

Learning to Pay Attention – Brian Hartley

Isaiah 62:1-5; 1 Corinthians 12:1-11; John 2:1-11

Every time the train would approach a station the engine operator would repeat the drill. “Ladies and Gentlemen, please be careful descending the stairs as you disembark from the train. The steps are slippery and you should use the handrail. The conductor will assist you with your bags.” And, just before arriving at a stop, the conductor would magically appear, sweep the steps free of ice, and warn the entire car that the snow had made the descent somewhat precarious, demanding our full attention. Folks would cue up and, for the most part, take their time with their bags as they negotiated the four or five steep steps to the ground—all that is except for one terribly distracted woman who insisted on talking on her cell phone while scurrying towards the front with a handful of bags and parcels. She blasted past an elderly gentleman who was trying to shuffle into the aisle while yelling at someone on the other end of her phone line. And, instead of grabbing the hand rail and gently walking down the steps, she refused the porter’s offer of assistance and stepped boldly into the great beyond. The sound of her feet coming out from under her was something of a pregnant pause before she landed on her posterior with a thud. The entire car took in an inhaled breath as invective poured from her mouth at all those gathered around her. I suppose had I had more empathy, I might have stepped to her defense but, instead, I simply chalked up the entire incident as irrefutable truth of Darwinian evolution.

The fact of the matter is that this poor woman is simply emblematic of where most of us live—stuck away in our own little worlds, ignoring what is going on all around us. We mistakenly believe that God is to be found primarily in the great and spectacular, so we oftentimes miss God’s activity in the everyday and the ordinary. That is why Frederick Buechner says, “Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery that it is. . . . There is no event so commonplace but that God is present within it, always hiddenly, always leaving you room to recognize him or not to recognize him,” (Now and Then, 87). As Dean Nelson, who teaches at Point Loma says in his most recent book, “When we’re paying attention, we see that grace is breaking into our everyday moments, making them different—sacred—drawing us into the presence of God. It’s not about us getting a hold of the sacred. It’s about the sacred getting a hold of us,” (*God Hides in Plain Sight*, 17). And this morning’s texts both reaffirm and develop this idea of God’s presence in the mundane interstices of our lives.

We have just come through one of the two high points of the Christian Year—Christmastide. We have exchanged presents, eaten voraciously, and gorged ourselves on football. We started hearing Christmas music soon after Halloween and this year we have even witnessed and lived through a truly “White Christmas.” But now the tree has been taken down, the seasonal partying has come to an end, and we find ourselves facing the prospect of another two full months of winter weather. Some of us may be tempted to go into hibernation—to pull the covers up over

our heads and to sleep-walk through the next few months. While others of us find ourselves with our noses to the grindstone—pulling our taxes together and forging through the mental snows all around us. The danger in both cases is that we may well miss the signs of God’s presence all around us, mistaking the stripped-down barrenness of the landscape which surrounds us as being devoid of hope or meaning.

That is why we have this church season in the depth of winter known as Epiphany which began last Sunday with the story of Jesus’ baptism in the River Jordan by John. Other words for epiphany are “manifestation” and “appearance.” That is, glimpses of the Divine that take place where we might least expect them. This is certainly the case in today’s Old Testament lesson where the people cast out of the Promised Land hear hints of God’s restoration. And that restorative process begins by being given a new name. Now names are important. They signal to the rest of the world something of who we are. One of the unfortunate aspects of having the simple name of Brian (spelled with an “i”) is that people are always inverting the middle two vowels so that I have received an enormous amount of mail addressed to “Brain” Hartley. In the schoolyard there were always taunts and jeers of “Brian the Brain” and “Brainy Brian” which seemed to accompany me. Because we moved quite often, I even tried changing my name to my initials once asking people to call me “B. T.”—all to no avail. As soon as people found out my name, they were calling me “Brain” all over again. After awhile, I just decided to quit fighting it and to try and live into my newly given name.

In today’s text, the change of name couldn’t be more dramatic. From “Forsaken” and “Desolate,” the people are now known as “Delight” and “Married.” From having experienced death, destruction, and exile, they are now promised restoration and fruitfulness. No longer known by the Hebrew Hephzibah, they are now endowed with the beautiful name of Beulah. The sheer intimacy being signaled here of relationship is an announcement not only to the exiles but to all those who have known these people primarily by their separation from God and the land as now being restored into loving relationship. And yet, the reality for the exiles who returned to the land was one of continued desolation and despair. The scars left behind by the Babylonians remained deep and it took many years before the land could be brought back to fruitfulness. When one reads the narrative provided in books like Ezra, Nehemiah, and Haggai, it is clear that the people faced very real challenges despite their return into the land.

We, like they, may be tempted to despair as well. We remain dependent upon God during this season of cold and darkness for our own well-being. The earth remains locked into a perpetual deep freeze and the trees are stripped of their leaves and color. The landscape itself stands like a grim reminder of the waste of winter—think the movie “Fargo” over against the colors of Dorothy’s Oz! In such times, we can only cling to the promises of God that spring will come again. Driving into town we are haunted by the grimy snow which seems to mock the name of our town, “Greenville.” And yet we dare to hope that we will yet be able to lay claim to the summertime reality of that name which we have been given.

During such times, we must join in paying particular attention to the signs of God in our midst. And no one describes this better than does the Gospel according to St. John. In this gospel, Jesus doesn't perform miracles but he engages in sign-acts, semeia in Greek. And these actions are never for the glorification of Jesus but are meant to be small windows into his larger identity and purpose. In this gospel, Jesus performs seven such sign-acts in the first half of the narrative, concluding with the great raising of Lazarus in chapter 11. But the first of those sign-acts is something rather mundane really—the transformation of water into wine.

The narrative begins with the phrase, “on the third day,” a clear signal to those listening in that this would be an epiphany narrative. In John's gospel, everything operates on at least two different levels. Jesus says “water” and he really means “water.” Or, Jesus refers to “bread” and he really means “bread.” The narrative literally drips with metaphorical language, offering a severe challenge to we moderns who read the text as if it were the New York Times. But this is no newspaper—this is a theological text meant to convey meaning in a symbolic world recognizable to those in the first and second centuries, but somewhat less so to those of us living in the twenty-first century. The very next story, the cleansing of the temple, a similar third day narrative, by the way, displaced by John from its traditional order in the closing week of Jesus' ministry in the other gospels, also serves to reveal something important about the nature of his ministry.

These stories, then, are not meant to be ham-fisted empirical data to prove that a miracle was performed but are meant to point us to something much more important. As Fred Craddock is wont to say: “The Evangelist is saying that a sign is not a miracle to amaze or an offer of proof for his teaching. The sign was a window through which God was revealed. To attend to the miraculous and to miss the revelation would be no more than curiosity wallowing in the unusual,” (Preaching the New Common Lectionary: Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Year C, 130). And yet, we get all caught up in the hocus-pocus nature of the event, interpreting it both woodenly and literally—at least, until, we have to square it with our own propensity towards abstinence and teetotalism. Then, we come up with cockamamie theories about how this wine was really a form of unfermented juice.

But, we are neither the first or the last to look for God primarily in the spectacular. As Paul says in the opening chapter to the first epistle to the Corinthians: “Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles,” (1:22-23). And nobody fell harder for the spectacular than did the residents of Corinth. They were the embodiment of the character, Herod, as portrayed in Jesus Christ Superstar who sings out to Jesus, “prove to me that you're no fool, walk across my swimming pool. If you'll do that for me then I'll let you go free. Come on, King of the Jews!”

They had created their own hierarchy of gifts and at the top they had the most ostentatious and spectacular. Paul here takes them to task, challenging outward signs as the primary manifestation of the presence of the Spirit. Some scholars have surmised that there may well have been Gnostic-believing Christians in this congregation who disparaged Jesus' humanity

and, so, called down curses on the human figure, Jesus, whom they saw in opposition to the “spiritual Christ.” Paul’s pastoral concern is clearly linked to addressing this faulty theology which emphasized “speaking in the Spirit,” when their actions revealed something quite different. If we are looking for the revelation or epiphany of God in these outward and exterior manifestations, we may well be led astray this chief of the Apostles suggests.

In fact, in his own list of gifts, Paul mentions tongues last. This would fit the larger point he is making here that there is both a diversity of gifts and that the primary purpose of these gifts is for the good of the community, not the individual. If we expect God to manifest God’s self in the same way in different people, we are denying one of the key elements of how God works in the world—through diversity. There is no one gift, like a “silver bullet” that marks the presence of God. No, God works through a variety of people in a variety of ways. And so, if we go looking for God in one place to be demonstrated in an extraordinary way, we will, more than likely, miss the signs of His grace in our very midst.

All of which brings us back to the dark and barren season in which we find ourselves. For some of us there may be a tendency to see this wintry time as something to get through so that we can get on to the “sunny” times of our existence. But like the very common wedding in which Jesus finds himself, we may be in danger of living much of our lives longing for what lies around the next corner only to discover one day that we have missed much of our life. These ordinary cold days make up a prime time for us in which to look for God in the everyday and the ordinary. As Barbara Brown Taylor says, “Like a silver spoon in the drawer with the stainless, like a diamond necklace on the bureau with the rhinestones; the extraordinary hidden in the ordinary, the kingdom of heaven all mixed in with the humdrum and ho-hum of our days, as easy to find as an amaryllis bulb in the dark basement that suddenly sends forth a shoot, or a child’s smile when she awakes from sleep, or the first thunderstorm after a long drought—all of them signs of the kingdom of heaven, clues to all the holiness hidden in the dullest of our days,” (*The Seeds of Heaven*, 44).

And so, on this day, we are called like the hearers of the prophet Isaiah, the congregation at Corinth, and the community of the Beloved Disciple, to start paying attention to where God is at work in the quiet and barren seasons of our lives. This may, however, demand that, unlike the woman in our opening story, that we quit trying to do so many things at once and start paying attention to what is going on all around us. For me, this took place watching the faces of a couple of children in a seat behind me as they stared out the train window at the snow falling all around us a week ago Thursday. For many of the adults on that journey, the snow and ice were impediments to travel—something we had to get through in order to get on with life. But for these children, that snow was something magical. They pointed out the window, they laughed, they watched the vapor form as they breathed on the glass, and they reveled in the little boy waving at us across the tracks as he built his snowman. For them, winter was not a time to be gotten through but a time of fairy magic when the world comes alive with all kinds of new possibilities. And so it might become for all of us—if we have eyes with which to catch sight of the Incarnate Logos in our midst.

Sometimes, it is most difficult, but most important, for us to look for signs of Christ's presence where they are least likely to appear—such as in the most recent tragedy in Haiti. Yet, perhaps in the midst of so much destruction and suffering is exactly where we should most expect the living Christ to be at work. As I watched the video from just yesterday of Bishop Roller officiating at a service of remembrance for those three Free Methodist missionaries who are still missing and now presumed dead, I was reminded of that transforming vision for which they gave their lives. For they, like so many before them, went believing that Christ is present and at work, often in unseen ways bringing beauty and shalom even in the midst of so much devastation. If nothing else, then, their deaths should prompt us to open our eyes to the possibilities all around us of the signs of the Kingdom. And, as we gather at table this day, we do so sharing in that vision, mouthing the words of this “anticipatory liturgy,” and believing, as that liturgy says, “in sure and certain hope of the resurrection.” