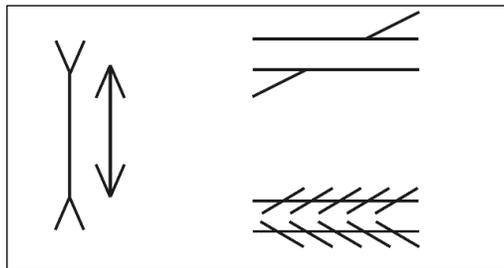


Sermon 03-7/8-2020

“I only believe what I can see” – Rev. Markus Wegenast

John 6:1-14

After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias.^[a] ² A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. ³ Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. ⁴ Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. ⁵ When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, “Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?” ⁶ He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. ⁷ Philip answered him, “Six months’ wages^[b] would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.” ⁸ One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, said to him, ⁹ “There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?” ¹⁰ Jesus said, “Make the people sit down.” Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they^[c] sat down, about five thousand in all. ¹¹ Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. ¹² When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, “Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.” ¹³ So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. ¹⁴ When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, “This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.”



1.1)

Here is something that happened almost 30 years ago. Two friends of my 10th grade high school class were having a fierce conversation about religion and faith in the school cafeteria. Ingo was arguing a critical view of everything religion, while the other student was making a case for his faith involvement. I could tell that Ingo was getting upset and he would finally shout in a rather angry voice: “I only believe what I can see with my own eyes.”

That was the point when Claudia, a 12th grader, decided to get involved. She had been listening to the argument between the two for a while and now she chimed in. She pulls out a sheet of paper from her backpack that featured a couple of optical illusions (see above). She confidently points to the first image and says:

“Ok, Ingo, you say you only believe what you can see, so tell me: which of the two lines that you can see is longer, the first one or the second?”

Ingo looked surprised but he wouldn’t give up that easily: “Claudia, I know that the lines are exactly the same length.” Claudia says: “Yes, you know it, but what do you see? You said you only believe what you see, and what you see is that one line is shorter than the other. Right?”

Wow, I thought! Those 12th grade girls. She may have been a year or two older than Ingo, but she sure made a point!

1.2)

To this day I am amazed that of all the days for Claudia's religion teacher to hand out a diagram with optical illusions, it was the day when Ingo was in an argument about religion. What a timing...

Now, I don't want to give Ingo a hard time. When he said "I only believe what I can see," I think he expressed a noble sentiment. Isn't it better to rely on facts, on what you can actually observe yourself, rather than on hearsay or gossip?

But at the same time we depend on what **others** see. Think about history books or eye witness accounts in the secular court system. We need eye witnesses.

When it comes to faith, wouldn't it be nice if you could be an eyewitness yourself? Honestly: Have you not thought about how nice it would be if you could have been there when Jesus walked and did his miracles? Wouldn't it make believing a bit easier?

"If only I could have been there when Jesus fed the 5000."

"If only I could have been that youth (the Greek actually allows for a young boy or a girl) that brought him the 2 fish and 5 barley loaves."

I have had these thoughts! Is it true though? Would seeing Jesus' miracles really make believing easier?

The gospel of John calls Jesus' miracles "signs." One reason for Jesus to perform these signs is so that people would believe (John 20:30f (2:11)). And to some extent it actually worked, check out verse 2. Jesus' signs/miracles caused people to get curious about him. But not all of them became believers because of that. The majority of people still screamed "crucify him" at the end. That's not something you scream when you came to faith through the miracles you have seen with your own eyes!

It even says in the Gospel of John: "**Although he had performed so many signs in their presence, they did not believe in him.**" - John 12:37

Why do you think was that?

1.3)

Maybe they weren't real miracles! Take a look at the miracle of the fish and bread: Maybe Jesus just did something very sneaky and had **all the people** bring what they had – not just that youth. Sure there must have been others that had some food.

Maybe the "miracle" that Jesus performed was that he organized the people to share what they had and have a big potluck. In retrospect it seemed like a miracle because Jesus accomplished what they couldn't have without his leader-ship.

It would still be a very powerful story with a great lesson on the power of sharing.

