

## Sightings

Luke 2:8-17, Matthew 2:1-2, 9-11

This week's theme on this first Sunday of Christmas is "Seeing". After Waiting, Accepting, Journeying, Birthing, now "Seeing!" The title of my sermon is "Sightings", sightings of the Lord, and I have three of them for you today.

The Psalmist cried,

As a deer longs for flowing streams

So longs my soul for you O God.

My soul thirsts for God

for the living God.

When shall I come and behold

the face of God? (Ps. 42:1-2)

Then came the miracle, in John's words:

No one has ever seen God.

It is the only Son, who

is close to the Father's heart who

has made him known. (John 1:18)

And now we not only hear with our ears the good news, the eyes of our eyes are opened and we see him.

There are three sighting of the Christ-child I offer you today: the sighting of the shepherds on the night of his birth; the sighting of Simeon and Anna in the temple in Jerusalem; and the sighting of the wise men after their long journey across the sands to see him.

## I

The shepherds were the first, out tending their sheep on the Judean hillside when the angel of the Lord appeared to them in the sky. The angel's first word was, "Fear not", the word they needed most to hear and the word we need to hear. I've been told that the words "Fear not, be not afraid", are God's most frequent words to us in the Bible. Three hundred and sixty five times, someone has counted, one for each day of the year. We need them everyday of the year.

Fear seems more rampant than ever these days, so these words are a balm to us. In the book of Daniel, Daniel receives these words from a heavenly messenger: *"Do not be afraid for you are deeply loved by God. Be at peace; take heart and be strong. (Daniel 10: 10,19)."* Inscribe these words on your heart today: *"Do not be afraid, you are deeply loved by God. Be at peace, take heart and be strong."*

The shepherds lived on the margins of their society, the itinerant farm workers of their day, moving from place to place to make a scrape-by living. But the angel of the Lord said to them:

For behold I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people.

For unto you is born in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord.

To you out there, yes to you, tending someone else's sheep. And not only to you but to all people.

What did "Savior" mean to them and to the others of their time? Rescue, deliverance, peace. Not a ticket to heaven but rescue, deliverance and peace here on earth.

"Glory to God in the highest", sang a chorus of angels in the night sky, "and on earth, peace." Peace for a world with so little peace.

The angel of the Lord told them where the child was to be born, in a shepherd's stable of all places. And off they bounded to see him. When they got there they saw the child lying in a stone feeding trough for a cow, wrapped in strips of cloth.

What would you give to have been there that night with the shepherds? To see the child who would be the Savior of the world? To see him as the shepherds, with your own eyes.

*Amazement* was what happened to them then, and off they ran, praising God, to tell what they had seen. Good tidings and running feet go together.

“Go tell it on the mountain”, we sometimes sing on this first Sunday of Christmas, “that Jesus Christ is born!”

## II

The second sighting: two devout worshippers of God up in years, Simeon and Anna. Their devotion to God sent them over and over again to the temple. It was the 8<sup>th</sup> day after Jesus’ birth, the day of his circumcision and the purification of his mother Mary.

Joseph and Mary carried Jesus to the Temple that day and offered their small offering, two turtle doves, or pigeons, which was the prescribed offering for the poorer of the land who could not afford more.

Jesus was raised in an observant Jewish home. Hebrew faith was the cradle of his faith.

An older man, Simeon, was in the temple that day. All his life he had looked for the Messiah and what the text calls “the consolation of Israel”, that is, the deliverance and salvation of God’s people. Now he saw him saw him with his own eyes. And he took him into his arms and began a blessing:

Lord, let thy servant depart in peace,  
for my eyes have seen your salvation...a light of revelation  
to the Gentiles and glory to your  
people Israel.

All his life he had worshipped in the temple and hoped for a Messiah. Now he saw him in the arms of his parents.

There was another there that day in the temple, a female prophet named Anna. She had long been a widow, now 84 years old. She now spent every day in the temple fasting and praying, so she was there, in just the right place, when Mary and Joseph brought Jesus. She too, the text says, was one of those “looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.” When she laid eyes on the child, she too began praising God and went out to tell others what she had seen.

The first sighting happened in the open air of a Judean night behind an inn in Bethlehem. The second sighting happened in a place of worship. We too prepare our eyes to see him in church and worship. In church, our eyes gotten used to the dark now adjust to see the light. We train our eyes to see him when he comes. Church can be a cradle for the Christ.

