see with the eyes of their hearts.

At one point in his presentation Jones showed a series of pictures, all taken of the same scene with the same camera. The object in the foreground of the pictures was the same, but each time the focal point was changed slightly. The pictures ranged from something I could have taken with a disposable camera to ones that were breathtaking. “It is all a matter of believing that there is beauty waiting to be revealed,” he said. “If I am patient and persistent and let the wonder reveal itself to me, in time I will come to see it. But I won't see it, if I don't first believe it.”

We sometimes say that “*Seeing* is believing,” but more often it is the other way around. We only see what we **first believe**. What we believe shapes profoundly our perception in every aspect of life. If we believe this world is a junkyard, we see junk. If we believe the world is a shopping mall, we see commodities to buy and sell. If we believe “the paranoids are out to get us,” they do...and may already have.

But if we believe that the world was created out of infinite Love, the whole world can become “**the theater of God's glory.**” For those with eyes of faith, the world is the stage on which the glory of God is performed every moment of every day. So, behold, look deeply with the eyes of your heart and the imagination of faith. Then perhaps you, too, can say with the poet Walt Whitman,

I see something of God each day
and each hour of the 24 and each moment then.
In the faces of men and women I see God,
and in my own face in the glass.
I find letters from God dropped in the streets,
and everyone is signed with God's name.
And I leave them where they are,
for I know that wheresoever I go,
Other will punctually come, forever and ever.³

Jesus opens our eyes to see the “letters from God” dropped in the streets of daily life. For God has not left himself without witnesses anywhere in creation. To those with eyes to see, the whole world is the “theater of God's glory.” **“The heavens are telling the glory of God and the firmament proclaims God’s handiwork.”** (Ps. 19:1)

But only those who believe--only those whose eyes have been opened to glimpses of glory-- bow down in worship.

“Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God,”
writes the poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning. “

But only those who *see* take off their shoes.
The rest stand round and pluck blackberries.”⁴

Jesus opens our eyes to see glimpses of God’s glory in the world around us. And in so doing, at the same time, **he opens our eyes to the surprises of grace that come to us each day.** More often than not, those surprises of grace come in wondrously ordinary ways--in the touch of a loved one's hand, in a word of encouragement when you most need it, in bread broken and laughter shared in the company of life-long friends. The grace of God is lavished upon us in the most common things of life. To those with eyes to see, all of life can become a sacrament of grace.

A number of years ago the humorist, Lewis Grizzard, learned that he had to have an open-heart operation. It was a life-changing experience. Afterward, he wrote a book telling how the experiencing of having to face his own death had given him a new appreciation for the simple gifts of life. He entitled it, *They Tore Out My Heart and Stomped that Sucker Flat*. In it Grizzard writes,

The most interesting thing I learned about myself during the time before surgery, when perhaps I stood closer to death than at any other time in my life, was that I felt no remorse about the fact that I might die and miss doing something I hadn't done before. What struck me as most regrettable... was the fact that I might not get to go back and repeat some earlier experiences I had accepted as commonplace.

There were some ladies I want to kiss on the mouth again.... I wanted to hear Willie Nelson sing 'Precious Memories' and watch a dog running

toward me with his ears flapping behind him in the breeze. I wanted to take a fat bream off a hook, and hit an overhead for a winner, and squeeze the hand of a friend long lost, and read the *Sunday Times* over Sunday morning coffee and put on clean underwear after a shower, and see my mama smile. Again.⁵

You see, it is not just in those “once in a lifetime” experiences that we come to know the grace of God. It is in those ordinary moments made precious by the friends and loved ones with whom we share them. Grace lies just beneath the surface of life, waiting for us to look and see... and kneel in adoration. The living Christ opens our eyes to the wonders of life and the surprises of grace awaiting us around every corner in creation.

