

Finding God Above Our Heads Sunday, 12/13/20

Before Where's Waldo, there was Highlights magazine and the Hidden Objects pages. I hated going to the dentist as a kid, but I loved picking up the Highlights magazines that were piled up in the waiting room and locating all the objects that were so cleverly blended into the pictures. There was another puzzle that I liked where you had to identify details that were different among a handful of similar pictures. Do you remember those? They weren't easy. They required concentration, a pattern of scanning the images back and forth, and patience. The Hidden Objects puzzles required you to trick your brain into seeing something that it's not used to seeing: A baseball bat in the trunk of a tree; A candy cane in a scarf; or a safety pin in a skate. When we're not expecting to see something, we often don't, even when it's sitting in plain sight.

Psychologists have long known that people make rather poor witnesses because we tend to see events happening in the world in the way we expect them to happen rather than the way they actually do. Sometimes that means our brains invent missing details that we didn't see, but often it means we either were looking in another direction or we simply failed to register what we saw with our eyes. The same is true for our witness of God's work in the world. God is active and present in our daily routines of work and play, but either we're preoccupied with our work and miss it, or God is speaking to us in places and ways we're just not expecting. Sometimes, in order to find God, we need to look up from what we're doing. Just like the wise men who saw the star of Jesus, we need to take our eyes from our feet and look above our heads.

I love what James Harnisch said of Robert Owen Evans, the pastor we heard about earlier who observed supernovas. "Pastor Evans has trained his eyes to watch empty spaces in the sky so that at just the right moment, by looking at just the right place, he observes a burst of light that the rest of us- too busy to wait, too anxious to watch, too immersed in the present to peer into a light from the past- are unprepared and unable to see."¹ I would guess that most of us would be content with letting astronomers and graduate students put in all the late night hours of observing the emptiness of space. But what if instead of an exploding

¹ James Harnisch. *When God Comes Down*. Abingdon (2012).

star, it's the hand of God were missing? What if God is acting in the world around us every day, and we're missing it because we haven't prepared ourselves to see?

We know that the wise men, or magi, were not really kings, and they certainly weren't amateur astronomers who noticed something interesting in the night sky and decided to check it out. Instead, they were pagan astrologers, practitioners of a pseudoscience that purports to tell the future based on patterns of stars and planets. They likely knew nothing about God, and were arriving in Jerusalem, some two years after the birth of Jesus, because they believed that the star foretold the birth of a new earthly king, many of whom expected worship from those they ruled. The magi would have been unfamiliar with the Hebrew Scriptures and had no reason to believe that the newborn king would be the Jewish Messiah foretold by Isaiah. They were outsiders in the extreme, and yet they had trained themselves to watch for changes in the world around them, so they didn't miss the star.

On the other hand, the priests and teachers that Herod summoned to his side had the inside story, and they even knew that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem rather than Jerusalem. In case you were wondering, we're supposed to identify with these priests and teachers because, like them, we also have the inside story, only more so. We have both Old and New Testaments. That the magi made their long journey to find Jesus is perhaps less significant than the observation that the priests and teachers didn't take any journey. What were those priests and teachers doing for two years while the magi prepared and travelled from the East? Why weren't they scouring Bethlehem to find Jesus? They had all the knowledge they needed from the Scriptures, but I imagine they were so caught up in maintaining the routines of their lives that they simply weren't looking and either didn't notice the star or just couldn't conceive that the long-awaited Messiah would actually arrive one day.

How about you? Have you read your Bible lately? Putting aside the Old Testament prophets for the time being, Jesus made very clear that his birth wasn't the last time he'd make a dramatic appearance to us. Last week, when we celebrated Holy Communion, we repeated the great mystery of faith: "Christ has died, Christ has risen; Christ will come again." In other words, just like the teachers and the priests of Jesus' time, we are still waiting for the Messiah- not to be born, but to return to remake heaven and earth and to

finally consummate the Kingdom of Heaven. Did you know that? Are you waiting? Are you watching? Are you actively preparing? Jesus spent most of his ministry telling us to begin preparing the world for the Kingdom of Heaven. How's that going for you? Are you remembering to look for God above your head, or are you too distracted by the routine of each day? Preparing our hearts for Jesus doesn't end with His birth on Christmas Day. It goes on continually until Jesus returns and makes everything that's broken whole again. Eventually our seeking will end, just as it did for the magi. Let's finish their story now, picking it up with Matthew 2:9 in the New Living Translation

{Read Matthew 2:9-12, MSG}

When was the last time you waited a long time for something? We're not used to waiting these days. Packages arrive at our doorstep in a matter of hours or days, and movies and television programs are available to stream whenever it's most convenient. That's even true of worship now! What was it that you last waited for? Was it the birth of child? That, at least, usually has a pretty well-defined timeline. Were you waiting for a child to come home for Thanksgiving or Christmas? Some of that waiting is going on longer than we expected this year. Most of the things we wait for are measured in hours, days, or weeks. The pandemic has us waiting for things we never thought we'd ever have to wait for, like funerals, and not for hours or days but for months. The wisemen waited two years before presenting their gifts to Jesus, but they did eventually get to look into the face of their king. How can we live our lives more like those astrologers who travelled to see Jesus, and less like the teachers and priests who stayed behind in Jerusalem?

The most important thing we can do is to plant God's word in our heart, and that just doesn't happen if we're not reading our Bibles or at least reading from a regular devotional source. If that sounds a bit like a broken record, it's because God's truth remains the same, from generation to generation. The Bible is the most accessible revelation of God's way of thinking and acting that we have. More than that, it's "living and Active,"² forming and guiding our lives. It's God's Word that helps us to recognize God's hand when we see it move in the world in surprising ways and places. It's God's Word that helps us to recognize

² Hebrews 4:12. English Standard Version.

God's voice when the Spirit speaks to us at surprising times. And it's God's Word that shows us that waiting for God often means not just sitting but taking purposeful action that intersects with God's plan in the lives of other people. The wise men had astrology that led them to the star, and eventually to Jesus. That God could use astrology for that was a miracle! But we have something even better, if only we'll read it, digest it, and let it form our lives and direct our eyes and our hearts.

I suppose this particular comic could be interpreted in a variety of ways. Snoopy says the secret of life is to keep looking up. Perhaps he says that because that's where his food dish always comes from. Perhaps he means that by keeping a hopeful attitude we'll be happier in life. I suggest that "looking up" can mean watching what's happening above our heads instead of gazing at our feet. It can mean looking for our star, a sign of God doing something new in our lives and the world, instead of focusing on ourselves. It can mean believing in Emmanuel, God with us, who's Spirit draws near to us not only once a year at Christmas, but every day of our lives. The same God who created the cosmos, the same God who parted the Red Sea, the same God who was born in a stable, the same God who rose from an empty tomb and will come again one day, is the same God who eagerly desires to meet and guide you, if only you'll take notice of what God is doing and follow the star that God has given.

As each of us follow our Advent stars, those things that remind us and guide us into close encounters with the Spirit of Christ, we can eagerly expect that we'll look upon the face of God. Maybe not every day, maybe not every time we worship. But there will be times when we can expect to experience close encounters of the holy kind. We know that God's eager desire is that we seek out his presence and that we find Him, as the prophet Jeremiah recorded: "If you look for me wholeheartedly, you will find me."³ God's revelation is all around us. Are you looking up to see it? Are you willing to follow it?

Please take some time now to reflect on what you can do to notice God "above your head." If you like, you can share a comment or a prayer.

³ Jeremiah 29:13. New Living Translation (2nd Edition).



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