

The Verbs of Advent

“SEE”

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12/11/16

Over the past 3 weeks we working through a sermon series that has been looking at various verbs for the Advent season.

Pastor Ron helped us think about what it means to watch and not just sleep-walk through this thing we call church. To wake up so that when God calls upon us to act, we will be ready. As some would put it, *To begin to think about what it takes to get ready for the fullness of the coming of God's kingdom.*

Our second week of Advent, we looked at the verb “Turn”.....and talked about the things we may need to turn away from in order to move closer to God.....the word we use for that in church is Repent. And we tried to remove some of the baggage that word carries and appreciate it for it is truly calling us to do.

And this week we will be looking at the verb “SEE.”

Now just so there is no confusion, I want to say that “See” is distinctive from “watch” in this series as Watch is focused on the idea of being ready....being On Watch for what God is going to do.

Whereas “SEE” isn't about being ready for what God is going to do, But rather it is about looking around and seeing what God is already doing in the world.

Unfortunately, we are not always focused on finding these places where God is at work. We get distracted by other things....we focus on other places.....we sometimes get so busy focusing on the darkness that we miss the light.

You might say that when it comes to looking for God working in the world, that sometimes our vision gets blurry.

Many times we put on nearsighted glasses and miss what is far away....or we can do the exact opposite---we can get so consumed about looking to the distant future that we miss what is going on right in front of us in the present.

And it is hard to blame anyone for having blurred vision. It is hard to blame anyone for losing focus. After all, there are a lot of things to worry about... that draws our focus away.

There are a lot of things that don't seem to make sense.

There is needless loss....needless pain....needless turmoil going on all around us.

In our community we see those who are dying from drug use....

We see people so desperate to get their next fix that they steal from their loved ones...

We see or experienced strained relationships....fighting with our loved ones....separation....divorce.....

Those of you who have teenaged children or grandchildren you may feel like they are so closed off to you....or communicate or do things that absolutely, positively make no sense at all.

We fight with friends or family because of our different views....sometimes we even stop talking to that seemly crazy aunt or uncle because every time we get together with them the talk always moves to politics and always ends with everyone at the dinner table angry.

We see senseless acts such as the Ohio State University attack....

We see the loss of so many young adults in the Oakland ghostship fire....

We can't help but fear for our children and grandchildren...and sometimes we get consumed with doing everything in our power to protect them.

I could go on and on all morning about all the things we can get focused on....all the fears—some valid and some unwarranted that our vision can get locked in on....

And with this being the holiday season...we know how these hardships...these stresses can be amplified so much more.....

Indeed, there are so many painful things that draw too much of our attention.

Even when things are not necessarily going wrong, our vision and focus can still be blurred by the fact that we are living in a constant state of change....

There has never been another time in human history where technology has evolved so rapidly.

We are no longer in a time where most people work for the same company for their 40-year career....in fact very few people even stay in the same career field their entire working life anymore.

We have instant access to any fact, figure or funny cat video we want thanks to things like google and YouTube.

Our thoughts or daily activities can be instantly communicated to thousands of people thanks to social media.

Our world is getting smaller everyday which means we are confronted everyday with people of different cultures, religions and socio-economic backgrounds.

We have the ability to see both the progress and turmoil being made all around the world on our computers...on our televisions...on our phones and tablets...

It is a lot to take in..... It is a lot to process. It is a world we may not have been expecting 10 or 20 years ago...

In our gospel lesson today we find John the Baptist experiencing a different world than he was expecting....

The man who we read about last week seems in a very different place than we was when we was calling on people to repent, and telling them that the Lord was near....

The man who thought he was the voice in the wilderness preparing the way is now in prison....and experiencing doubt.

And while it doesn't say so explicitly in the text, I have a feeling that John was not only doubting if Jesus was the messiah, but also questioning himself....whether he himself was a prophet at all.

“Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” John asks.

John...Jesus' own cousin.....

John...the one who saw the Heavens open up and heard the voice of God is questioning if Jesus is the messiah.

It reminds us that no matter how much we have been on fire for God....no matter how much we think we have checked all of the right boxes of what it means to be a good Christian that doubt can creep in and we can lose sight of who Jesus is....especially when things don't seem to be working out in the way we thought they would....or the way we think they should.

Sometimes we get focused on the wrong things...sometimes we misinterpret what God is doing....we misinterpret who God is...

This can cause us to waiver in our trust that God is at work or many times causes us to place our trust in other places- such as wealth or prestige or earthly security.

But the good news is that no matter where we are at in our journey, we can always place our trust in God....and that even when we begin to place our trust in the wrong places...in things that do not last...that God is ready to welcome us back with open arms anytime.

No matter how lost we get...no matter where we are, whether it in a Jail Cell like John or in a personal jail we create for ourselves....God is with us....God does not leave our side.....God will continually wait for us to return.

So often....it seems like our trust for God gets lost because we are focusing on the wrong outcomes...

John was so confident that a messiah would be a leader who would unite the people...and overthrow the Roman oppressors and make Israel a powerful earthly kingdom that his trust waivered when he didn't see these things happening.

So...in response to Johns doubt what does Jesus tell his disciples to do???

He tells them to report to John all the things that they hear and SEE.

Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵ the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers^[c] are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. ⁶ And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

God was at work....Jesus was at work the entire time....all over the place....

People's lives were being changed left and right. Those who were on the margins we being radially welcomed in.

