

Sermon: “That We May Have Eyes to See”

Looking Toward Heaven

⁶So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” ⁷He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” ⁹When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. ¹⁰While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. ¹¹They said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”

¹²Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day’s journey away. ¹³When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. ¹⁴All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

Acts 1: 6-14

“That We May Have Eyes to See”

Friends, as we gather this morning on the final Sunday of Easter one of the things we are preparing in our hearts is to confront the mystery that waits for us in the weeks ahead, on the *other* side of Easter. The past seven weeks of Eastertide have been a time of joy, of the celebration of life, of renewal, and restoration. Spring has arrived and the world is in bloom. In Easter, we celebrate resurrection and the profound and personal meaning it has for each of us—a meaning that finds its way into places often too deep for words.

Divine Departure

This week, however, we find ourselves, like the disciples in the story, staring up at heaven in wonder. With solemnity in our hearts, we observed this week the event of the Ascension—marking the moment in which the resurrection story takes an unexpected turn and leaves Jesus’ followers staring up at the sky in disbelief. This Sunday, the Sunday after the Ascension, is a period *between*—a pause, a time of silent reflection and waiting. Pentecost has not yet come. In some ways this Sunday is like Advent, as we await with anticipation divine *arrival*, but in other ways it is very much like Holy Saturday, in which we must grapple with what feels like a divine *departure* from the world.

In the Church calendar, this period that we are entering is called “ordinary time”. It stretches for more than half the year all the way until Advent Season begins anew. It is a time of descending from the mountaintop into the valley—in which we, as individuals and as a community, must come to a deeper understanding of God’s presence with us in the world. It is a challenging task because it is no longer focused around the specific, tangible presence of Jesus. The Ascension marks a turning point in which God’s presence in the world changes profoundly. It becomes something new, something different, something we don’t recognize as easily.

This is a period in which we are challenged to sense God's presence in the midst of—if we are honest—what *feels like* absence, in a world that feels all too often bereft of the divine.

Do you ever feel that way? Do you wonder if God is really there? I mean *really* there? Not just a story we tell ourselves? In the midst of all the sorrow and pain that we see at times in the world around us—how can we maintain our Easter hope, our hope in the power of life over death, of love over separation?

Last week we reflected together on what it means to think of God as the one in whom, as Paul wrote, “we live and move and have our being.” I want to connect us this morning to what it means to take this idea seriously—this idea of the divine reality as something all-encompassing, the ground of everything that *is*. We have been called forth into being, as beloved, as infinitely valuable, as a treasured part of something so wide and deep that we cannot even fathom its edges.

If God is truly all around us at every moment—the one in whom we live, move, and have our being—then our ability to sense God's presence depends on a very particular form of awareness. It requires the ability to see something *so large and so close* that we have trouble distinguishing it *as* anything at all. It is subtle, barely detectable: A still small voice at the heart of the cosmos. We must tune our attention to the ways in which divine presence can be *felt* in the world. But how?

A Quiet Hum

In 1964, the world was astonished at the discovery of evidence that our universe was born at a specific moment 13.8 billion years ago in a flash of energy we now call the ‘Big Bang’. Prior to that, the scientific community at the time considered the universe to simply be eternal with no beginning or end—dismissing the poetic creation stories of the world’s religions as mere myth and fable.

However, as we developed telescopes powerful enough to peer out beyond our immediate solar system to the surrounding cosmos, engineers were baffled by a noise they were picking up. It was a low hum of energy that

showed up as background static in their measurements. Where was this hum, this static, coming from? Was it a failure in their equipment? Like a car radio, they were trying to tune their instruments but no matter what they did, no matter what direction they pointed in the sky, they picked up the same quiet hum.

Fifty-nine years ago this very weekend, on May 20th, 1964, they made the incredible realization that this hum was *not* equipment related at all. It was coming from ancient light—light from the very *birth* of the universe—it was the remnants of the Big Bang itself, still echoing out throughout the eons. Because it was all around us, universally present in every direction, it was woven into the background energy of every measurement. We couldn't recognize it for what it was until we developed the capacity to “see” it. Scientists now call it “Cosmic Microwave Background Radiation” or CMBR, and by measuring tiny fluctuations in the CMBR they have been able to map the cosmos and discover more and more about the way our universe is structured today.

