

Auto-Focus

Genesis 18:1-10; Luke 10:38-42

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“You are worried and distracted by many things.” – Luke 10:41

Many of you know that one of my favorite hobbies, outside of gallivanting around towns and parks with Seth, is photography. I love the still capture of a moment. The smile and the landscape. The shadow and the shaft of light. But as often as it brings me joy, I must also admit it can be a love-hate relationship. Not with the art and the craft-form, but with the tool and the apparatus. I suppose if I just joined 2022 (or, for that matter 2012) and used my smart phone for pictures, a lot of the hassle could be avoided. But as it is, I am stubborn, and most of the time, I still lug around my camera bag, full of lenses and filters, and hope for the best.

I hope for the best because often what I see is not what the camera sees. Sometimes the reproduction of color is not right. Sometimes the scene is illuminated too brightly, or sometimes it's produced too dimly. But mostly, my main frustration, is found in the focusing system. For instance, when I use the camera's auto-focus feature, which can save a lot of time, it sometimes isolates the wrong subject. Even when the box in the viewfinder is pinpointed down to, say, the iris of an eye, and I click the shutter and take the picture, sometimes the image result, it's sharpest point, for whatever reason, ends up being a distant freckle. I didn't pick the freckle, of course, the camera did. And then it laughs at me. Love and hate.

Now I've learned over time that most cameras, even the best of the best, can struggle with auto-focus in certain situations. In particular when the contrast of the scene is too low and nothing really sticks out. Or when the contrast is too high, and all nuance and middle tones are lost. Or, when the background is full of distractions and odd angles. Or, when it's dark and the light is imperceptible.

It's not the camera's fault, of course. It's just the way it was built and its compliance to its algorithms and its programming. But nevertheless, it is a flawed feature that leads to flawed results. Yes, auto-focus and auto-mode is easy. It's the default setting. It can be great at just snapping a shot, and getting the job done, but it will also never fully capture all the detail and get the focus just right. For in order to do that, the photographer must move to manual mode. To override the computer, the chip, the processing. To take the time to analyze and tinker, to pause and see the scene more correctly if not more creatively... and then can it become art, or at least a more faithful, colorful, and inspired representation of the event and subject at hand.

But in 2022, who wants to do that? We don't want to take extra time. It's easier to simply make snap judgments. Reading the headlines, but not the articles. Parroting what we see on Facebook but not in journals. We don't want to use the tools at our disposal to fully understand and get it right. The internet, which was first designed to be a platform for scientists and philosophers to communicate globally about complex equations and queries has turned into a meme-factory, where the most we can be asked to do is scroll and like as we go. We are, in the end, those dudes from Wall-E. And just like fast-food, we want it all sloppy and quickly.

And in much the same way, quite sadly, we have taken a similar approach to faith. We sing the hymns and say the confessions but can't be bothered to remember two minutes later what we just said and sang. We won't go to Bible Study, or Theology on Tap, we won't stay for second hour or come to a workshop. And I am just as guilty. For it's much easier on auto-mode, and we think the processed image of religion is good enough.

But it's not solely our fault of course. It's our programming. The algorithms of the modern day society, in this world full of odd angles and distraction. And we have been conditioned to think this is all normal behavior and response, and that binary, soulless, banal discourse and thought, is acceptable because it's more easily understood, conversed upon, and disseminated.

And honestly, I blame a lot of these devolutions on the rise of superhero movie. Oh yes, I do! It's all that's ever released these days, isn't it? Where are the blockbusters with plot and character, drama and substance? It's all random guy or girl versus random girl or guy, with this cape or that. There is no nuance or middle ground. There is no critical analysis or thought. It's all mindless, easily digestible, entertainment. And while I mostly jest that Thor and Thanos are to blame, they are yet a glaring testimony of where we are today. This guy good, this guy bad. This thought right, that thought wrong. This picture decent enough.

