

John 1:35-51 – Seeing and Being Seen.

Almighty God, grant that, as your only Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, ascended into the heavens, so may we also set our minds on things above, where Christ is, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one true eternal God. Amen.

In our passage for this morning, we are finally hear from Jesus in his own words. We have up to this point heard that Jesus is God, the Word become flesh. We have been introduced to his cousin, John the Baptist, who prepares the way for his coming with his baptism. And now we finally meet the man himself.

John introduces Jesus with the calling of the first disciples. Jesus' invitation to them is to "come and see." Proper sight is an aspect of our salvation that we sometimes over-look (pun intended). Coming and seeing is not just for Jesus' first disciples, but for us too. In fact, John is constantly using the way that Jesus speaks to his disciples as if he were speaking to us. Let us come to God's Word, and see him there:

John 1:35-51

The next day John was there again with two of his disciples. ³⁶When he saw Jesus passing by, he said, "Look, the Lamb of God!"

³⁷When the two disciples heard him say this, they followed Jesus. ³⁸Turning around, Jesus saw them following and asked, "What do you want?"

They said, "Rabbi" (which means "Teacher"), "where are you staying?"

³⁹"Come," he replied, "and you will see."

So they went and saw where he was staying, and they spent that day with him. It was about four in the afternoon.

⁴⁰Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, was one of the two who heard what John had said and who had followed Jesus. ⁴¹The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, "We have found the Messiah" (that is, the Christ). ⁴²And he brought him to Jesus.

Jesus looked at him and said, "You are Simon son of John. You will be called Cephas" (which, when translated, is Peter).

⁴³The next day Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. Finding Philip, he said to him, "Follow me."

⁴⁴Philip, like Andrew and Peter, was from the town of Bethsaida. ⁴⁵Philip found Nathanael and told him, "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph."

⁴⁶ “Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?” Nathanael asked.

“Come and see,” said Philip.

⁴⁷ When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, “Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit.”

⁴⁸ “How do you know me?” Nathanael asked.

Jesus answered, “I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you.”

⁴⁹ Then Nathanael declared, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel.”

⁵⁰ Jesus said, “You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You will see greater things than that.” ⁵¹ He then added, “Very truly I tell you, you will see ‘heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on’ the Son of Man.”

This is the word of the Lord.

In this story of Jesus calling his first disciples, we get to hear Jesus speak for the first time in the gospel. Jesus’ words here are not like ordinary words. They are the words of the one who is himself the Word. Of course, when God speaks creation happens. The first order of creation is creating light and separating it from darkness. Here we see Jesus, and we can see Jesus because he calls us with his creating word. Even though we hear the first words of Jesus here, there is another sense that John focuses on in these passages, sight.

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The theme of being able to see properly is woven throughout this story. John the Baptist begins by telling his disciples to “*Look!*” The disciples are *seen* by Jesus and then Jesus calls them to come and see. These disciples spend the day with Jesus and are convinced that they have *found* the one promised in the scriptures. After Philip is called to follow Jesus he too responds to Nathaniel’s scoffing with Jesus’ own call to “come and see.” Jesus then says to Nathaniel that he “*saw*” him under the fig tree, to which Nathaniel proclaims Jesus to be the “Son of God,” the “true king of Israel.” The whole story comes to a climax as Jesus gives a grand vision of “heaven opened.” If last week we saw the Spirit as a dove hovering over the waters of new creation in Jesus’ baptism, today we see the Word proclaiming “let there be light!”

Our sight is very important to us. It would probably be the last sense that we would want to give up. It is a real tragedy when someone loses their sight. John here uses our sense of sight as a metaphor for our salvation. Seeing here is knowing things as they really are, seeing Jesus, knowing him. Seeing Jesus, having him see you, these things are central to receiving the life that Jesus has for you.

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The great poet William Blake wrote, “If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, infinite. For man has closed up himself, till he sees all things thro’ narrow chinks of his cavern.” Our sight, our “doors of perception,” says Blake is “closed up.” We are as those who are stuck in a cavern looking through cracks, unable to see things as they are. All things pointing to their infinite creator.

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This past week I was listening to an interview with David Brooks on a podcast (I’ll attach the link to the podcast on the email after church). Brooks is a columnist for the New York Times, and a best-selling author. His newest book is titled, “How to Know a Person: The Art of Seeing Others Deeply and Being Deeply Seen,” is all about our ability to truly see other people.

