



“Come and See”

1 Samuel 3:1-10; John 1:46-53

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January 18, 2009

Second Sunday after the Epiphany

My father-in-law, Gene, can see things most people miss. He’s a carpenter-builder by trade and spent his life creating beautiful things from houses to airports to gadgets around the house. He can look at a pile of rough material and see what it can become. He has a way of seeing things.

Years ago, a large cedar tree on one of his properties fell. He looked at that tree and saw more than a log. He milled the log into rough lumber and stored it for the right time to bring his vision into reality.

His daughter, Gloria, was part of the vision. After we’d dated for a time and she thought I might be worthy, she brought me home to meet the family. Things went well, and shortly afterward her dad told her about that old cedar tree, that he’d been waiting for the right time to make it into a cedar chest for her to prepare for her marriage. Neither of us could see marriage at the time, but Gene can see more than most people can see.

Soon the old log became a beautiful piece of cedar furniture which became a hope chest and, sure enough, Gloria and I got married in her old home church – a building her father built! That cedar chest held a privileged place in our house for thirty years. It now rests in our daughter’s house where someday it might be a hope chest for her daughters.

Some folks can see what others cannot. Good leaders, successful entrepreneurs, every one in the creative arts, all have that gift. Prophets, too, can see what other cannot see. Prophets are people who have spiritual insight. They always perceive what’s wrong with the world but, better yet, come see what God wants done about it.

Usually, prophets work against overwhelming resistance. Conventional wisdom and cultural norms always dull the moral sense of a people. In fact, popular culture is usually a tyranny that blinds us to all other moral visions. How can what “seems” so right possibly be wrong? How can “everybody,” or at least the vast majority, be mistaken?

Prophets can see what others miss. They clearly perceive how God’s norms and values differ from our own – and then they tell the truth. And they often die for it.

Like prophets old and new, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. could see what others could not see. He had a dream for America that now seems so obvious to most people, we cannot believe we didn’t see it before. That dream, so eloquently stated in King’s famous 1963 speech, “I Have a Dream,” simply stated that equality for all was God’s will and America’s promise. [Earlier in the year, King preached an early version of that speech here at Plymouth Church in a sermon titled, “The American Dream.”]

At the time, however, not many people shared King’s dream. Many people hoped that someday full equality might be the experience of every American. But few believed it

could or should happen quickly. Most people were trapped in the power of the status quo. Too many political, social, legal, cultural and religious barriers blocked the way. It was a distant dream and for many only a dream.

And, truth be told, that grand dream didn't come easily to Dr. King either. In the early days of the Montgomery Bus Boycott (1955-56), few, including Dr. King, were dreaming large visions. From the beginning the success of the boycott was unlikely, and as the boycott continued over weeks and then months, the tension on both sides of the political power structure was rising to a boiling point. Something had to give.

There was no Civil Rights Movement at the time, only a few tired black bus riders and a few courageous clergy kept the boycott going. Dr. King was 27 years old, in the first year of his first job as a pastor. He was a reluctant leader, pressed into service because no one else wanted the thankless job of butting heads with an intransigent power structure. Everyone seemed to counsel the leaders of the boycott to use great caution. His conscience counseled otherwise.

Soon, Dr. King was receiving 30-40 death threats a day. In early 1956 he was thrown in jail for the first time. His offense was driving 30 mph in a 25 mph zone even though he knew he was being followed and deliberately drove below the speed limit. Equality seemed a mere dream, and struggling for it was becoming a nightmare.

Martin Luther King was afraid: afraid for his own life and more afraid for his wife and small daughter. On a January night in 1956 King faced his fear head on. He was feeling discouraged and stayed up after his family went to bed. The phone rang. It was another vile death threat to him and his family.

Dr. King decided it was time for a heart to heart talk with God. As he told the story, he brewed a pot of coffee, sat down at the kitchen table, and told God, "I am weak. I'm afraid. I'm at the end of myself. I'm on my own and losing courage. I can't do this alone any more."

Then something amazing happened. King said it was as if he heard a voice telling him to stand up for the right, to stand up for justice. "I will be with you," the voice said, "all the way to the end of the earth."

Both his biographers miss what Dr. King added to the account once. "I remembered that old gospel song I learned at my mother's knee, 'No, never alone, no, never alone. He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone.'" Then he writes:

I tell you I've seen the lightning flash. I've heard the thunder roar. I've felt sin breakers dashing trying to conquer my soul. But [that night] I heard the voice of Jesus saying to fight on. He promised never to leave me alone. I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never experienced God before. Almost at once, my fears began to go. My uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything.

Three nights later, King's home was bombed. He was at a meeting across town. Fortunately, his family was not hurt. King returned to face an angry mob in his front yard bent on vengeance. With amazing calm and courage, he talked them down, urging them never to return violence for violence.

A week later over 100 indictments came down. King was in Atlanta with his father who, along with all his friends, urged Martin not to go back to Montgomery. It appeared the movement was over before it even began.

