

Seeing and Believing

Isaiah 62:1-5

John 2:1-11

“Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.”

When ministers are guests at a wedding reception and are asked what they do since, without a black robe, they do not look like a minister, one of three things usually happens: the person asking suddenly needs to revisit the bar for a refill, never to be seen again; or the person confesses that she used to go to church, read the Bible, believe in God but she no longer does any of those things for various and sundry reasons, end of discussion; or the fellow guest begins to talk about being spiritual rather than religious. The third is sometimes the most confounding response for those of us who spend our lives wrestling in particular with the God who addresses us in Scripture and in Jesus Christ and in the apostolic witness of the church. Spiritual in response to what? Spiritual according to who? Spiritual meaning what exactly?

Yet in this pluralistic world and lest you have no one to talk with at a wedding reception, an affable minister's instinct is to be theologically inclusive about the other person's experience of, well, spiritual things. I imagine that is your instinct too, even if you are only vaguely familiar with the words of Scripture and even though you would be too embarrassed to counter with a word about Jesus at a wedding reception. Still, you think to yourself, the love that came down at Christmas precludes identifying the God you know in Jesus Christ with the disembodied gods born of human imagining. “We do not see everything,” the preacher to the Hebrews declared, “but we do see Jesus.” He is the lens through which we look when we are looking for God in the world. “And because of his visitation,” to borrow the words of W. H. Auden's Simeon, “we may no longer desire God as if He were lacking: our redemption is no longer a question of pursuit but of surrender to Him who is always and everywhere present.” The catch these days is that most Christians either forget to bring their biblical and theological lenses with them when they leave the sanctuary; or the lenses they are wearing were last ground for them when they graduated from confirmation class; or their present lenses are the kind they might buy at Walgreens because generic lenses are sufficient in a pinch to keep their faith in focus.

All of this is a long lead up to the reason the Sundays that begin with Epiphany and end with the Transfiguration are so helpful. This is the season when we are invited to see and believe through the eyes of those who first saw and believed that God was in Christ. Every Sunday in this season, I imagine God the ophthalmologist fitting us to see God's glory through these stories, asking us if we see better with “one or two: wedding at Cana or Jesus preaching in Nazareth? One or two: Simeon seeing his salvation in an eight- days-old baby boy or the disciples seeing the new age inaugurated in a miraculous catch of fish? One or Two: the blind receiving sight, lame walking, deaf hearing, dead raised or the Transfiguration?” With the addition of each story to our seeing, we begin to notice God appearing in places we have never looked before. (Brian's point on Epiphany Sunday!) Last year, counting Transfiguration Sunday, there were five Sundays in Epiphany, five chances to see God's glory in the face of Jesus Christ and believe before we turned our faces with his toward Jerusalem. This year, mercifully, there are eight Sundays—the maximum. Perhaps this year will give us time and grace enough to see and believe. But see what and believe how? Or see how and believe what?

Thus far, in Matthew's Gospel, the magi have seen the light of a star that led them to see “the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage.” Post-Christmas, shall we follow the stars or the child? One or two? In Luke's Gospel, the heavens open and Jesus alone sees the Holy Spirit descend on him in bodily form like a dove and hears a voice from heaven saying, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” Post baptism, shall we follow John the Baptizer or his cousin at the end of the line? One or two? In John's Gospel, “the first of Jesus signs, in Cana of Galilee, revealed his glory; and his disciples believed him.” Post-Epiphany, shall we hang our hearts on religion or revelation? In his prologue, John says of the apostles “we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.” What did they see and what are we led to see through their witness?

In a word, they saw light. “In him was light,” John wrote in his prologue, “and the light was the life of all people.” In John, God is light itself, is the source of light, is the light that radiates and reaches all people in person, is the light that exposes the darkness, is the light that opens blind eyes to recognize God in the face of Jesus Christ.

God the ophthalmologist began fitting God's people to see the light of God's glory dwelling with them ago. Israel's lens is the base line of our own. In the first fitting, God's glory filled the Arc of the Covenant and dwelt

with God's people in the wilderness. In the second, God's glory filled the Temple Solomon built in Jerusalem. In the third, right before the Babylonians marched into the city and destroyed the Temple, Ezekiel says the glory of God left the city, even as the prophet was given a vision of the glory returning to the Second Temple. In the fourth, after the Second Temple was destroyed in 70 A.D., the dwelling place of God's glory became a matter of debate and division. Rabbinic Judaism saw God's glory dwelling in the words of the Law and the Prophets. Christians saw God's glory dwelling in Jesus Christ.

"The Word became flesh and dwelt among us," John wrote. Tabernacled among us. Pitched a tent among us. The first witnesses followed Jesus because they saw God's light dwelling in him, saw God's glory revealed through a sign performed by Jesus in Cana of Galilee. Because the lens through which John's community was looking included Isaiah 62 (our Old Testament lesson) where a wedding anticipated the messianic age, John's community glimpsed the promised messianic banquet in the abundance of fine wine drawn from jugs traditionally used in the Jewish rites of purification. The steward did not know where the wine came from. The guests did not know where the wine came from. Only the servants who *obeyed* Jesus' word knew. Only Jesus' mother, who said "Do whatever he tells you," only she knew. John says Jesus did this, the first of Jesus' signs, in Cana in Galilee, and revealed his glory, the light of the glory of God dwelling in him, tabernacling in him, pitching a tent in him.

Yet Jesus' question is oddly our question too: "What concern is that to you and to me?" How does a sign Jesus performed in Cana of Galilee or any of these stories, for that matter, give us eyes to see God's glory made manifest in Chestnut Hill of Philadelphia? In 90 A.D., that was already a question being asked by John's community. In John's Gospel Jesus later will praise those who believe without signs or who believe on the basis of signs seen by others who were with Jesus. Moreover Jesus will say that those who have faith in him will perform the same works he performs, even works greater than his. Here John is thinking of the church's works which had largely replaced miraculous manifestations of God's presence and power with the sign and seal of the sacraments. "We are not," Karl Barth says, "here and now excluded from the glory of God. But the form in which we are surrounded by it, is the form of the Church: proclamation, faith, confession, theology, prayer..." and the sacraments as they all focus our eyes on the light that shines in the darkness, the light that is the life of all people.

So if, over the course of these eight Sundays and through our diligent use of the means of grace, we more and more see God's glory, God's light shining in the darkness, then for John, believing comes next, but not believing a creed or a doctrine. Believing in John's Gospel has to do with following the light, with obeying Jesus' word, with being his disciples. And as we have seen by way of these stories, if you follow the light that is light, you likely will find yourself in anything but religious company. Ha! Back to the wedding reception where I am rethinking the reason the spiritual but not religious person is stuck talking with the preacher. "When you encounter another person," John Ames says in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*, "when you have dealings with anyone at all... think, as it were, 'This is an emissary sent from the Lord, and some benefit is intended for me....He would probably laugh at the thought that the Lord sent him to you for your benefit (and his), but that is the perfection of the disguise, his own ignorance of it.'" That is also the way the light overcomes the darkness *in us*, the way the word becomes flesh *in us*, the way the *Logos* became God's word to me in a Mary Oliver poem, a poem that surely reveals God's glory:

Why wonder about the loaves and the fishes?
If you say the right words, the wine expands.
If you say them with love
and the felt necessity of that love,
the fish explode into many.
Imagine him, speaking,
and don't worry about what is reality,
or what is plain, or what is mysterious.
If you were there, it was all those things.
If you can imagine it, it is all those things.
Eat, drink, be happy.
Accept the miracle.
Accept, too, each spoken word
spoken with love.

Thanks be to God!