Those who thought they had it all together were being humbled and those who suffered from oppression were being liberated.

Those who were both spiritually dead were finding new life....being born in a whole new way.

Those who were physically blind as well as those who were blinded by their own selfishness and ego were regaining clear sight!

Blessings upon blessings upon blessings.....if only you would look at it. It only you understood and searched for the outcomes God desires in our world.

The amazing thing about our God is that we have a God who wasn't just at work 2,000 years ago....but a God who is at work today through our church...through our friends, through our neighbors....maybe even through you and I.

How do I know this....because I see it all the time.

The radical welcome, love and support that the people of Danville have shown Jake Javier who lost his ability to walk after a tragic accident 6 months ago...and the grace, positivity and perseverance in which Jake is dealing with his new reality.

The lives being transformed in the work that the people of our church do through Volunteers in Mission trips around our globe. Whether it be by providing food and clean drinking water....or education....or even giving sight to the blind by providing optical services and glasses to those in need...God is at work.

I think about those who have shared their experiences at trinity center with me...and how they find that it's not only important to feed our neighbors who are hungry...but it is also important to build personal relationships with them....to know their names...to hear their stories....and see the image of God reflected in their faces.

I think about those who provide car rides to others so they can be at church...or go to their medical appointments.

I think about those on the Peace and Justice Committee who are working to build bridges between us and those who are different than us.

I will say it again because it is true and it is worth repeating....GOD IS AT WORK!

So this morning I would like to suggest three practices that we can incorporate into our lives...practices I believe can better focus our vision on what God is doing in our lives and in our world.

First, I think we need to get into the practice of slowing down.

It is no secret that we are part of culture that is constantly on the move. Between the errands and the meetings and traveling and soccer games for our children and grandchildren there is always a next place to be.

And it seems so often that the number one most valuable thing has become time....We pay big bucks for the electronic service or device that can make our work be accomplished more quickly...

We look for the fastest way around the traffic on 680 during rush hour...friendly tip: it is NOT Danville Blvd.

We look for Where can we get dinner quickly and efficiently....

Time is so valuable to us even though we are constantly on the move to find ways of being more efficient we still end up with seemly no time anyways...

As hard as it may seem...as impossible as it may seem we need to slow down.... We need to look around.

One of my all-time favorite movies was made in the 1980s...it was called Ferris Buller's Day Off.

And in the movie he had a quote that was so iconic and full of truth that even first lady Barbara Bush would quote it in one of her speeches.

Ferris said: *“Life moves pretty fast, if you don’t stop and look around every once in a while you might just miss it.”*

Perhaps the same can be said about God working in the world.... If we don’t stop....if we don’t slow down every once in awhile, we will surely miss it.

The second practice I believe we can incorporate into our lives in clearing out the clutter.

We need to prioritize....not just when it comes to the things we possess, but also in where we place our time, energy and attention.

There is a restaurant I have a love-hate relationship with....

It is called the Cheesecake factory.

While I’ve never had a meal there that I didn’t enjoy....there is a major problem that I have every time I visit that establishment...

And that is there menu....it’s just too dang big....there are way too many options!

Whether it be Italian food, Chinese Food, Fish, Steak, hamburgers, Thai food....they have absolutely anything and everything you can imagine....

And I find myself overwhelmed with choices....so much so that I spend way to much time looking through the menu to end up always ordering the same thing...the funny thing is, when I share a bite of the thing I always end up ordering...the Chicken Madera...with whoever I am eating with...they always say they should have gotten that.

Even though I know that it is the best thing on the menu....I always end up wasting a bunch of time and energy getting caught up in all the other clutter...all the other options in the menu.

What are some ways you can simplify your life....simplify your focus...so that you can give your full attention to the work at hand....so

you can give your full attention to what God is doing in the important places of your life?

Finally, a third practice I would like to suggest is giving credit where credit is due.

We had a beautiful Psalm read for us today...and I feel it is worth repeating:

*⁵ Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob,
whose hope is in the LORD their God,*

*⁶ who made heaven and earth,
the sea, and all that is in them;*

who keeps faith forever;

*⁷ who executes justice for the oppressed;
who gives food to the hungry.*

The LORD sets the prisoners free;

⁸ the LORD opens the eyes of the blind.

*The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down;
the LORD loves the righteous.*

⁹ The LORD watches over the strangers;

he upholds the orphan and the widow,

*but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin. The LORD will reign
forever,*

your God, O Zion, for all generations. Praise the LORD!

Does this Psalm describe the God you put your faith in?

Do you believe in a God who is watching over the stranger?

Do you believe in a God who opens the eyes of the blind?

Do you believe in God who works for justice?

Who feeds the hungry?

Who frees the prisoner?

And if you do.... How do you think God is going to accomplish those things?

Is it just through magic?

Is it through unexplained miracles?

Or does it also involve me....does it also involve you? Does it involve people who may not even know how to articulate why they are helping those in need?

For in the places where we see unconditional love....places we see caring and gift-giving with no strings attached....we must remember that God is fully present in those moments.

Even when the folks who may be engaged in that care or that justice work don't think it has anything to do with God.....God is still there.

For as the writer of First John stated: God is Love.

So as we continue in this season of Advent...a season when we prepare our hearts to re-witness God breaking into the world.... May we take the time to focus our vision....to slow down....to clear out the unimportant clutter....and to acknowledge all the places God is at work in our lives and in our world.

Amen.