

WHAT DO YOU SEE?*by Elaine Poproski***MATTHEW 11:2 – 5****ISAIAH 35:1 – 10**

When my niece was about 4-years old, we were playing Hide & Seek in her backyard. Normally, when you play Hide & Seek with 4-year olds, it's really easy. They hide behind trees, or they cover their head and think we can't see the rest of their body sticking out. But on this one occasion, when we were playing Hide & Seek in her backyard, I couldn't find her anywhere. I looked everywhere. I went through the neighbour's yard and looked everywhere there. I looked all through her own yard. Finally, I went into the house and I said to my sister, "I've lost your kid! I can't find her anywhere!" The thing is, when I was looking for her, I was calling to her: *The game's over! Come out!* I got nothing back. There was not a peep from her. There was no little body poking out from any of the possible hiding places in the yard. Eventually we found her, curled up in a really great hiding spot. I asked, "Didn't you hear me calling?" She answered, "Yes." So I asked, "Why didn't you come out?" to which she responded, "Because I was hiding."

Do you ever lie in a field and look up at the clouds and look for the shapes that are in the clouds? Sometimes you might see a dinosaur in the cloud, or maybe a giant rabbit riding a dragon, or something equally absurd, or something really common place. Sometimes someone else sees something and all you see is a cloud.

I find that constellations are like that. I don't know how familiar you are with all the various constellations in the sky; I know the big dipper and the little dipper. They're usually pretty visible and I can see how they make their shapes in the sky. But every other constellation... I don't see it.

I'm telling you all this because all through the Bible, we read the words of people who saw things others couldn't see. Isaiah was that kind of person – as were all the prophets. These were men and women who saw the true state of things in a way that most people couldn't see.

Have you ever sat in the window seat on a plane and looked out as the plane was beginning its descent to land? It's such a fascinating view. Lakes look like puddles. Cars and trucks look like little toys. If it's night, the streetlights sparkle all the way across the landscape. In the day, the buildings look like Lego creations. It's impossible, from that high altitude, to make out all the people or see anything super precisely, but the lay of the land is clear, regardless of whether it's night or day.

This is part of what it means to be a prophet. Prophets see the big picture. They see the trends of history like highways from a plane – they can see the ways they flow and connect and can thus usually pretty accurately identify the ways they will continue to flow and connect. Israel's prophets saw the ups and downs of Israel's history. They saw the back and forth of their faithfulness and their disloyalty to God. They saw how over and over and over again Israel would wander from God, suffer the consequences of that wandering, return to God, and be blessed in the returning. When you read through the Bible you see that this cycle repeats over and over and over and over. The prophets, looking down from their 30,000' view, could see that trend through Israel's history. Meanwhile, the regular people – the non prophets – didn't see it. That's why they needed their prophets.

But the prophets didn't just have clarity about Israel's history, and thus the ability to make some pretty accurate assumptions about her future, they also had a clarity about the nature and character of God. The prophets heard God speak. They experienced what it was to be in conversation with God. They were sent by God with God's message to the people. Sometimes that message was one of encouragement. Sometimes it was not. Sometimes they spoke to all the people. Sometimes they spoke only to those in power. Sometimes those to whom they were sent listened – like the people of Ninevah, who heard and believed Jonah's warnings of destruction if they didn't repent and turn to God – and sometimes (oftentimes) those to whom they were sent didn't want to hear what the prophet had to say.

Have you ever heard the saying, “can't see the forest for the trees”? Think about what it's like to go for a walk through a forest. You can see the trees immediately around you, you can see the brush underneath, you can see new growth popping up through the leaves on the ground, but you have no way of knowing how big the forest is, where it begins and where it ends, or what shape it is. When you're in the forest, you can't see it. But if you can get out of the forest and above the forest somehow – maybe you climb to the top of a really tall tree, or maybe you take a ride in a helicopter – suddenly you can see how big it is, where its borders are, what shape it is.