The church has told his story for over 2,00 years, and now we sing: “*O, come let us adore him, O come let us adore him, O come let us adore him, Jesus Christ the Lord.*”

### III

Now the third sighting. They were three magi or wise men from the east, Persia, what is Iran today. They studied the stars and studied the holy books of many religions. One night they saw in the heavens a conjunction of planets. They read in their holy books that this was a sign that the King of the Jews had been born. So off they went on a quest to see him. After an unfortunate meeting with King Herod who wanted nothing to do with a new King of the Jews being born—no king wants another around—they arrived in Bethlehem. When they saw him they knelt in worship and offered the three gifts meant for a king: gold, frankincense and myrrh. We offer the best we have, the best we know to give him. As Simeon had said, the child would be light to the Gentiles, and nations would come to him.

In the open air, in the temple, on a quest, they saw him.

### IV

What about us? John said that Jesus came to make God known to all people, even us, 2,000 years later, that we might see him too. We can see him with our mind's eyes today—in more ways than we can count.

In Matthew 25, in the parable of the Last Judgment Jesus says that we see him in the faces of “the least of these”, the hungry, thirsty, sick, cold, the stranger and prisoner. We see him in them as we come near them to bring them help.

Mother Teresa of Calcutta who spent her life among India's poorest, said when she saw a person coming, hungry, sick, alone, she would say, “Here comes Christ in another distressing disguise.”

Dorothy Day spent her life among the poor of New York City. Some are calling for the Catholic Church to make her a saint, but she says of sainthood, “I do not want to be so easily dismissed!” She said, had Mary come to the inn that night dressed in gold and jewels, as in the book of Revelation, there would have been room! But a poor, tired, nondescript traveler, there was no room for her. So Christ comes to us, she says, disguised in the poor, the needy, the rejected, in the ones for whom there is no room. We see Christ as we make room for the most vulnerable in our midst.

Where do we see him? You may know this poem by an unknown writer. It has been set in an anthem form: “*Thou Shalt Know Him When He Comes*”

Though shalt know him when he comes;  
not by any din of drums,  
(Never mind the little drummer boy!)  
Not by his manners, nor his airs,  
Nor by anything he wears.

Thou shalt know him when he comes,  
Not by a crown, nor by a gown  
But his coming known shall be,  
By the holy harmony  
Which his coming makes in thee.  
Thou shalt know him when he comes.

Whenever, wherever peace comes, in you or in the world, there he is. Or healing or justice, or freedom, wherever, whenever these come, we see him.

Finally, we see him, if we look, closely, in one another. There is something of him in us all. We are Christ's body, his eyes, his arms, his hands, his feet. Behold him in one another.

The poet Gerard Manly Hopkins saw Christ everywhere, in the sea gull, the grandeur of creation, and in each other. He wrote,



...Christ plays in ten thousand places.

Lovely in limbs and lovely in eyes not his

...through the features of men's faces.<sup>1</sup>

All our faces. Look for him in others' faces of other and you will see him.

Last week I spoke about letting Christ be born in us, letting him take up residence in us. My eyes were opened a bit more this week as I read the poem of Mary Oliver, "Making the House Ready For the Lord":

Dear Lord, I have swept and I have washed but

still nothing is as shining as it should be

for you. Under the sink, for example, is an

uproar of mice—it is the season of their

many children. What shall I do? And under the eaves

and through the walls the squirrels

have gnawed their ragged entrances—but it is the season

when they need shelter, so what shall I do? And

the racoon limps into the kitchen and opens the cupboard

while the dog snores, the cat hugs the pillow;

what shall I do? Beautiful is the new snow falling

in the yard and the fox who is staring boldly

up the path, to the door. And still I believe you will  
come, Lord: you will, when I speak to the fox,  
the sparrow, the lost dog, the shivering sea-goose, know  
that I am speaking to you whenever I say,  
as I do all morning and afternoon: Come in, Come in. <sup>2</sup>

That's when Christ comes, when we see him: as we say to any of God dear children or creatures, "Come in, Come in." Praise him.

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1. Gerard Manley Hopkins, "As kingfishers catch fire", *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1970),90.
  2. Mary Oliver, "Making the House Ready for the Lord", *Thirst* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006),13.