

“Seeing God in the Desert”

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This story of John the Baptist is a beautiful way to consider the start of the Advent season. It is a story that is both personal and cosmic in nature. This is the beginning of the narrative of Christmas. John has come, and he is beginning the announcement of the coming of Jesus Christ. Jesus, who will come and be this pivot point for all of time. Everything about creation is about to change. It is a cosmic narrative of the brokenness of humanity: God sending God’s own son as a human being - and the world being changed.

At the same time, it is a personal story. It is a story about people who were coming to the Jordan River and being baptized. And, I would ask this question: What was it that was drawing them to John the Baptist? Why did they come?

I am teaching Confirmation class. I was talking to them this morning about the Old Testament law. We have been going through this process of unpacking things that, when they were in first grade or kindergarten they learned, and they were very concrete and simple, and now they are ready for something that is less simple, like: When is killing not murder? Or, are all lies wrong? Or, why did God ask the Israelites to wear clothes that were all of one cloth and why don’t we do that today? Why do we do the Sabbath today differently than they did?

It is this process of discovery they are capable of something new. They have been developing their faith since their baptisms and Sunday school, but they are ready for something new.

So, as I have been talking to them, I have been immersed in the question of, what does it mean to come to faith? What does it mean, and how do we find faith? How do we encounter God?

Fundamentally, I believe it was Bart who said, “When we come before Scripture at worship, we are asking, ‘Is it true?’” And I would ask those who came to see John the Baptist, how did they know that John the Baptist was speaking from God? What made them come? How did they know? How do we know what is true?

You know, we live in a world that privilege is the empirical method. I studied a little bit of philosophy. (I’m not a philosopher by any stretch - but in my doctorate dissertation we were looking at the changes in American culture, in the way that we were moving out of the modern era.)

The modern era was known for the empirical method. I loved the empirical method. It has given us amazing things. My wife is a physician. The empirical method shifted medicine from doing more harm than good at a scary late date. There are suggestions it was as late as 1930 when doctors began doing more good than harm.

The empirical method has done amazing things for us, but there are things that the empirical method cannot teach us.

The empirical method is great at testing, observing the material realm.

This is fundamentally a sermon about two philosophical concepts. I may just lose you all right now [laughter]: Epistemology and ontology. Epistemology is the philosophy of what do we know and how do we know it. Ontology is the philosophy of existence: What exists?

Epistemology. The scientific method is fantastic at teaching us about the material ontology realm - things we can see and touch and test. Those things we can make hypotheses about and make a null hypothesis, and repeat it, and prove or disprove that hypothesis, and move forward in process. But there are vast quantities of things that we cannot study: truth, knowledge that is valuable and meaningful to us - incredibly important things, that the empirical method just cannot reveal. Questions, for instance, of existence. The existential questions like: What does it mean to be human, or why do we exist? Why are we broken? Why do we struggle? What is the "good" life? How do we find fulfillment, meaning and purpose? The empirical method is very limited in its ability to even begin to address those questions. It is unable to grasp beyond the logical realm of moral knowledge. What obligations do we have to friends? to family? to fellow citizens? to humanity? to animals? to plants? to the universe? What is beauty and how is it created? What is just, right and good? These are all essential qualities of life that are outside this realm's ability to discern.

Finally, the spiritual realm. Questions like: Is there a being that created us and how would we know that being? I say psychology - in the undergraduate world - and some of the things we did in psychology, were to attempt a way to measure things that aren't necessarily obviously measurable. It is very difficult, for instance, to measure or quantify abstract things that mean things to us - like freedom. Is there freedom or is there not? love? altruism? And, yet, when we as humans see it, we just know it.

Justice Potter Stewart described this ability we have to see and know, even if you don't know what it is from. He famously said, "I know it when I see it." He was referring to a case in 1964 that went to the Supreme court, *Jacobellis vs. Ohio*, when he was discerning what was obscene in a movie. He said essentially, "I know what obscenity is and this movie isn't it. I know it when I see it."

And, trying to access these things with the empirical method - it's like trying to teach a robot to walk. The height, the pinnacle of our ability in technology, in humanity, has been decreed - a robot that can function about as good as a one-year-old child. We have this hope some day to achieve the ability to teach something that can walk as well as a two-year-old. In that same way, the youngest child can tell you if there is love. The youngest child can see and know whether they are free. The youngest child knows what altruism is: the self-giving - giving the cookie to mom or to dad. We know this as human beings. We have an incredible capacity for morality, spirituality or meaning that cannot be found in the modern methods of empirical study.

I say all of this, because it comes back to the question of, how did they know that John the Baptist was from God? In the words of Potter Stewart, "They knew it when they saw it." Somehow, we experience something - we see it and we know. To my Confirmands who struggle and are wondering, somehow, we experience it and we know.

I remember when I was a young child, my dad was installed as a pastor. I think he had been a pastor for about a year. I was about 7 years old, and I came up to him and I asked him, "Dad, how do we know that God is real?" I wasn't asking the question. "is God real or false?" I just wanted to know how do we know it. If we can't test it and prove it, how is it that we know? The way we know is through this human capacity, the ontological realm of the spiritual world has a degree of certainty to us. We can't test it and prove it in the same way we can germ theory. On the other hand, it is incredibly important to us. It is essential to our life and, somehow, God reaches beyond this epistemic gap to touch us, to encounter us - and we are changed.

I shared last week about the formational experiences that I had at Calvin Crest - the summer camp that I grew up at. I went every year. And, some of the things that I encountered in understanding or in experiencing God, were simply waking up, morning after morning, and going to bed, night after night, in the Sierra National Forest surrounding us - with the birds chirping and the cedar trees and the pines and the smell - and just the lack of all of the human creation around us. It drew our focus on God, and we experienced God more easily.

Some of it happened because we were singing together, and in the midst of worship we were moved; singing silly songs at camp fires or singing deeply personal songs. Some of it happened as God encountered us as speakers who would speak to us, and we would hear God moving and stirring in us.

Later in life, as I was in ministry on staff, as we would pray, my AIM team - three of us - we were leading high school students in a leadership two-week program, and we would begin the morning asking for God to be at work in the lives of the students we were working with, and, at the end of the day, we would reflect on the ways we were seeing God moving and changing and shaping them. We were moved in this experience.

So, in this Advent season, may we be like those who came to hear John the Baptist. May we be those who come and see God, who reached beyond that which we can test, and find faith by finding encounters with God in worship, in tradition, in sacrament, in music and being elevated. May we find those moments where we transcend this material realm, and encounter the spirit of God who moves in us. For God is always seeking us; God has been seeking us our entire life,

Before we turned to God, God's spirit was at work, moving through all of the aspects of our life - calling us, inviting us. And, in this Advent season, as we prepare for Christmas, as we prepare for the coming of God, may we encounter God. May we find, may we seek and be found by the one who is calling to us. Amen.