

Bellaire Community United Methodist Church

December 11, 2016

“See”

Advent 2016, part 3

Matthew 11:2-15

You are in the right place this morning. God has called you here. You might think it is just a coincidence, but it is not. God has a real and specific purpose for you to discover with us. None of us is meant to be alone. Together, we are the church. That’s why I am so grateful for your presence today.

I invite you to pray with me, holding out your hands as a symbol to God that you are ready to receive his Word.

Lord Jesus, come and fill this place with your presence and your love. We are your people. Open our eyes, that we may see your truth. Open our ears, that we may hear your voice. And open our hearts, both to receive your love and to pass it on to those around us. This is our prayer, Lord Jesus. Quickly come. Amen.

I’ve been thinking lately of calling the Center for Disease Control and reporting a condition that I am certain I have. I even have a name for it: mono-optic-cuniculum-tosis. You probably recognize it by its common name: tunnel vision. This terrible disease afflicts unfortunate men, such as myself, with the inability to see something when it doesn’t appear exactly where we expect it and when we expect it. Such as: The butter in the refrigerator. Or the car keys on the kitchen counter. My case is so bad, I recently set my watch down on my end-table, walked away, and seconds later, it disappeared behind an invisible force-field. I know this is what actually happened, because after I couldn’t find it, I went

looking in the bathroom, kitchen, and dining room, and when I finally returned to my table, and it was RIGHT THERE, where I swear two minutes earlier it was not.

OK, I'm joking a little. But I want to share a real truth with you: Our focus shapes our vision. When we don't see things exactly as we expect them to appear, they are as good as invisible to us. This has actually been studied by psychologists. Check out this video: ([Gorilla problem](#)).

Now, we may talk about missing car keys, cellphones, and even gorillas, but there are actually spiritual things in this world that we are not seeing. I'm talking about things like peace, hope, health, security, and joy. There are a lot of people, you and me included, who never seem to find them. Is it because they are really not there? Or do we need to refocus?

We started two weeks ago noting that Advent is a season of preparation for the coming of Jesus. We learned that we are to watch for his return, not just celebrate his birth 2000 years ago. We need to prepare our hearts, love God, and serve others. Last week, we learned how John the Baptist prepared the way for Jesus by calling people to repent, to turn from their sins and be baptized. We learned that we need to confess our sin in order to prepare for Christ. Today I want us to consider what we miss because our spiritual vision is impaired.

We begin by looking at another story of John the Baptist, but with very different circumstances from last week. Remember, John was first preaching in the Judean Desert, drawing large crowds to the Jordan River to repent and be baptized. But in the story today, he is in a dark dungeon in King Herod's palace.

It turns out, insulting a king is not a good idea for anyone, even a prophet. In Matthew 14 we learn that John the Baptist told King Herod (the son of the king

who tried to kill Jesus as a child, by the way) that it wasn't right for him to marry his brother's wife. This seems reasonable to us, but it landed John in prison.

It's a nasty turn of events for John, and it causes him to lose focus and to doubt. So he sends his disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?" (Matt. 3:11) Remember, this is John the Baptist, who once spoke eagerly about Jesus Christ. John had said, "After me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry." (Matt. 3:11) He said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29) Of Jesus, John said, "He must become greater; I must become less." (John 3:30) John even told Jesus, "I need to be baptized by you," when Jesus came himself to be baptized by John. (Matt. 3:14) John was excited at the coming of Jesus! He was bold! Fiery! But now he's depressed, weak, and doubting. What happened?

Here's what happened: Jesus didn't fulfill John's immediate expectations. There was no fiery judgment, no separation of the grain and straw. No upheaval in the current society. John, the good guy, was in prison; King Herod, the evil guy, was still in power. So John sent his disciples to basically ask, "Why is this happening, Jesus? Aren't you supposed to be the Messiah?"

Jesus' answer is not what I would have given. You know, when you children ask why, you either say, "Because!" or you give them some long, drawn-out reason that they inevitably don't understand or believe. Jesus doesn't say, "Yes, John, I am the Messiah. Now stop whining!" No, Jesus gives John's disciples an eye exam. You know, the one the optometrist does with the lenses: "Which is better, one or two?"

Jesus says, “Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor.” (Matthew 11:4-5)

Jesus tells them: Look with your own eyes. See for yourself what is happening. Don’t just take my word for it. Don’t fall away just because I don’t measure up to your test.