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In his book, Brooks says, “Some days it seems like we have intentionally built a society that gives people little guidance on how to perform the most important activities of life. As a result, a lot of us are lonely and lack deep friendships. It’s not because we don’t want these things. Above almost any other need, human beings long to have another person look into their face with love and acceptance.”¹ We live in a hyper-individualized culture. Our alienation from true human contact is only exacerbated by our use of social media, where we are not seen at all, as the only thing we offer is some airbrushed version of ourselves. Through social media we give a persona, a mask, and then sit behind this mask alone, interacting only with other masks.

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Brooks goes on, he says, “There is a one skill that lies at the heart of any healthy person, family, school, community organization, or society: the ability to see someone else deeply and make them feel seen—to accurately know another person, to let them feel valued, heard, and understood.”² To be able to do this is a skill. Maybe you know someone that can do it really well. Maybe you never recognized this about that person, but whenever you’re around them you feel good. If there is any skill I want, it is this one.

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¹ David Brooks. *How to Know a Person: The Art of Seeing Others Deeply and Being Deeply Seen*. Random House, 2023,8.

² *Ibid.*, 9.

Brooks tells the story of a friend of his, a pastor named Jimmy Dorell, who built a church under a highway overpass for homeless people. Brooks describes Dorell as a boisterous teddy-bear like man, who above all sees people as image bearers of God. Brooks tells a little story about Pastor Jimmy,

“A few years ago, I was having a breakfast meeting in a diner in Waco, Texas, with a stern, imposing former teacher named LaRue Dorsey. I wanted to understand her efforts as a community builder because of my work with Weave, an organization I co-founded that addresses social isolation by supporting those who connect people. I was struck by her toughness, and I was a bit intimidated. Then a mutual friend named Jimmy Dorrell came into the diner, rushed up to our table, grabbed Mrs. Dorsey by the shoulders and beamed: “Mrs. Dorsey, you’re the best! You’re the best! I love you! I love you!”

I’ve never seen a person’s whole aspect transform so suddenly. The disciplinarian face Mrs. Dorsey had put on under my gaze vanished, and a joyous, delighted 9-year-old girl appeared. That’s the power of attention...

...When Jimmy sees a person — any person — he is seeing a creature with infinite value and dignity, made in the image of God. He is seeing someone so important that Jesus was willing to die for that person.”³

Brooks came to Christian faith around 10 years ago, and has come to understand that the heart of being able to see someone well is to recognize what God has created them to be. Getting to know someone, learning to see them well, not only allows you to have a relationship with them, but it transforms you as a person. As Blake says, to cleanse the doors of perception and see the infinite.

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Brooks quotes George Bernard Shaw, “The worst sin towards our fellow creatures is not to hate them, but to be indifferent to them: that’s the essence of inhumanity.” This is why stereotyping is so destructive to societies. Instead of seeing others well, we simply make quick judgements of others and never get to know them. Isn’t that a great assessment of our culture today? How quickly do we write someone off as a Trump-supporter or a social justice warrior before getting to know the person under the exterior?

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³ Ibid., 31.

This is what Nathaniel does to Jesus when he asks, “what good can come from Nazareth?” Like anyone, Nathaniel thinks that the great things of the world should come from great places. If the Messiah was going to come and redeem Israel from her oppressors then he would come from somewhere important, like Jerusalem, not the backwoods of Galilee. Nathaniel in his pride can’t see what is in front of him.

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Unlike Nathaniel, Philip, Peter, and Andrew had been given new eyes because of Jesus’ call on them earlier. Andrew and Peter had spent the day with Jesus, getting to know him. One can only imagine what a day like this might have been like. We know that Jesus was a master of seeing people, and in turn being seen by them. All over the gospels we see Jesus able to look through people’s facades and see their hearts. Whatever Jesus and these disciples spoke on, these brand-new disciples were able to confidently say, “We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.”

When Nathaniel questions this, Philip in turn calls Nathaniel with almost the same words that Jesus used to call Andrew, “come and see.” While John recounts this story, you can almost see him turn towards those who he is reading to, saying these words as an invitation to all of us. John calls us all to come to his gospel that we might see properly; that we might come to know the Lord, the Word of creation. In seeing Jesus, we are transformed, and we are truly seen too.