But the gospel story just doesn't tell it that way. It really tells us that there was a miracle taking place. It wasn't a miraculous sharing of resources, it was the miraculous multiplication of a little into much.

People saw it, people talked about it – I have no doubt that people believed what they saw; and still: It didn't result in authentic faith in Jesus after all.

So how does seeing and believing relate? What good is it to have eye witnesses when not even the eye witnesses themselves believe in the one they saw doing miraculous things?

2)

Over 100 people in our church are involved with our Lenten study book "The Case for Christ" by Lee Strobel. We ran out of books last Sunday and had to order more. It may not be a miracle but I'm really excited about that.

Whether you are one of the 100 or not, I think it is fair to say that this kind of field that we are exploring this Lenten season through study or worship, is not everybody's cup of tea.

That's ok! Some of us, I believe, will like it and find it helpful. Some of you may find affirmation as you contemplate historical evidence for your faith for the first time. And some of you will probably struggle with this type of fact finding.

What I am asking all of us this Lenten season is this:

Please have an open mind. Please let God do something with you.

- If you don't need facts – hear them anyway and let them enrich your faith life.
- If the facts that this particular book is offering are not sufficient for you, consider looking for others (bibliography).

But please, don't walk away from this season of Lent claiming that the New Testament of the Bible is the product of delusional, charismatic writers that relied on oral traditions that are completely shrouded in legend. Because that is simply not true.

The historicity of many/most of the NT writings is by far better documented than most any other historical document of antiquity – yet ironically modern society is much more tolerant toward giving secular histories the benefit of the doubt.

There was a chapter in the book that compares it to Alexander the Great. Nobody disputes that he existed and conquered Persia +. And yet, we have much fewer documents about him, and the documents that we do have are rather young.

Yes, I know, Alexander the Great lived much earlier than Jesus, but still, you've got to be able to say it out loud: His story got written down 400+ years after he lived (p.34). Jesus' story got written down within the next generation.

And yet hardly anyone doubts the events surrounding Alexander but when it comes to Jesus some even doubt that he lived! Come on!

Another critique of the historicity of the Bible that is frequently mentioned is this: “The gospel writers and Paul, they were all biased and shaped by their beliefs.”

Yes, the biblical writers had an agenda, of course they had! But so did most every other historian of antiquity. Do you think that the biographers of Gaius Julius Caesar wrote a “neutral” account of the most famous Roman consul? Do you think he himself recorded a neutral account of his Gallic Wars?

> Every biography has a bias! [*See p. 32, The Case for Christ, premier edition*]

The accounts of Jesus’ story are biased – they are as biased as he himself was when he performed his miracles with a clear bias: so that people may believe and see the goodness of God.

Do you believe in the goodness of God? Do you believe because of the eye witness account of others? Or do you believe in what you can see for yourself?

God invites us to appreciate that which other people have seen. There is a reason why we have a Bible! And this Bible is not a product of mere human selection. That is actually one of the biggest struggles that people have expressed to me. It’s not so much the reliability of the biblical *authors* or the reliability of the accuracy of the biblical *text* that people struggle with. [*See page 63 for evidence accounts*]

What I see many people struggle with is the selection process of the Bible. Isn’t it fair to wonder how much bias of an early church went into the selection process? Sure there was an agenda in this process.

The question is: Whose agenda do you believe was it?! Let me read to you the conclusion of someone that spent a lot of time with this question:

“It is the simple truth to say that the NT books became canonical because no one could stop them doing so.” [*William Barclay, quoted in Strobel, p. 70*]

3)

“I only believe what I can see.” Oh, how I wish I could have been that youth that had the fish and bread. But what would I have seen? Would it make me **follow** Jesus? If you could time travel and stand on the foot of Jesus’ cross on Good Friday, all you’d see is a man in agony. You can’t see how his agony is redemptive. That only happens when you put your trust in that man himself. You will follow him when this suffering son of God comes into your life and has a relationship with you.

This Lenten season, go for relationship. Yes, take in all that wonderful - or not so wonderful - info on evidence for Christ. But let it be a motivation for you to pray and talk and then walk with that historical Jesus who wants to be your Lord and your friend and your savior today. Amen.