

Do You See What I See? – Brian Hartley

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24; John 1:6-8, 19-28

I can take trains or leave them. While I enjoy traveling by train because of the space it provides and the leisure for reading, I can't really claim to be a train aficionado. Because of my mechanical retardation, I have never really taken to getting down on the ground and examining toy trains in depth. In point of fact, I suppose that I am something of a railroad pragmatist—as long as it works, I'm essentially content.

But, over the last year or so I have come to see and understand trains in a new light—all thanks to my grandson, Tristan. You see, for him a train is not just a collection of railroad cars, but something akin to a heavenly wonder. He loves everything about trains: the bright flashing lights, the perpetual movement, even the habituated movement from one end of the tracks to the other. But more than anything else, Tristan loves the sound that a train makes. As a result, he has come up with a special vocabulary whenever he senses a train is near. His ears will perk up, his eyes will take on a new luster, and he will lean forward in his seat or break into a run all the while yelling, “Woo-hoo! Woo-hoo! Woo-hoo!”

Tristan's response to an oncoming train has caused me to rethink my approach to Advent and Christmas. It is disconcerting to discover that one has preached through the same series of texts about ten times and one grows tired of the relentless march of tired old films like “It's a Wonderful Life,” A Christmas Story,” and “A Christmas Carol.” I mean, how many times can you watch Chevy Chase fall off an icy roof and it still remain funny? The season for me has become something like my weather-worn dressing gown and ratty old slippers—familiar and comfortable. I keep them in the same place and pull them out whenever necessary. And just like them, everything and every character in the story has been reduced to the expected: here comes the apocalypse again; there goes the unruly John the Baptist; somebody remove that halo from the Blessed Virgin Mary; and, for God's sakes, somebody please retrieve those damned angels. “Same song, second verse; a little bit louder and little bit worse.”

In his book, *Messiah in Context*, the Jewish scholar, Dr. Jacob Neusner, posits that there were about fifty different elements regarding the “messiah myth” found in various documents in Judaism. These elements had been recited, rehearsed, and recapitulated for hundreds of years. The teachers and prophets of Jesus' day knew these elements well—they knew them by heart. But, like me in my dressing gown and slippers, they had grown all too comfortable with the narrative and its contours. Yet, I am prone to wonder, was it possible that they knew the elements so well that they somehow missed the truth when it happened right in front of them? Had they grown so used to watching the train go by that they failed to see the “Woo-hoo” when it came?

In the second century, the Christian apologist, Justin Martyr, engaged in a long dialogue with Trypho, the Jew. Trypho claimed that even if the Messiah actually did exist somewhere he would remain unknown, hidden, until Elijah would come to anoint him and make him known. In Jesus' day, hopes were high that just such a redeemer would emerge. All eyes were glued to the sky for signs of the times. People kept listening for a blast from the trumpet and the sound of approaching hoof beats. Instead, an unkempt man emerged from the desert who simply said of himself, "I am the voice." He attracted some attention to himself, but when they pressed for further information he pointed in the direction of a Galilean peasant and few took notice.

When the Baptizer says in today's text, "among you stands one whom you do not know" (John 1:26), his words should catch us up short and get our attention. We have come to handle the familiar treasures of Christmas with such casualness that we are apt to forget that the coming of the Messiah, of God's promised one, is always swathed in mystery. The one who is present to us is always something of a Hidden One. The One John reveals to us is also the One who is concealed: "Among you stands one whom you do not know."

This is the scandal of the Advent season—that the One about whom we thought we knew so much, we actually know very little about. That which has become so very common, so very ordinary, so very comfortable, is, in actuality, quite unique. We know Jesus, and because we know Jesus, we know we don't know Jesus. We know Jesus, but the songs we sing express not only our love but also something of our longing, "Come, thou long-expected Jesus, born to set thy people free. . ." We know Jesus, and because we know Jesus, the songs we sing are filled with wonder, "What child is this?" we ask, "What child is this?" One would think that the angels, those incorporeal heavenly messengers, would remind us of how strange and unbelievable this story really is, but even they have become domesticated household figures, all-too-familiar, atop our Christmas trees with a sprig of spruce up their butts instead of the messengers of something vast and mysterious.

