

You never can get away with anything. At least that's the way it seems...and probably the way that it works. **There is always an audience of some kind that is taking note.**

The internet may be the best example. It is everywhere, and try as one might it seems that your personal information, or at least some of it, is shared more widely than one might know. Signing up for paying a bill on line may find the applicant assisted in filling out the spaces with your address and name by means of "autofill." That can be a little disconcerting. That is, is not like one wished to have all that location data spread everywhere, but it is. When we moved to our new address in Mint Hill, it was amazing the number of companies that sent us advertisements, and we have only been there a couple of days.

And so we have **audiences that we did not ask for, causing us to be careful with our "life information."** There are those warnings to never, ever give out your social security number over the phone, and the encouragement to be very careful when punching in your pin number to buy gas or get some cash out of the ATM machine near the bank. Never mind that you're often on camera in the least likely of places...except, of course, in a church this size.

We have an audience here, but it is different. We want a lot of people here... As in the situation occasioned by a baptism, when we share the joy of welcoming two people as fellow servants in the kingdom of God. At least for the family of the parents, there is the expectation and the enjoyment of having relatives and friends to come and witness the event and add their hopes and wishes to that of the liturgy itself. This gathering is full of people ones who are new to the journey that we call discipleship, in addition to well-traveled saints that have experienced the kinds of joys, sorrows, doubts and exhilaration of being a disciple of Jesus Christ. Living as such a person will always be done in the context of an audience, whether one asks for that presence and awareness or not.

*(Parenthetically I must note that **the word audience is used with hesitation.** This is a congregation, a gathered community of faith, and not an audience that is here to see a show. Those in worship leadership are not performers, but leaders of the worship of the people. This is not an issue of semantics. It is crucial distinction, and tragically too often that point is missed).*

Nevertheless, the disciple is never alone, and beyond the people of the faith that accompany us from time to time, long after the waters of baptism have been dried up, God never leaves us. **We always have an audience in God. The opening verses of the psalmist in Psalm 139 says it well:**

Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast. If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night," even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you. (Psalm 139:6-12).

We can't run away from the presence of the divine, even if we tried...which is a good thing.

And beyond this relentless presence of the Almighty, there is the "cloud of witnesses" that is described later in this same letter from the New Testament. For the writer describes the gathering of those who have gone on before, and who labored to build the kingdom of God through through

their heroism, their martyrdom, or both...so that we might see the fulfillment of the kingdom of God on earth. And so we do. Like a group of alumni players on the sidelines of a bowl game, who cheer on the players who now follow in their footsteps, this “cloud of witnesses,” next to God form a cheering section in the life of the Christian disciple. Want to know some names that could be added to the magnificent list in those latter chapters Hebrews...note **the plaque on the wall** as you come to join in worship each Sunday. They are part of your “balcony of saints.” Indeed each time that we share holy communion, we do it in the presence of the “community of saints” that the Apostle’s Creed calls attention to.

Of course, the reality is that **there is always someone that is looking up to you as an example** of a good person, and thus takes you as a model. To be sure, our modesty (false or real), will guide us to deny their quiet influence on us. And certainly we might be gently horrified that someone relies on our behavior in words and actions as to define what virtuousness should look like. Nevertheless, we have an audience.

Baptism, discipleship, and simply being who are involves an audience in one way or another. **All these assume an audience.**

And yet one can also say that discipleship requires an audience, and us being a part of the audience for others, for that matter.

Begin with baptism. Not only do we expect an audience, but we require it. That is, Isabel and Zachary, for example would never be baptized with just the family in attendance, for an elder, representing the congregation would have to be here in attendance as a part of the rubric. Baptism is administered as a movement into the congregation’s life of ministry, and not simply punching some kind of ticket for heaven. The sacrament of baptism is not a hurdle to get over like some kind of ribbon at the finish line of a race. Rather, it is the starting gun to begin the life of faith. The parents and the congregation in attendance make promises going forward. By definition, our baptism in this life is only completed at the end of this life.

And after the baptism, **an audience is still required if the journey of faith is to have any staying power.** Other parts of this letter to the Hebrews will remind us that the habit of meeting together (*on a regular basis, one would assume*), has been the occasion for the entertaining angels, without the community of faith knowing it. In the same breath the writer of this book in the Bible will note that gathering together is a way to encourage, or “provoke” others to good works. In other words, the intentional audience that we call the worshipping, gathered community...is the singular place where the Spirit does its most complete work, sooner or later.

But perhaps the trump card in all of this is the simple description of the work of Christ: for the text from the prophet Isaiah says: ***It was no messenger or angel but his presence that saved them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them.*** There was no face-time, no tweet, no email, no chat room, no phone call...but His physical presence.

(In fact, in the actual Gospel selection for this First Sunday of Christmas, there is the story of the enraged Herod who slaughtered all of the boy toddlers of Jesus’ age, in an attempt to eliminate any challenge to his throne. Note that it is not the idea of a king to follow Herod that stirs his horrible anger, but the knowledge that the new king was present amongst the people.)

So then, it is the essential character of the Christian faith that the presence of God is found in the gathered people of God ... the physical gathered people of God. As it is, do we not remember in this season of Christmas that Christ came as little child to be among us, to sweat with us, caught with us, cry with us, to laugh with us, to become angry with us, to die with us. Jesus is not an idea

or a feeling. Pay attention to the verse quoted on the front of your worship folder for today: *The word became flesh and lived among us.*

So it will be with the world around us ...Not to reveal right and wrong (Jeremiah 31.34). People already know that pretty much...But to become brothers and sisters...a real time cloud of witnesses.

The world needs it, and God expects it.

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

MorningStar Presbyterian Church

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