

Title: Faith as a Way of Seeing

Text: John 1:43-51

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Immanuel Baptist Church

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Here is a letter a college student sent to her parents:

Dear Mom and Dad,

I am sorry to be so long in writing. Unfortunately all my stationary was burned up the night our dorm was set on fire by the demonstrators. I am out of the hospital now and the doctors say my eyesight should return sooner or later. The wonderful boy, Bill, who rescued me from the fire kindly offered to share his little apartment with me until the dorm is rebuilt. He comes from a good family so you won't be surprised when I tell you that we are going to be married. In fact, Mom, since you always wanted a grandchild you will be glad to know that next month you will be a grandparent.

At the bottom it read: P.S. Please disregard the above practice in English composition. There was no fire. I haven't been in the hospital. I'm not pregnant. And I don't have a steady boyfriend. But I did get a "D" in French and a "F" in chemistry and I wanted to be sure you received this news in the proper perspective

One's perspective is a matter of how and what one sees. Faith is a matter of seeing. How we see the world, how we see God, and how we see ourselves in our relationship and connection to both the world and God is at the heart of what faith is. Our faith is influenced and shaped by how and what we see. Faith is a way of seeing.

Some see God as a hostile power, a threatening force in the universe, set against the creation. Others see God as a neutral power, indifferent to the affairs of life in this world. Still others see God as a loving and compassionate Parent out for our good and well being. Can we trust God if we believe that God doesn't really care about the creation or even worse is hostile towards it? So how we see God is crucial to our faith development.

In our Gospel story Philip believing that Jesus is the One they have been waiting for goes and gets Nathanael. He says to Nathanael: "We have found the one Moses and the prophets wrote about, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." (By the way, the early Christians reinterpreted their Scriptures in light of what they had come to believe about Jesus. They read their Bibles through the lens of Jesus).

Nathanael's initial response is: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" He is echoing a conventional belief. New Testament scholar R. E. Brown remarks that the saying may be a local proverb reflecting the jealousy between Nathanael's town of Cana and nearby

Nazareth. If such is the case then Nathanael is simply echoing a belief that he had been taught, a belief that he grew up with.

Jesus goes on to shatter that assumption. I wonder how many of us are stuck in our spiritual lives because we are clinging to assumptions and beliefs that we have been taught that keep us from seeing with new eyes. Nathanael had to let go of his false assumption about the Messiah before he could see from a more honest, healthy perspective. Many Christians cannot let go of unhealthy, negative assumptions and beliefs and therefore are not open to perspectives that could shape their lives in more positive ways.

I like to say about my own faith—this is what I believe right now, this is what I believe at this stage in my faith journey, but you know, I could be wrong. And unless I am willing to admit that I could be wrong, I have no real hope of growing and seeing new things or experiencing God in new ways. And that's why some people never grow—they cannot bear to admit that they may be wrong. And yet we all see through a glass dimly.

Of course, this can be dangerous. One can lose one's way. That is a possibility. But that's what makes the journey exciting. The spiritual life should be an adventure of discovery. And the new things that we see and learn and come to believe should make our spiritual lives exciting and vibrant. Some folks can't handle the danger. If you live on the edge, they say, you might fall off. I would much rather risk falling off, exploring new worlds, than be confined and afraid to venture out of my prison cell.

In the movie, *The Truman Show*, Jim Carey plays Truman Burbank. He was the first unwanted child to be adopted by a corporation. He is placed in a make believe world, where the entire town is dedicated to a continually running TV show. They are all actors except Truman, and for him it is real. Everything about his life is staged. But at one point in the show, a girl that he met in college deviated from her script and tried to explain to Truman the true nature of his life. Of course, the producers got to her before she could do that, but the seed had been sown and it resonated with something deep within Truman, that there had to be more to life than what he knew.

Truman experiences a gradual awakening, a quest for the truth, and the need to break out of his box. He encounters many obstacles in his way—traffic jams, the inability to book flights out, when he buys a bus ticket the bus breaks down. In the final scene he overcomes his fear of water and sails against an artificially constructed hurricane force storm on the “ocean”—which of course is not really an ocean. When he finally reaches the edge of his world he exits via a door in the wall to the thrill of the television audience and discovers a whole new world.

Many folks are content to live in their artificially created and constructed worlds. But more and more people, according to new statistics, are not. And they are leaving their faith.

According to Christine Wicker, former religion reporter for the *Dallas Morning News* in a new book entitled, *The Fall of the Evangelical Nation: The Surprising Crisis Inside the Church*, she says that as many as one thousand conservative evangelicals are leaving their churches everyday.

The living Christ invites us to explore new horizons, to expand our way of seeing and venture out into the unknown. And while it may be unknown to us, the living Christ is already there inviting us to “come and see.”

In our Gospel story Jesus sees Nathanael before Nathanael ever sees Jesus. And when Nathanael appears Jesus says, “Behold an Israelite in whom there is no deceit.” Nathanael says, “How do you know me?” And Jesus says, “I saw you under the fig tree.” Perhaps Nathanael was meditating and reflecting on the Jacob story, wondering how God could use a scoundrel like Jacob who was so full of deceit. We don’t know, but the words of Jesus shattered Nathanael’s previous assumptions and beliefs about the Messiah.