"Among you stands one whom you do not know." And isn't that the real irony of this season? We have installed Jesus permanently on the dashboard of our cars, bedecked in our own version of dressing gown and slippers—something like I heard Paul Newman proclaim recently in my first viewing of "Cool Hand Luke": "I don't care if it rains or freezes, long as I got my plastic Jesus, sitting on the dashboard of my car; Comes in colors, pink and pleasant, glows in the dark because it's iridescent, take it with you when you travel far." That's the Jesus we know—carefully pre-packaged and fit to the needs of our consumerist society. And that's the way we think about this all-too-familiar season—not daring to look deeper lest it be revealed to be all tinsel and hype.

But, inside all of us there is this small flicker of hope that maybe something familiar and known might be full of wonder and mystery beyond the capacity of the human mind to understand and the human heart to know. John's announcement that, "among you stands one whom you do not know" is disturbing, yet also full of the good tidings of great joy. It hints that in the very midst of

all that is so blessedly familiar there is a blessing greater yet—one that we do not know and have not yet imagined.

Look as hard as you will in your crèche set when you go home this afternoon and I will lay a dime to a donut hole that you will not discover John the Baptist. The dude is missing. You will find a lamb, a cow, perhaps even a donkey. You will see Joseph and Mary, the wise men, the shepherds, and the little baby Jesus (just big enough to be swallowed by an innocent two-year-old). But you will look in vain for the character who dominates the stage every year on the third Sunday of Advent—in all the gospel readings for years A, B, and C. Him we do not know.

The gospel writer says that he “bore witness” to the light. Augustine even suggests that John was meant to be but a voice for awhile, but Jesus was the eternal Word from the beginning. John brings dissonance, both to his age and to ours. He is like your mother’s brother, Uncle John, who occasionally crashes the family gathering, stinking up the place and causing grandma to break out the good china and grandpa to go fuming out on the back porch to have a smoke. This unkempt, radical wild man dirties up the story and his voice rings almost too harsh for our ears. And yet, he never points to himself, but towards the familiar. He captures our attention and then points us toward home.

John reminds us this morning that this thing we call the gospel once had rough edges and grated on the ears. As the Swedish poet and bishop Nils Bolander wrote: “Christianity used to be an eagle gospel springing out of the nest on the highest peaks with great, bright wings of flight. But we pruned its daring feathers, professionally straightened its raptor’s beak and see—it became a black bird, a talkative and tame crow. Christianity used to be a lion message, constantly hunting for warm and living prey a young lion of Judah. But we clipped its sharp curled claws, quieted its thirst for heart’s blood and made it into a purring house cat. Christianity used to be a wilderness sermon sharp and cutting as the piercing wind, burning as the desert sand. But we made it a pleasure garden, daisies, hyacinths, and pious roses, a sentimental inclination among the flowers,” (Lathrop, *The Four Gospels on Sunday*, 207-208).

But today the words of the prophet Isaiah call out for a fresh breath of the spirit of the Lord God. Through this rough and ready character, the earth dares to burst forth and a new hope appears on the horizon. John tells us that Jesus comes among us in the familiar images of the season. And yet, he thwarts our attempts to domesticate him. At the beginning of “The Wizard of Oz,” Dorothy sings about her hopes of discovering life “somewhere over the rainbow.” But at the end, she finds that all that she needs to know of life can be found in her own backyard.

The irony and wonder of the coming of Christmas is that it brings to an end, once and for all, our search for our self in our encounter with this mysterious figure. For there in the manger amidst all the muck and mire, amidst all that is so familiar and yet so mysterious, lies the answer to our deepest longings, the one whom we thought we knew but about which we have so often been mistaken. And sometimes it takes a child to arouse us from our lethargy and to remind us that

that thing with which we thought we were familiar is actually quite unexpected and full of wonder. So there it is: it's no familiar gospel train whose light pierces the Advent darkness but a genuine, one-of-a-kind "Woo-hoo!" To which we can but respond: "Forgive us, Lord, for having tripped over you so often and for not having recognized you."