This incredible discovery has something important to tell us as we too gaze up to the heavens this week. In Matthew 13, Jesus says ‘for those who have eyes to see, let them see, and ears to hear, let them hear’.

This exhortation is important. There are so many ways in this world to look at something and not see it for what it is. That we would have ‘eyes to see’ is a prayer that should be at the very heart of our spiritual lives. It has to do with our capacity to come into relationship not only with God but also with the world around us. It determines the way we orient ourselves to *presence*—to the presence of others in our life, to our ability to come into deep relationship with one another, to experience the beauty of the world and the meaning of life. It also determines the way we orient ourselves to what we may perceive as *absence*. Perhaps like the team of scientists studying the sky and realizing that the quiet hum they were hearing was something deep and ancient and extremely important about who we are, we too need to reflect on what it means to look out on the mystery of existence and truly see it for what it is.

So, how do we cultivate this capacity to truly see? To truly hear? How do we discern the presence of something so immense and all-encompassing that it forms the very *fabric* of reality, the universal ground of experience itself? To help us explore this question, let us consider a parable. The parable is about water—and it comes to us not from the Bible but from another noteworthy event whose anniversary also happens to occur this weekend.

'This is Water'

Eighteen years ago, on this very day—the morning of May 21st, 2005—the celebrated author David Foster Wallace was sitting on the floor of a borrowed office in Gambier, Ohio. It was in complete disarray. With empty coffee cups and papers strewn about, Wallace was frantically editing and scratching out whole sections of a speech he was scheduled to deliver in just a few hours. He had been asked to give the final commencement address at Kenyon College, and he had, with quite a bit of reluctance, accepted.

In the years since his 1996 publication of *Infinite Jest*, Wallace had grown to major acclaim in the literary world—considered one of the voices of his generation. He had won multiple honors and awards, but he battled anxiety and depression all his life and was nervous when speaking in front of big audiences. He had tried to decline the invitation, but the students at the school persisted and eventually he agreed. His biographer reports that he saw it as an opportunity to convey the things that mattered most to him, to distill his life philosophy in a way that might be directly helpful to others.

The address he ultimately gave—titled “This is Water”—has been ranked by Time Magazine as one of the best commencement speeches ever delivered. Millions have listened to the audio recording of it which is available on YouTube, and it has become one of his most beloved and important pieces of writing since his untimely death just three years later in 2008.

His speech begins with a parable: “There are these two young fish swimming along,” Wallace says. “And they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way.” The older fish “nods at them and says, ‘*Morning boys, How's the water?*’” The two young fish “swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, ‘*What the heck is water?*’”

What the heck is water...says the fish.

Radical Amazement

This is water. This is water, all around us. Everyday life. Here, now, this very moment. It contains all that we perceive as present and absent and the greater whole that holds and beholds both. We navigate each day in the midst of the great ocean of life, with all of its wonder and mystery, but our eyes are often blind to it because it is so close to us that we can't even see it. The truth of our existence, the mystery of our being, is so deeply woven into us that it is for the most part invisible.

Invisible, that is, unless we happen to be given a gift—the gift of being called to an *awareness* that there is something immensely deep and important going on in each and every moment of life, something that matters, something of immense beauty upon which the entire meaning of life hinges, something that doesn't begin when we are born or end when we die. The Jewish theologian and rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel calls this coming to awareness the very heart of spiritual life—he calls it “radical amazement”. *Radical amazement!*

It should humble us to realize that the closer something is to us the more invisible it often becomes. What a warning this should be to us about the nature of intimacy, about learning how to truly love someone—how to nurture a marriage, or raise a child, or be a true friend? To truly love—our spouse, our children, our neighbor, the stranger on the street—*Do we have eyes that see them?* Do we have ears that hear their call? Do we recognize each other *and the world we are for each other? Or are we so limited to our own perspective*, so distracted, or bored or angry over that which is present—or paralyzed by that which is absent—that we miss the Spirit of God all around us, interweaving each seemingly mundane moment into the living water of eternal life?