My friends, if we ever want to improve, to grow, to appreciate and understand the nuances and the details of all that is around us in the viewfinder of life, we must change, and switch to manual mode, and override the systems that seek daily to numb and control us, as they do. As they do.

In our text from Genesis today, we find Abraham auto-focused on doing all that is necessary to be a good host. To demonstrate commendable hospitality and service. But like the auto-focusing camera system, he gets distracted by the background of what he thinks he is supposed to see and do and he is overrun by that programming. He is so dead-set on doing, that he doesn't get what Sarah gets by listening, she who went to manual mode and disregarded her algorithm.

The verbs "run" and "hasten" are used three times in the span of five verses. Abraham is quite literally going as fast as he can to get everything just right for his guests. He runs into the house, mumbles some orders to Sarah, who doesn't even have time to respond, before he is seen running back out again to the cattle, etc. And after he sets all things down before these men, the first word out of their mouths is not thank you, but *hey, where's your wife?* And Abraham is like... *uh, back in the tent.* But instead of doing as she was told back there, rushing around to make the cakes as she was so ordered, she is instead found just listening. Pausing, refocusing, overriding, listening. It's as if by asking, *where's your wife*, that these heavenly guests wanted Abraham to recalibrate his own system, to see and implement what Sarah has understood. For she captures the scene both creatively and correctly. While Abraham's sense of hospitality is no doubt something to be marveled at and celebrated, I also think in his busyness he misses the significance of the image unfolding before him. Just listen, Abraham, to what these men have come to say, for their words are more remarkable and hopeful than anything all your hurrying can achieve. *For in her old and barren state, God will bless Sarah with a child!*

Listen and be amazed. For in God, there is hope. There is hope.

Likewise, the same scene unfolds in our New Testament text. Martha, like Abraham, is running around, doing task after task playing the good servant for Christ; while her sister Mary is merely sitting at his side, listening to all that he might have to say.

And while this is again not a wrongdoing of Martha's (or Abraham's), it is yet perhaps a flaw in her programming and understanding, just as it is in ours. Namely, that doing a lot doesn't always amount to meaning a lot, at least in the eyes of the Lord, or in the days of our lives. That sometimes the best response is the more measured response -- the more interpretative, contemplative, and analytical. And I get that that goes against our very conditioning, which suggests that a busy person and an active child is "more productive" and "healthier" than the more cautious, sedentary, and zen-like ones... But just as Martha pleads, *don't you see all that I am doing for you while Mary does nothing at all?* Let us remember that Jesus replies: "Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; but there is need of only one thing and Mary has chosen the better thing."

Now, my friends, please don't interpret from all this that we should be more sloth-like in our vocations and our calls, or uninterested in doing the work required of us in this kingdom of God. No, we still go on Mission Trips, we still go to Face-to-Face ministry; we still feed the hungry and house the homeless. But, sometimes, sometimes, we would do well if not better to defocus, and pause, and recalibrate, so that we might see the whole image more properly and clearly, and our meaning our response to it more creatively and substantively.

On our cover today we have a rather strange piece of art. It's one of those "Magic-Eye" stereogram renditions that were popular in the '90's (consequently one of the best decades to be a teenager in, I will have no argument). It's a computer generated image that on the surface looks a lot like nothing. A jumbled mess of lemons, limes, and oranges that appears pointless in pattern and substance.

But if you are to relax your eyes, defocus, and look past all the busyness, you'll slowly begin to see the word GOD appear. It's a trick no doubt, and one that I must admit sometimes fails my own vision and comprehension. But it is nonetheless to the point of today's rather simple message.

That in this world of chaos, where the backgrounds of life are so frequently messy, confusing, and complicated, such that it's hard to find our subject, we must keep our glance on that which matters. Not on everything else that would seek to distract us or program us, but on the word of God – the Light shining in the darkness, that helps us focus, and gives us autonomy and hope.

Hope, my friends, that there is meaning both within and beyond the jumble and the mess in this world today. And hope that there is yet a beautiful picture for us all to see, if we begin to readjust, recompose, and manually try to seek it. Amen.