Isaiah lived above the forest. Elijah lived above the forest. Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Micah, and so many others lived above the forest. Without them, I'm not sure we'd have much of a Bible. The Bible itself is intended to give us an understanding of God's relationship with all creation since the beginning – if that's not a 30,000' view of things, I don't know what is.

Listen again to Isaiah 35, starting at verse 4:

Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
 “Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God.
 He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense.
 he will come and save you.”
 Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
 and the ears of the deaf shall be opened....”
 and so on.

Isaiah, from his 30,000' view – his view from above the forest – could envision God's kingdom as a kingdom of peace, of wholeness – of Shalom. He envisioned God's kingdom as a kingdom of justice, in which the weak are protected. He envisioned a kingdom marked by joy and singing. Isaiah wasn't the only one who saw God's kingdom – who talked about God's kingdom. It shows up in all the prophets' writing. It shows up in the psalms. In Psalm 146, which we spent some time with at the beginning of the service, the psalmist describes God as the one who executes justice for the oppressed, gives food to the hungry, sets the prisoners free, opens the eyes of the blind, lifts up those who are bowed down, watches over the strangers, upholds the widows and orphans. And then, right at the end of all those marvelous descriptors of God, declares: *The Lord will reign forever, your God, O Zion, for all generations.*

This is Israel's Bible. These are Israel's prophets and poets. This is Israel's history and future. How is it possible that they kept missing it?

When we are up with the prophets over the forest, it all looks so obvious – it all makes so much sense. But over and over and over again the people missed it.

John the Baptist was a prophet. Everything about him was a statement from God. He was the one about whom Isaiah spoke centuries earlier when he said, “A voice cries out: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.’”ⁱ He was the living embodiment of Isaiah’s prophecy. And he was a prophet in his own right, pointing further down the path to the long-awaited Messiah, who would usher in God’s kingdom – that same kingdom the Psalmist described; that same kingdom Isaiah described in chapter 35. John, like the prophets who’d gone before the, gave his entire life to this calling – this mission to be the one preparing the way – to be the prophet Israel needed.

I picture him in the wilderness, on the shores of the Jordan River, calling out to the people with a loud, confident voice. And they are responding. Something about his words or the way he speaks gets right inside and they come to the river, they are baptized, they repent – they return to life as God’s people. I picture John staring down the Pharisees and the Sadducees – the religious power brokers of the day. I picture the fire in his eyes. He’s under no illusion about their motives. He knows that they know that they’ve got it pretty good as things are. They don’t want to change. They don’t want anything to change. The current set-up is working out quite well for them. And John sees it all. And he calls them on it. He doesn’t hesitate, he doesn’t question, he doesn’t worry about how they’ll react, he just speaks. This is a man of incredible confidence. This is a man who knows who he is, who God is, and what his purpose is.

We fast forward a bit. John is in prison. He’s angered the wrong person one too many times. And now here he is. Alone. Isolated. Prison in those days wasn’t like it is now. In John’s day, prisoners weren’t cared for. If they didn’t have friends or family to visit them, they were completely alone; if they didn’t have friends or family to bring them food, they didn’t eat. John had people, but prison was a lonely, isolated place regardless. He probably suspected he wasn’t going to be freed. He might have expected that he’d end up executed. He begins to wonder – maybe he’s full on doubting – *Was I right? Is Jesus the Messiah?* So he sends his disciples to ask Jesus: *Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?*

Jesus’ answer isn’t quite what we’d expect. It’s a straightforward, *yes* or *no* question: *Are you the one who is to come? Yes or no? Are we to wait for another? Yes or no?* But Jesus doesn’t answer with a *yes* or *no*. Instead, he sends back this: *Go and tell John what you hear and see.*

I wonder if one of the things that contributed to John’s question was the size of the things Jesus was doing. For the individuals who received their sight, or were cleansed of skin diseases, or healed of their deafness, I’m sure Jesus’ actions felt massive. But they were just individual people – one person, and then one person, and then one person. Everything Jesus did was like that. Jesus didn’t do any large scale, political upheaval kinds of things. He didn’t do any of the kinds of things people expected of their Messiah. They expected the immediate establishment of God’s kingdom, with Israel at the centre, overthrowing Rome and any other empire that dared to rise up. I wonder if John, isolated in that dark, dank prison cell, found himself thinking about the limitedness of what Jesus was doing, and comparing that to the glorious vision of the Messiah that’s dotted all through Scripture. Daniel 7 is a great example of that, and is one John would have been familiar with.