Jesus affirmed to the crowd that John was a real prophet, not some weak, shaky reed in the wind, or a flashy, pompous prince in a palace. John was the real deal. He was their Elijah, the prophet they were waiting for. He was a great man. And he concludes his speech with these important words: “Whoever has ears, let them hear.” (Matthew 11:15)

What Jesus is saying to John, to the crowd, and to all of us is this: we have a choice to hear what Jesus is really saying, and to see what is really happening in the kingdom of God. It’s not all roses and fluffy unicorns. The kingdom of God is serious business. “The kingdom of heaven has been subjected to violence, and violent people have been raiding it.” (Matthew 11:12) It’s not surprising to Jesus that John is in prison for doing the right thing. Jesus seems to indicate that this persecution is going to happen to himself and his followers. But Jesus knows, that is no reason to give up hope, to stop believing that He is the Messiah.

John wanted to see judgment. John wanted freedom. He wanted to see repentance and redemption – RIGHT NOW. He needed a vision adjustment, a new prescription. Effectively, Jesus told him, Don’t look for what’s NOT there, just because that’s what you want. Look for what IS there.

What do we miss, because our focus is on our own bad luck, our own circumstances? Have we locked ourselves up in a prison of our false expectations? Maybe we need to see in the world what God sees.

I posted a question on Facebook earlier this week, asking where people have seen healing in the midst of dark circumstances. A former classmate of mine, now a teacher, told me, she had a very difficult time after one of her students died of a sudden heart attack, only two hours after she had taught him in class. She wasn't sure at all how she could ever overcome her grief. But in the summer, she ran a marathon. At the 17th mile, a young boy passed her on a bike. He looked just like the student who had died. Later down the race, he returned again, smiling and waving, like a messenger from God saying, "It will be all right."

Ann Steiner has an amazing testimony if you ever get a chance to talk to her. She and Dan have lost two children, and many of you know the medical challenges they faced with their son, Todd. But this is the quote she shared with me. "Our family endured so much and we never said why; we just say, Thank you [God] for blessing us with two wonderful children!" Instead of bitterness, they chose blessedness

I could go on. I've had friends tell me their children were saved from addiction by the prayer and the grace of God. I have witnessed my parents' marriage be saved from the brink of divorce. I have seen God take a burnt out, clueless engineer-turned-youth-minister and open the door for me to become a pastor. I've seen lives changed, broken hearts healed, families reconciled – all testimonies to the fact that the kingdom of God is advancing. Is everything perfect? Of course not! Am I living in denial? No! But I am choosing to focus on what is, instead of what is not.

In Matthew 11:5 in the NRSV Jesus says “the poor have good news brought to them.” I love the way that translation frames it, because there are a lot of people we overlook. The blind, the deaf, the lame. The poor. The truth is, we live in a world where “ableism” is a subtle mindset that creates obstacles to people living into God’s kingdom. We assume that everyone has the same abilities we do: They can climb stairs. They can open doors. They can read, they can hear. They know the words to our songs. But the truth is, if for some reason they don’t, we devalue them.

What if, instead of waiting for these people to come to church, we followed Jesus and took “church” to them? The youth group did a simple thing last week. They went caroling at some homes of the elderly. They took the good news with them.

We have a chance to bring the good news to others. There is a basket near the entrance with invitations in it. They are for our Christmas Eve services, only two weeks away. If you have ears, listen. There are about 5,000 people within 6 miles of this church. Even if every church in Bellaire had 100 people come to join them on Christmas Eve, there would still be 4,000 people left. The only reason why we wouldn’t have 300 people at our two services is if we won’t go out and find them.

Who are you not seeing? Who has God placed in your life that you have sold short? How can you change your focus? I know we are a church of introverts, but the reality is, no one comes to church, no one comes to Jesus, unless someone invites them. And I’ve been told, it takes an average of seven personal invitations before they do.

Think about it. We offer the greatest message in the entire world. Music. Light. Peace. Hope. Healing. A relationship with the Author of Life and Love. Is that not something to share?

I'd like you to listen to this song by Brandon Heath called, "[Give Me Your Eyes](#)." As we do, the ushers will distribute these invitations to whomever wants them. I have 100 of them. But this is my challenge: when you take one (or more) you must give it to someone. I don't want to see these in the trash or stuffed behind the pew Bibles. This is our moment to tell Jesus, "Yes, I have ears and I am listening."

Memory verse

Psalm 146:8 - "The LORD opens the eyes of the blind. The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down; the LORD loves the righteous."

Reflection questions

1. Do you wear glasses or contacts? How important is your vision to you?
2. What is something that you often overlook?
3. What is something that you have wanted God to do, but hasn't happened?
How has that distracted your focus from what God is doing?
4. What abilities do you take for granted that others do not have? What assumptions do you make about what they can do or what values they have? (Think of disabilities and socio-economic differences.)
5. Who can you invite to hear the gospel? How will you invite them?