As Wallace goes on to say: “The point of the fish story is merely that the most obvious, important realities are often the ones that are hardest to see and talk about...The fact is that in the day-to-day trenches of adult existence, banal platitudes can have a life or death importance.” Wallace is calling us to

have eyes to see. To break out of what he calls ‘default mode’ and recognize the magnitude of what is right in front of us.

Eyes to See

And this is crucial. Our ability to discern the nature of the water we swim in has serious consequences in our world, and in our relationship with God. The injustice of our world is too often completely invisible to us precisely because it is so much larger than us and doesn’t manifest in the form of a specific person, a villain, but rather as the nature of the environment we live in, its history, its dynamics, its flows—all of which are larger than any individual actor. We see this when it comes to issues of racism, of privilege, of gender discrimination and ableism. We see this also in the context of the greed, fear, and scarcity that manifests as economic inequality, rapacious capitalism, and the ecological crisis that threatens all life. These dimensions of our reality are so all-encompassing that they become invisible to us. This keeps us from recognizing the deepest layers of injustice in our world. After all, how can we recognize when we are swimming in unhealthy water if we don’t even know there *is* water?

Wallace ends by congratulating the students on their achievement but also with a reminder: “a real education has almost nothing to do with knowledge, and everything to do with simple awareness; awareness of what is so real and essential, so hidden in plain sight all around us, all the time, that we have to keep reminding ourselves over and over: This is water....this is water.”

Let’s pause for a moment here and recognize this call to awareness as a divine call, as Christ’s call to us, his living message—that we may have eyes to see and ears to hear this truth: *This is water*. This moment right here. The pew you are sitting on. The room and the people around you. The day ahead of you. *This is water*. And it is *living* water, which Christ shows is a river that flows through and connects us all. And though it is everywhere in all directions, do not let it slip from the foreground of your sight. You are an essential part of this reality and your thoughts, your deeds, your heart participates in making it living water for others. It is all around you this very moment. Even when you fail to feel it, it is there.

Perhaps you *can* feel it. In the quiet of a sacred space, here in this place, or during a morning meditation or a hike out in nature. It is there. To cultivate such an awareness, *a capacity for awareness*, is one of the main purposes of spiritual practice. Rabbi Heschel says it is about the ability to “face sacred moments.” To that end, the importance of Wallace’s message is to have us realize that *every* moment is sacred and capable of being a window to the meaning of life itself—waiting in line at a grocery store, driving to work, taking out the garbage. These are the times and places where the holy is present. What matters is our ability to *perceive* this presence, in our everyday life, in each and every moment.

The One in Whom

As we close, let us reflect on what this means for us this Sunday as we head out the doors and into our week. We are entering what the church considers “ordinary time” and we must not mistake the nature of ordinary time as one without meaning or content, nor a time of absence. It is in ordinary time that the sacred is most present—seeking our face, attending to our capacity to see, and hear, and remember that this is *not* a time of abandonment, nor judgment. It is a nudging invitation to recognize God’s divine love and presence, resonating with the sound of the ancient light that suffuses our world.

And so, we end with a blessing and a prayer: May you have eyes to see this light, to be radically amazed by the universality and intimacy of what it means: You are a beloved part of the living cosmos. You are created as love-in-motion—in love, as love, *to* love. God is not absent in our world. God is all around us: the one in whom we live and move and have our being. May the light of God’s love shine forth in the everydayness of your world this week, and may you have eyes to recognize it. The call of God’s invitation is to be this light also for others, to pour love out into the midst of *their* everyday world. This is the call that rings out in the still small voice at the heart of the cosmos. May you have ears to hear it! We end today with this deep yearning for our world: That we may have eyes to see, and ears to hear.

Lord, hear our prayer.