The living Christ sees us before we ever see the Christ. The living Christ knows us. I love the story about the preacher who liked to preach from a big loose leaf notebook. He wrote his sermon notes in the margins. He was reading from Genesis one day, “And Adam said to Eve,” then he turned the page. He read again, “And Adam said to Eve . . .” He paused, looked all around, fumbled through his Bible. He read again, “And Adam said to Eve . . .” “Hmmm,” he said, “Look’s like a leaf is missing.”

The living Christ knows what is missing in our lives. Christ knows all about our failures and sins; all about our selfish actions and attitudes—and he doesn’t turn away. Christ pursues us all the more. Christ loves us in all our sin and selfishness. Christ loves us even before we know to love him.

This is how I understand the concept of election in the New Testament. I don’t think God chooses some and passes over others. I think God chooses all. God predestines all to be God’s children, to know and experience God’s love. Will all come to know and experience God’s love for themselves. I don’t know. Certainly God doesn’t coerce or force or manipulate anyone. We have to come to receive God’s love and allow that love to change us. But I am certain of this: that God loves us before we ever know to love God. I like the way 1 John puts it: God first loved us before we ever loved God, and sent Jesus into the world to communicate that love and now we love God because God first loved us. The living Christ loves us before we ever commit to his will and purpose in the world and before we ever identify with his cause.

In our Gospel Story after Nathanael comes to see Jesus differently he lets go of his old assumptions and beliefs and confesses to a new reality, “Rabbi, You are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel.” Of course, Nathanael really doesn’t have much of a clue what he has just confessed. He has so much more learning and growing and seeing to do.

Jesus says to him, “You shall see greater things . . . you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.” The allusion, of course, is to Jacob’s vision. Jacob had dreamed of a ladder extending from heaven to earth with angels ascending and descending on it. Jesus takes the place of Jacob’s ladder. This is the central truth that John’s Gospel seeks to communicate—that Jesus is the Word and Wisdom of God come to earth, come to humanity. Jesus is the Son of Man, the representative man who reveals what God is like and enables us to know God in ever new and exciting ways.

This is the possibility and prospect of those who allow Jesus to shatter their old assumptions and presuppositions and are willing to follow Jesus over new horizons on a never ending journey. We will see greater things. Don’t you want to see greater things than you know and see now? Our age doesn’t matter. Jesus is always beckoning us to see new things—after all, there really is no end to eternal life, the life we experience with Christ. There is no exhausting what there is to see.

There was a man who operated a little bait and tackle shop right off the California coast. He had a large picture window looking out to the ocean and the view was simply breathtaking. The man who owned and managed the shop was working on a fishing reel with his back to the window when a customer entered. The customer took one look through the window and exclaimed, “Wow, you have the most beautiful view in the world.” The owner of the shop, with his back to the window, never bothered to look around. He sort of grumbled, “I’ve seen it so often, that I never bother to look anymore.”

Isn’t it amazing how one person can never tire of seeing, always seeing new sights and colors in awe of the beauty and mystery, and another simply stops looking because he has seen it all before.

The living Christ, the cosmic Christ, the Lord of all creation is always beckoning us forward, saying “Come and see.” But if we are to see, then we must be prepared to leave our old assumptions and presuppositions and ways of thinking that keep us confined, like Trumen, to the world that has been created for us. We must dare to confront the challenges and face the resistance that would keep us confined and launch out in faith if we are to see the greater things Christ has for us.

I’ve spent this whole sermon talking about the need to see, and what we must be willing to give up and risk if we want to see. But I want to close with an observation of why this is so important. How and what we see will determine what we do.

Fred Craddock tells about the time he was in high school and had attended his denomination’s summer church conference for youth. At the end of the week they had

collected \$140 for their Christian World Friendship Fund—a considerable amount in those days. The final night they were to have a special consecration service and determine what to do with the money. There had been, says Craddock, some great natural disaster in some foreign place and it was suggested that they give their money to help the people decimated by the disaster. It looked like a good thing to do and they were to ready to decide when someone said, “Isn’t that country Communist?”

Nobody knew. One of the counselors said, “Well, it’s pretty heavily communistic, but I don’t know what the percentage is.” “Well then,” someone said, “I don’t think we should send the money there.” Someone said, “Well, look, those babies don’t know whether they are Communists or not. All they know is that they’re hungry.” “We can’t do that.” “Why not?” “We have to be careful. We feed them today and we’ll fight them tomorrow.” After about an hour of arguing, a vote was taken. They used the money to improve the recreational facilities at their campground.”

How you see will determine what you do. And in every judgment text than I am aware of in the New Testament it’s always a matter of what we have done. Sometimes there is a fine line between what we do that is good and what we do that is evil—and so much depends on how we see.

Lord Jesus, risen and glorified, alive and present, give us eyes to see. Amen.