

Date: 12/24/21

Seen and Heard

Texts: Many

When God appears in the Old Testament, you know it.

There's always something fantastic, something that leaves us in wonder and mystery. There's Moses and the burning bush, with the voice in the air and the sand so holy you can't even wear your sandals on it. There's the meeting on Mount Sinai where the people go to meet God, and they see the lightning and thunder, and the fire and smoke on the mountain, and they feel the rumbling and they say to Moses, "Don't have God speak to us or we will surely die. You speak to us and we will listen." There's always something frightening about coming face to face with God, though no one really does that because, as Moses is told, no one can see God and live.

In fact, as far as it goes, for a book about God, God doesn't really appear in it that much, and if we're talking about actually appearing in the story, you know, so someone could see God with their eyes, why, it's practically never. Even in that wonderful scene with the great prophet Elijah where he's hiding in a cave and God comes to him, and there's a hurricane, but God's not in the hurricane, and then there's an earthquake, but God's not in the earthquake, then there's a fire, but God's not in the fire ... and finally there comes a still small voice ... and God is in that voice – some translators think it actually means not a small voice, but 'silence' itself, and God is in the silence – we don't see God. Whatever it was, there was a big wow factor in the build-up, even if God ultimately didn't appear as such.

Perhaps the closest we come is in the book of Job, when, after all the speeches of Job's so-called friends, God appears to Job in the whirlwind and questions him. At the end of it all, Job is left speechless, and says, "I had heard of you with the hearing of the ear, but now I have seen you with the seeing of the eye and I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes." So it must have been pretty impressive, to silence Job like that, since he has certainly not hesitated to argue with his friends with great freedom. Ultimately, Job doesn't die after his encounter with God, but he is a notable exception.

But now we come to the Christmas morning, and God with us is being born, in human flesh, just as Isaiah had promised. We would naturally assume that this is going to be the biggest scene of all, the showstopper, the tree-topper of an appearance. But instead, I imagine that someone who was actually there might have said "We had heard of you with the hearing of the ear, but now we see you with the seeing of the eye, and ... frankly, it's not that impressive. A baby. Wah wah. Big deal!" And there's always the classic manger scene: a cow, a sheep, a man, a woman, a barn, a baby. Um, o-kaay.

Oh, the story's kind of fun: talk of travelers from the East, of golden gifts and a silvery star in the sky, of angels singing to *shepherds* (to shepherds? who?), shepherds of all people, in a sheep-filled field in the middle of the night – what the ...??

That's kind of impressive, a sight to behold, I guess, those Easterners in their fancy clothes, that star, those angels with the unforgettable song sung probably to the least appreciative audience there

could be, but then to climax all of that with nothing but a baby ... a baby? Well, everyone's *seen* one of those, hey, everyone's *been* one of those. It's all kind of "Move along, people, nothing to see here. No, there really isn't."

But is that all there is to see? Theologian Frederick Buechner likes to tell the story of how during the Second World War, the lookouts on the convoys crossing the Atlantic realized a funny thing. Sometimes they thought they would see the light of an enemy ship, but when they turned to look at it directly, it was gone. If they looked away again, the light would reappear. This is because our peripheral vision is more sensitive to light than our central vision. But the thing that fascinated Buechner about it was that sometimes you couldn't really see something if you were looking directly at it. You had to look away a bit before you could see what was out there to be seen.

It's like the little girl who wrapped up her gift to her father in the most expensive gold leaf paper and put it proudly under the tree. When he opened it on Christmas Day, he found that there was nothing inside, just an empty box. He said, "Honey, you know, when you give a person a present, there's supposed to be something inside. You just gave me an empty box." And then the little girl said, "But Daddy, it's not empty. I spent all morning blowing kisses into it. They're all for you, Daddy." And so an empty box became her father's favorite Christmas present, and it sat on his office desk for years and years. Sometimes you have to look at something slant before you can see it right.

It seems that there's nothing to be seen in that back barn scene. But of course, that's part of the point, isn't it? That the unapproachable God, the God of crashing thunder and blazing lightning, of trembling mountains and trembling limbs, this God whom no one can see and live, is lying there in the hay, a helpless baby, having placed himself entirely into the hands of God's own creation. That is what John is trying to say when he mumbles on about the Word becoming flesh and all that. When you look directly at the scene, there is only a baby, but to see it aright, you have to look away, look at who that baby is, and at who that baby will become and at what that baby will do.

The unapproachable God just became approachable. The God we never see just became visible. The God we were afraid we could not trust, has just made the first move, opening himself up in vulnerability to us so that we might gather up our courage and come to him. Yes, here is still the Almighty God who will demand justice... but not today. Here is Almighty God who makes sinners tremble ... but not today. Here is the One who will judge the earth ... but not today. Today God offers mercy and grace. Today God says, "Come home and all will be forgiven." Today God lies there in human flesh, holy Jesus, Son of God, come to save the world, wrapped in swaddling blankets in his mother's arms.

Before we had only heard of God with the hearing of the ear, for nobody could look on God and live. But now we can see God with the seeing of the eye, and everything is changed. The great trust God has shown to us in coming this way opens our hearts to trust God back, opens our eyes to watch what God will do, makes us see God aslant, as it were, but also just right, so that we learn more about God by looking at God in this naked vulnerability as baby Jesus than we ever could by seeing God in all of God's glory.

To some it may seem anticlimactic, like a gold wrapped box with nothing in it, but in that baby in the hay is the best gift of all: God spent all morning blowing kisses into him, and they're all for us.

Merry Christmas to all, and Amen.