In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory, and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.ⁱⁱ

I wonder if John was thinking about these words from Daniel as he shivered in his prison cell. Sure, Jesus was doing things, but they were smaller than this vision from Daniel – they were more limited – they weren't as obvious as the picture Daniel painted. I wonder if that's why John started to question – to doubt – and sent people to Jesus to ask him directly. It's like John, the mighty prophet who'd lived high above the trees with a clear view of the forest, suddenly found himself on the forest floor, disoriented and unable to see the forest for the trees.

Are you the one for whom we've been waiting? I was so sure, before, but now... I don't know. Are you the one?

Jesus doesn't say *yes* or *no*. Jesus, instead, says this: *Tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, those with a skin disease are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.*

It's like Jesus is saying to John, "I know, it's not all big and flashy; it's not an all-at-once kind of thing. But look at what it is. And look at what the prophets who've gone before actually promised. Do you see it? Listen again to Isaiah. Do you see it? Listen again to the Psalms. Do you see it? I like to think that John did see it – that Jesus' words reminded John of things he already knew. I think Jesus's words lifted him up above the canopy of trees once again, returning him to his prophetic home.

It's easy to see nothing but the trees. There's so much going on around us – so much that is so contrary to God and God's ways – it's easy to lose hope – to lose faith. Every story we hear about the war in Ukraine and the devastation faced by the Ukrainian people, every new shooting reported in the news or hate crime perpetrated in our country, every person in our city who dies from the cold because they have nowhere warm to sleep, every pastor or religious leader we hear about who's assaulted or abused those in their care, every new, indigenous child's grave that's discovered on the grounds of a residential school... it's easy to get lost in the trees of this ugly, dark forest. It's easy to lose faith – to lose sight of God with us. This is the lament of Advent – the Time Between – the Time of Waiting – waiting for Jesus to return, waiting for God's kingdom to finally be fully here. Let's be honest, aren't we're tired of waiting? Don't we long for Isaiah's vision to be realized?

It's into that lament that Jesus speaks: What do you hear and see? Where do you see God at work? What stories have you heard of his presence with us? If we could get up above the trees, we'd see that God has not abandoned us. We'd see that he is present among us. We'd know that his coming is nearer today than it was yesterday. But we don't have to be above the trees to see this truth, because he's here, on the forest floor where most of us live our lives. He's at work all through the forest. We just have to look.

What do you see?

Advent may be a time of lament, it may be a time of waiting, but it's also an invitation to pay attention – to take notice – to keep watch. God has shown up all through history; God continues to show up in the here and now; and God will continue to show up forever and always. This is the promise of the prophets – those who live above the trees and see the forest in all its glory and splendour.

The joy that we talk about this Sunday of Advent, is a strange kind of joy. It's a joy that's rooted in the future. It's a joy that's rooted in a vision of the forest, even when all we can see are trees immediately around us. The joy of Advent is a prophetic joy – it declares God's presence with us, regardless of how bad things seem at the moment. It's a prophetic joy that calls us – challenges us – encourages us to pay attention and to look for all the little places – the unexpected places – where God is at work.

I hope each of us will take some time today or later in the week to reflect on the question: What do you see? Where do you see God at work? Wherever you're living your life, where have you seen God? It may be that you can't see God at work right now. It may be that you need to reach out to someone else and ask them the question. Either way, I hope you'll take some time in this Advent week of joy, to look for God in your world.

ⁱ Isaiah 40:3

ⁱⁱ Daniel 7:13 – 14.