And when he does, when Christ opens our eyes to the wonders all around us, at the same time, he **opens our eyes to see one another**. He, who opened the eyes of a man born blind, continues to open our eyes to the wonder in the face of every beloved child of God.

And yet too often we don't take the time or make the effort to really look. Too often we fail to really see even those nearest and dearest to us. No one I know has dealt more poignantly with our blindness to the wonders of our life together than Thornton Wilder in his play *Our Town*. In the play Wilder focuses on the life of a small New Hampshire town, Grover's Corners. As the play begins, we watch the age-old rituals of growing up, of falling in love, of marriage and death.

The central character of the play is a young wife, **Emily Webb Gibbs**, who dies giving birth to her second child. Wilder has her join the others who have died in the town cemetery. There they sit on wooden chairs, lined up in rows on the bare stage, and they talk of trivial things. But as they do, Emily learns that she can return to life for one day--any day in her life she chooses.

She chooses to return on her twelfth birthday. As she enters the kitchen, her mother is too busy at the stove to pay any attention to her daughter. Without looking up from her cooking, Mrs. Webb wishes Emily a happy birthday and tells her that there are presents waiting for her on the table.

Emily is hurt by her mother's lack of attention. But her mother continues to chatter away at the stove, and tells Emily to eat a good breakfast so that she will grow up to be a strong, healthy girl.

Finally, Emily can take it no longer. Overcome with emotion, she pleads with her mother to look at her. “Oh, Mama, just look at me for one minute as though you really saw me. Mama, fourteen years have gone by... Mama, just for a moment we are happy. Let's look at one another.”

But since her mother cannot see or hear her, she goes on with her cooking. Emily rushes over to the Stage Manager and pours out her anguish. “Everything goes by so fast. Why can't people just take the time to look at one another? So much is going on and they never notice it.”

Finally Emily asks to be taken back up the hill to the graveyard. She gives the world one last look and bids farewell to her favorite things... “to clocks ticking and my butternut tree, Mama's sunflowers, food and coffee, new ironed dresses and hot baths, sleeping and

waking up.” She is overcome by the wonder of our common life...the life we too often take for granted. She thinks for a moment, then turns to the Stage Manager and asks, “Do any human beings ever realize life *while* they live it--every, every minute?” He shakes his head and says, “No--Saints and poets maybe, they do some.”⁶

That in a nutshell is our human condition. Scripture calls it **blindness**--the failure to see the wonder of our life together in God's good creation, and to embrace it as a gift of grace.

But the good news of the gospel is this--that even in our persistent blindness, the living Christ comes to open our eyes to the wonders of creation and the wonder of each other. He is the only one who ever realized life fully “every, every minute.” But in him not only a few “saints and poets” can see the wonder of life. You and I can, as well. From time to time, in ways as unpredictable as winning the lottery, we, too, can see the grace of God in even the simplest things of life. And we can see each other as gifts of God, given to each other “to love and to cherish” all our days. And in that gift of new sight, we, too, can exclaim, “**One thing I know. I was blind, but now I see.**” By the amazing grace of God in Jesus Christ...I SEE. To God be the glory. Amen.

Dr. Allen C. McSween, Jr.
Westminster Presbyterian Church
July 31, 2011

NOTES

¹ From a poem by Jess MacFarland Mills, Bellevue, Washington

² Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 1974, p. 9.

³ Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself*, section 48 (I have used Whitman's words to make a point he would reject. Just before the words quoted he writes, “And I say to mankind, Be not curious about God, For I who am curious about each am not curious about God...I hear and behold God in every object, yet understand God not in the least. Nor do I understand who there can be more wonderful than myself.” Contrary to Whitman, I am arguing for a theocentric naturalism, not a solipsistic naturalism.)

⁴ Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Bk. VII, I. 820-825

⁵ Lewis Grizzard, *They Tore Out My Heart, and Stomped that Sucker Flat*, 1982, p.100.

⁶ Thornton Wilder, *Our Town*, 1938, p.83