

Seeing is Believing

Text: Kings 6:17; John 14:9

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

"...O Lord, open his eyes and let him see." Kings 6:17

"If you have seen me, you have seen the Father." John 14:9

Popular folk wisdom says, "Seeing is believing." Is that your creed? Is that your philosophy? Well, I dare say it is. It's really the way all of us operate, almost inevitably. "Seeing is Believing." In other words, prove it to me, demonstrate it to me, give me verification. They say all of us operate that way because we are all the children of western civilization, of western culture. We are at the end of a couple of centuries of scientific investigation and research in which the scientific method has been perfected. It has yielded tremendous success, and given us understanding. It has given us insight into unraveling the technological mysteries of the universe. We are simply people, who through the very lens with which we see reality, live and act and breathe and think as empiricists (a school of philosophy named empiricism). Empiricism is simply a philosophy that says that knowledge, truth, is derived only from sensory experience - what I can touch, what I can taste, what I can hear, what I can see. Sensory experience is the access to truth and to knowledge. Everything that is not reducible to sensory experience is simply questionable. We are children of a philosophy that has trickled down to the average person and has become now our shared common wisdom. That is the way we operate. I don't want to deprecate that. Observe all the wonders of the modern world that we enjoy. Look at the technological advances. Look at how life has been transformed through the application of empirical research and that philosophy: "Seeing is Believing."

There are those who observe the human scene who have said that we are at a hinge point in the human story. We are at the end of that modern age, which is characterized by the Enlightenment, by the Age of Reason. We are also at the end of this age characterized by the scientific method, and by all of the technological breakthroughs that we have witnessed in the last couple of centuries. We have entered a Post Modern Age. The signs of that are the spiritual questing, the evidence of the emptiness of soul and the yearning of the heart for something

more. The shadow side of the modern age, so splendid in its achievement, was the implication that truth and reality were measured by the human mind, and that human reason and human rationality decided the limits of what was true - and what was real.

The great philosopher, the father of modern development of philosophy, Emanuel Kant, has a book entitled *Religion Within the Limits of Human Reason*. You cannot have religion within the limits of human reason. We know that now. We have come up empty and are hungry. Our souls are starved and whenever that happens there is a reaction. So we have New Age spirituality as it is called. Part of it is very serious, part of it bizarre. These are indications that there are people who are grasping at straws, groping for something beyond, something that breaks the paradigm of the human rational, verifiable reality.

Two popular news magazines, *Time Magazine* and *Newsweek Magazine*, December 27, 1993, both featured stories on angels. They featured stories about not only the historical and biblical conception of angels, but also how angels appear in Judaism and Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism. People are searching, and in both articles there are moving accounts of human encounters with angels. One article relates angelical healing. Another article simply relates how the appearance of one's guardian angel removed the fear of death, which still followed two days later. And there were stories of people encountering a light that sent heat, an energy, through their body that transformed them and gave them peace.

People are hungry. In our present contemporary scene we see "angel" stores opening for business. *Publishers Weekly* reported five hundred million copies of books on angels sold in the recent past, and that five out of ten are on the Best Seller List. We now see, not only angel stores, but angel newsletters, angel clubs, angel seminars, etc.

Perhaps you remember John Westerhoff, who was here two years ago on the first Sunday in Lent. John, a Christian educator and scholar, was interviewed by authors of the *Time* article. They asked him, "Why do some people see angels, and some people don't?" He said, "It takes faith to perceive an angel. If you don't believe, you won't see." You may say, "Hey, John, you just turned that whole thing on its head! But it isn't 'Seeing is Believing'". Maybe there is a whole dimension of reality where believing is seeing. That, of course, is the connection with this season of the year, this Epiphany season.

An expert on angels will be here during the next hour at the Perspectives Class. I'm not an expert on angels, but we see here a marvelous contemporary instance of how there has been a shift in human consciousness. We are beginning to see that the demand to see in order to believe is shipwrecked when it comes to our longing for an encounter with God. We are beginning to see experiences of transience, that sense of something or someone beyond us who touches us in grace. Not "seeing is believing," but "believing is seeing." Epiphany is the season

of revelation. It is the season of the lifting of the curtain; the unveiling of manifestation, if only for a moment. Epiphany is the lighting up of the landscape of the mind in that moment in which one is transformed by the revelation; the revelation that we need eyes to see - Epiphany Eyes.

Have you ever seen picture puzzles of lines and dots all over a page that look like somebody's doodle pad until you studied it long enough, or got it just at the right angle, when suddenly there is a human face or a tree, or a dog, or something else? There is a pattern there. It means something to you. You looked at it before and you saw nothing but lines and dots, and suddenly you look at it and you see an artistic pattern, a configuration of meaning. The difference is not in the page, the difference was in the perception. Epiphany Eyes enable you to see, - really see what is there. This season of the year we celebrate "The Word became flesh." This Word in flesh, whom we believe is Jesus, this One is the Light of the world. This One is the Light that enlightens. In the face of Jesus we see into the heart of God. But, for that to be so, we must know that in some cases "believing is seeing."

