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When Eyes Are Opened

Isaiah 35:2b

There are times in all of our lives when events leave us feeling disoriented. In those moments we struggle to understand that which we cannot clearly see. For John the Baptist this time came when he was arrested and placed in a prison cell from which he would never emerge. His ministry was at an end. He was isolated from his work and from the community which shared his vision for the future. The disoriented prisoner begins to question the central convictions of his life.

As John languishes in jail he has too much time to reflect on the results of the ministry to which he has given himself. He struggles with realities that he can see all too clearly. Neither he nor Jesus has accomplished what he had expected. The political landscape of Israel has not changed. The Romans are still in control and Herod thrives as their political agent. The people are still caught in the cycle of poverty and political repression. But worst of all the spiritual condition of the people has not changed either. The people are like sheep without a shepherd. They have lost touch with the spiritual center of their lives.

Recognizing that nothing has changed, John instructs his disciples to go and put a question to Jesus, “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another (Matthew 11:3)?” John is looking for a sign of God’s grace which can penetrate the gloom of his prison cell. He knows he is caught in a wilderness of doubt and he wonders if God is paying attention.

Garrison Keillor wrote recently about a visit to New York City when he met a group of teenagers who had gathered for a Sunday School class. Keillor was impressed by the honesty with which these teenagers expressed their doubts. He wondered how those doubts had been shaped by the experience of living in New York City. He writes:

New York is very gaudy at Christmas, and Santa Clauses on Fifth Avenue swing their bells with style, and the store windows glimmer and the city at dusk is ever magical, but all New Yorkers know that loneliness is a part of life and can’t be extinguished...

I walked around the city that Sunday night—two homeless people were camped on the steps of a Lutheran church on 65th, in the midst of grand old apartment buildings, and the opera crowd was wending toward...the Café des Artistes for the lobster bisque, and on the uptown subway we all sat and did not stare at the crazy old man boogeying in his sleeveless T-shirt and singing incoherently and watching his own reflection in the glass—and how 17-year-old kids should mesh New York with the Nativity, I was not able to tell them. God prefers admitted incompetence to fake authority.

But explaining the universe to them was not my job, only to love them...On Christmas Eve the snow on the ground, the stars in the sky, the spruce tree glittering with beloved ornaments, we stand in the dimness and sing about the silent holy night and tears come to our eyes and the vast invisible forces of Christmas stir in the world. Skeptics, stand back. Hush. Hark. There is much in this world that doubt cannot explain (*Springfield Journal-Register*, December 9, 2007).

There are moments when our eyes are opened to see beyond our doubts. This is what Jesus had in mind when he sent an answer to John the Baptist in prison. “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them (Matthew 11:4-5).” Jesus invites John to see with new eyes. He offers the capacity to see beyond what is unfinished in our world so that we may catch a glimpse of God’s kingdom breaking through to the place where we live.

We see this process unfolding in the 35th chapter of the book of Isaiah. There we find the prophet coming to terms with the lostness of humanity. The disorientation of humanity is described in spatial terms. The people of God are scattered far and wide and denied the opportunity to experience wholeness. Their only hope for spiritual transformation is to travel from all directions to the holy land of Zion. But it is a journey that exposes them to terrible hardships. The wilderness through which they must travel cannot sustain human life. There is no water. It is filled with ferocious beasts who create an atmosphere of danger. Worst of all, the wilderness that Isaiah envisions cannot be penetrated because there are no roads.

But the prophet trains his eyes to detect the presence which can transform this forbidden wilderness. He sees streams of water running through the desert to make it bloom. The ferocious beasts are subdued. A beautiful highway suddenly appears to guide the traveler to the longed for destination. All those destructive forces which have prevented the lost from finding their way home are overcome. The wilderness will become the place where their eyes are opened. The prophet says, “They shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God (Isaiah 35:2b).”

Theodore Wardlaw has described a moment when this promise of the prophet came alive for him. It was a moment which opened his eyes to see what he had never seen before. He writes:

In the fall of 2006, we all watched as one particular Amish community in Pennsylvania—in the midst of grieving over and burying a group of their own schoolchildren who had been slaughtered by a rage-filled man with a gun that he finally turned on himself—paused nonetheless to send a delegation to reach out to and financially support the widow and family of the one who had done the slaughtering. We watched in open-mouthed disbelief as they summoned a strength that ultimately was impossible, humanly speaking, and then dealt with the sin and tragedy that had penetrated their world by beholding it all with the right kind of eyesight. We watched as they returned love for evil, as they reached out in healing and redemption. We watched in complete awe as they directed our gaze, if we had the eyesight to see it, toward a light shining in the darkness that darkness—try as it might—could not overcome (*Journal For Preachers*, Advent 2007, page 7).

Advent is a time to look again at the wilderness where we live. It is a time when we are invited to see it with new eyes. For it is there that we shall see the glory of the Lord.