King resisted his elder's counsel. "I must go back," he said. "My friends and my congregation are being arrested. I would rather spend ten years in jail than desert my people now."

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A dream took shape, a movement was formed, and the conscience of a nation was awakened by a man of uncommon courage and soaring vision. Some people can see what others cannot. King could see what ought to be, and he could see the hand of God creating a new nation.

Some people have unique spiritual vision. Both Scripture Lessons for today illustrate the point.

Samuel was a young priest-in-training. He was an apprentice of an old corrupt priest, Eli, who headed an equally corrupt system. It was time the old order gave way to the new. The old corrupt system needed to change. It seems time in office dulls the moral sense of the keenest reformers.

There is wonderful irony in the story. The narrator tells us that Eli was going blind and could no longer see, “but the lamp of the Lord had not yet gone out in Israel.” The old priest was doubly blind, physically and spiritually. A new leader must arise, a man who could see with his soul. That man was Samuel.

The word of the Lord came to Samuel in the night. He thought Eli was summoning him. Three times he heard the voice of God. Three times he went to ask Eli what he wanted. Finally, Eli got it. “It’s the Lord,” he said. “Listen carefully.”

Samuel did listen and before long he was the prophet of God whom God sent to find a king for Israel. He went to Jesse’s home. Jesse had a number of young sons it seems, and Samuel knew one of them would be the king.

Jesse brought out his sons one at a time, from the eldest down. Each time Jesse gave Samuel the resume of his son. Each time Samuel said, “He’s not the man.”

Finally, the prophet asked, “Do you have any other sons?”

“Why yes,” Jesse said, “there is the little one, David. He’s out taking care of the sheep.”

“Bring him to me,” Samuel said.

Then Samuel offers the heart of the ancient story, “Jesse, you need to know something. Humans measure one another by outward appearance. But God looks at the heart. David is the man.” Samuel could see what others simply missed.

And before long, King David was corrupted by power and wealth, and another prophet confronted the proud king and told him, “A great evil has been done. You did it. Judgment will follow.” And it did. Some people can see what others cannot.

This story is a story about us. It’s an illustration of the human capacity to brilliant achievement and an illustration of the stunning moral blindness that accompanies great success and power. We need people with prophetic insight to keep us honest.

That brings us to the Gospel Lesson. It’s a promise, a promise that all of us can have that necessary spiritual insight.

It’s a story about Jesus’ first disciples – and it’s a story about seeing. Sixteen times in the story, forms of the verb ‘see’ are used. “Look,” the story begins. John the Baptist points at Jesus and says, “Look, the messenger of God.”

The first disciples looked and, at the same time, Jesus “saw” them. “Come and see,” Jesus says to them. One of them runs to find a friend and says to him, “Come and see. We’ve found the promised one.” Jesus tells a new disciple, “I saw you before you ever saw me and, believe it or not, I see potential in you beyond your imagination.”

Then Jesus says to all of them, “You will see things you never imagined possible.” He offers sight all who follow him.

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Faith is a way of seeing. Faith in God – following Jesus – enables us to see the ways conventional wisdom and contemporary culture lay siege to our souls. Jesus offers sight that loosens our hearts from that bondage. Faith offers a transforming moral and spiritual vision to all.

In fact, sight is one of the gospel writer John's themes in his book. He argues that if you've seen Jesus, you've seen God. It's not some vague, mystical sort of vision of the invisible but rather is a clear objective vision that sees who Jesus is, and what he did, and recognizes that is what God is like, and what God does.

It's the self-sacrificing love of God revealed in Jesus that is John's point. The cross is precisely where God love is most vividly seen. In fact, in John, the cross is Jesus' glory. The point is not the horror of crucifixion, though that is true enough. Instead what John wants us to see at the cross is the incomprehensible love of God poured out for us unconditionally and irrevocably. Jesus suffers and dies on behalf of the world – precisely the world that rejects God.

John's point is theological and ethical. This is what God is like. That is how we should live. Jesus' self-giving love is a way of being, a way of seeing the world. It's God's way. God calls us to adjust our lives and our vision accordingly.

That powerful moral vision is seen in the early church. Paul, one of Jesus' first interpreters, lived in a world in which slavery and gender discrimination were so normal, no one could see the world any other way. Yet, transformed by the moral vision that accompanies the Christian gospel, Paul could write revolutionary words, "In Christ there is neither slave nor free, male nor female....but Christ is all and in all. In baptism we are one."

What a refreshing story we viewed close by this week. They're calling it "Miracle on the Hudson." It's so different from the dominant narrative we've been reading lately. That narrative is about cheats, destructive schemes, the selling of a Senate seat, bombs, and the stench of war.

Then the story of an airline captain who not only safely lands his craft in the Hudson River, but stays on board to make sure all the passengers are safe, who finally boards a life raft with his clipboard and passenger manifest counting heads to make sure all are safe.

It's a reminder, a vision if you will, about the world, God, and us. We can be better than we are. The world can be better too. It happens when we learn to see what God sees and act like God acts.

I believe. Help my unbelief.

Amen.

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