Wasn't that an interesting Old Testament story? Did you remember it? The one about Elisha? Elisha, the prophet, was in trouble with the King of Syria because he continued to send intelligence reports to the King of Israel. He constantly kept the King of Israel out of the hands of the King of Syria, until the King of Syria wanted to do something about it. He sent his troops to apprehend Elisha. When Elisha's servant got up in the morning and saw the mountains surrounded with the enemy troops, he said, "My master, alas, what shall we do?" Elisha said, "Relax. Those who are for us are more than those who are against us." Then he prayed that marvelous Epiphany prayer. "O Lord, open thy servant's eyes that he may see." The servant's eyes were opened and he saw the mountains ringed with chariots of fire. As in all of that Old Testament historical writing you have the historical core, richly embroidered with legendary material. What that story was saying was at the core of Israel's faith. This story makes clear that decisions are not made in Damascus or Babylon or in Persia, not even in Jerusalem. On that grand stage of world history there is an invisible player. Finally there are angels and spiritual powers, and there is a will of God and a purpose that is at work. Elisha was simply giving testimony to his conviction that the ultimate power does not lie in the hands of a Clinton or a Yeltsin, in Moscow or in Washington. In the corridors of power there is still an invisible presence of one who transcends all. There were chariots of fire surrounding God's people. What a beautiful image.

This is what Jesus was explicating to Philip. Philip needed the Epiphany prayer. Philip just didn't get it. Philip was only the stooge for the rest of the disciples. If you read the Gospel of Mark, you will find that those disciples never got it. It is hard to find a bunch more dull than the disciples, particularly if you are reading Mark's account. They never got it. Philip says, "Oh, that would be nice, just show us the Father and we will be satisfied." Jesus said, "You just don't get it. I have been with you all this time and you still don't get it. If you have seen me, you've seen the Father."

Reflecting on that, I was reminded of the distant past at Hope College while studying philosophy with G. Ivan Dykstra. For those of you Hope College lore, old D. Ivan used to pace up and down, giving these marvelous philosophical lectures. Once in a course on Kierkegaard, a Danish philosopher/theologian, we were reading a little book called *Philosophical Fragments*, which talked about "disciples at second hand." Do you know what disciples at second hand are? You might say, "They are folks like you and me." Disciples at first hand would be Peter and James and John, who could reach out and touch Jesus, ate with him, walked with him. They told us about it. We hear about it. We are disciples at second hand. Right? Wrong. Wrong. Dead wrong. Kierkegaard said that the disciples that rubbed shoulders with him were disciples at second hand. They had no advantage over you and me. Read the Gospels and you will see he was right. You didn't bump into Jesus and say, "Oh, my God." There are all kinds of people who bumped into Jesus and saw nothing. The two who walked all the way to Emmaus brought Jesus into their house, and it was not until the breaking of bread that their eyes were opened and they *saw* him. In other words, it was a gift. It was the insight of faith. It was grace. "You've been with me so long, and you still don't know. You haven't seen. You don't understand. You just don't get it." Kierkegaard said, "You could have walked all day and not seen anything."

The disciples present were disciples at second hand until the disciple had an Epiphany experience, which is as available to you and me today as it was to them then. What happened to them then must happen to us today, and what happens to us today had to happen to them then. It is not seeing that is believing, but it is believing that is seeing. It is the opening of the eyes, the mystery that is always there, but which we cannot perceive except we be graced with the eyes to see.

I am a child of my culture. I am a child of this age. I operate in the whole rest of my life where "Seeing is Believing." Suddenly I come to this juncture, and verification won't do it, proofs are not available, and I have to acknowledge that it is believing that gives sight.

I have bought that philosophy all my life. I hate that about the Gospel. I would love to be able to take somebody by the nap of the neck and rub his nose in it. I'd like to be able to prove it, to demonstrate it, to verify it. I would like the facts! This is so dangerous. How can I distinguish my responsible faith and my commitment from some lollygagging person out in la-la land and some fantastic imagery? I can't. How can I prove my faith? I can't. And I resist that. Believing is the only channel open to that dimension of reality that transcends the space and time world for which we are so well fitted. You can't verify it, and if you are waiting to see it in order to believe it, you'll come to grief. If today you believe it because somebody has *proven* it to you, you are in for trouble.

I deal with this subject because it is Epiphany, but also because in popular culture today it is being dealt with. I told you about the *Time Magazine* and *Newsweek* articles on angels. I have here the book, *The Five Gospels* (Matthew, Mark, Luke,

John and the Gospel of Thomas), which comes out of The Jesus Seminar. If you were in my Wednesday night classes you would know I had a big book by John Dominic Crossan, the Catholic scholar. Crossan has done research into the historical Jesus. I also told you that books are coming off the press a mile a minute on this subject. In this *New Quest for the Historical Jesus*, Crossan tried to get through all the tradition and all the church baggage, to get down to the historical core. The Jesus Seminar, of which Crossan was a part, attempted to do the same. It began back in 1985, with scholars and clergy taking a second look at the sayings of Jesus. Finally they have published this translation of the Gospel in four colors. If they are certain Jesus said it, it is written in red; if they think Jesus said it, it is written in pink. If they think he didn't say it, it is written in grey, and if they know he didn't say it, it is written in black. (Laughter) The passage I read this morning, that beautiful passage from John 14, (just in case you wondered) is in black.

I show you this book because I say to you, if your faith rests upon the results of historical criticism, you're in deep trouble. If you only believe because someone has been able to prove it to you, you are in trouble. It seems as though when the methods of historical research are honed, the skills and competence increase, scholars learn from the errors of previous quests and they get down to the bare bones facts.

I was studying peacefully in my loft when Nancy, my wife, came to me and plopped this magazine down on my desk and said, "What do you think of that?" The article, "Jesus Plain and Simple," talks about three currently published books. In one book John Dominic Crossan takes the huge thick book of research, which I just showed you, and reduces it to a more popular, albeit revolutionary, biography of Jesus. Nancy said, "In these couple of pages in *Time* ("Jesus Plain and Simple"), you have a stripped down variety of Jesus. I don't like it." This reminded me of another love of my life, my granddaughter, Stephanie. Some of you were here on Christmas Eve, when I told you how Stephanie came to her mother, Lynn, and said, "Tell me the truth, Mommy. Is Santa Claus real?" Now that's a moment when you can't just say, "Oh sure, Honey." This was a little girl at the edge of awakening, saying "Mommy, tell me the truth." So her mother told her. Stephie got angry. She said, "Well, I'm going to believe it anyway!" Later that night after Nancy had thrown the magazine on my desk she said to me, "That stuff doesn't bother you at all, does it?" I said, "No, it doesn't bother me at all. I have known for a long time that my faith cannot rest on the uncertain consequences of historical research. I do not see in order to believe. But I believe, and then I see."

I deal with this issue because it seems to me that I am accountable to you. You ought to be able to look to me to talk about these things with you. *The Five Gospels* has attracted quite a bit of press lately. I have here articles from *The Milwaukee Journal*, *The Detroit Free Press*, and *The Grand Rapids Press*. I could do as three pastors did in *The Detroit Free Press* and say that the Jesus

Seminar scholars are enemies of God, they are undercutting religion, but I won't. They may be right. They may be wrong.

But the Jesus Seminar scholars are responsible and they are serious, and they are carrying out their research and their gift and offering it to God and to us. By and large I believe that is the case. Or I could just sidestep the subject and hope it goes away, but some of you said to me at the door last week, "Did you read *Time Magazine*? Help!" What I choose to do is use this as an occasion to say to you, "Put your faith where it belongs. Recognize it as the gift of God, the God who graces you with a spirit, who illumines you when you sing, 'Open our eyes Lord. We would see Jesus.'"

I share this with you because it becomes a marvelous occasion in which to say to you, "Don't seek proof and verification. We have done that too long. We have spoken about the revelation of God as though somehow or other that happened way back there. Then it was inspired and spoken, and now we have this revelation. We don't have a revelation. There isn't *a* revelation, there is only a God who reveals, here and now and continuously. This book (the Bible) is the consequence of Epiphany experiences, when those who rubbed elbows with Jesus and saw nothing had their eyes opened to see everything, and were able to witness, as the gospel writer John witnessed Jesus - as the Way, the Truth, and the Life. This book is the consequence of those who had an Epiphany experience, and it was written down and told in order that it might become the occasion for you and me to have an Epiphany moment *now*. My faith rests not in the verifiable proof of historical research. It is the consequence of the illumination of my heart and mind through the Spirit of God in this *present* moment. That is where it rests. The scholars can continue to look at the foundations of the faith, and rightly they should, because we claim that the revelation has occurred in the midst of human history and in the arena of historical reality and, therefore, we will always have that with us. Responsible people ought always to be checking those things out. But when all is said and done, it is finally gift, grace, unveiling, here and now.

Why do some see and others not see? I don't know. But I do know that there is a sure promise in the Word of God, "If with all your heart you truly seek me, you will also surely find me." And once I have been found, in the moment of finding I will know a rest that will enable me to be un-settled. I can be un-settled without losing ultimate trust and faith in the work that continues to go on because I know finally it is not only seeing - that it is believing. Believing has its own eyes to see a purpose and meaning that can give us the courage we need to seek God's way in our present moment.

"Oh Lord, open thy servants' eyes that they may see."