The importance of vision comes to the forefront when we see Jesus speaking to Nathaniel. When Jesus sees Nathaniel coming, he says, “Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!” To this Nathaniel responds, “How do you know me?” When you’re reading scripture, you should know that everything is said for a reason. Jesus’ is not saying some typical throwaway introduction. To understand what Jesus says here, and why Nathaniel has the response he does, we must look back to the very beginning of Israel.

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The nation of Israel got its name from Jacob, the last of the patriarchs. Jacob received the name Israel as a blessing after wrestling with the Angel of the Lord because he had seen God (Gen.32:30). One possible Hebrew etymology of ‘Israel’ could then be something like *ish* meaning ‘man,’ *ro’eh* meaning ‘see,’ *el* meaning ‘God.’ Thus, being a ‘true Israelite,’ as Jesus calls Nathaniel, would be one who truly sees God (See Philo, Works, 757, for a contemporary of Jesus thinking this is what ‘Israel’ means). In this case, whether Nathaniel knows it or not, he is seeing God in flesh in our Lord.

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Jesus also says that Nathaniel has 'no deceit'. Which is another strong connection to Jacob, as Jacob was famous for being a deceiver. Jacob is the kind of guy who deceives his blind father into getting a blessing intended for his brother. The same word that Jesus uses to describe Nathaniel is how the Greek Old Testament describes Jacob. By calling Nathaniel an "Israelite in whom there is no deceit," then, Jesus is saying that in seeing him, he is a true version of what Jacob should have been [repeat].

For the rest of the Gospel of John, the Jewish leaders will be referred to by John as merely 'Jews', they are not true Israelites, as Jesus calls Nathaniel. Even though their God was right in front of them, in the person of Jesus, they were blind to him. If they were they would have recognized who Jesus was, they too would be true Israelites, seeing God, like Nathaniel will very soon.

When Jesus says this to Nathaniel, he seems a bit taken aback, saying, "How do you know me?" Nathaniel must know something is up as he has already been told by Philip that this is the Messiah. Nathaniel, like everyone Jesus meets feels seen by Jesus, known by him. Jesus then tells him something that knocks him off his feet. Jesus says, "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you."

It is at this point that Nathaniel's eyes come out of their sockets and he realizes that he is standing on holy ground before the promised Messiah. He declares, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" While Jesus is truly the Son of God in a sense that Nathaniel does not know, what he meant by calling Jesus 'the Son of God' is something which means simply the 'King of Israel,' the coming Messiah.

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Because Nathaniel feels seen by Jesus, he is transformed. Just like David Brooks says, being seen is a need we all have, and when we are seen we can become our true selves. We can open the doors of perception and see the infinite. As Jesus interacts with many different people in the gospels, he sees them like nobody else can. Sometimes this means finding the woman at the well, seeing her sin, but calling her to himself. Other times it is seeing through hypocrisy and then being rejected.

If like Nathaniel we come to Jesus open, allowing him to see our sin, and we humbly accept him, he will transform us through this encounter. In this encounter we get to be totally seen, totally open to him, confessing all our sin, and yet he takes it all on himself.

Because we have had that encounter, we can in turn go and treat others in light of that. Just like Brooks describes Pastor Jimmy, we can see the image of God in people. When we are

seen by Jesus we can then in turn start to see others as he sees them. This, of course, will not always end in stern schoolmarms being softened, as it was for Pastor Jimmy, as many reject Jesus' penetrating sight, but it does open the possibility to begin to see things as they are, as God sees them.

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In the last thing Jesus says in our passage, he takes a bit of a more mysterious turn. He says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man." Remember, Jesus tell us to come and see, and this is what we will see.

Yet again the Gospel brings us back to the very beginning of God's people. In Genesis 28, Jacob is said to have had a dream where there was angels ascending and descending on a heavenly ladder. Jesus gives a vision that is very similar to what Jacob saw in his dream. Jesus takes this image of the ladder with God speaking at the top and makes himself the ladder. He is the means to God. He is the way we communicate with our creator. He even is the one to whom Jacob spoke, and now Nathaniel is having the same experience.

Today is Ascension Sunday, and we have confessed our belief that Jesus is ascended to the right hand of the Father, and there reigns in heaven until he comes again in power. Jesus describes this here in the very first chapter of John's gospel. Jesus is the ascended Lord, our means to the Father. He is our salvation, and we rely on him for all things. Let us ask God for eyes to see.

Let's Pray.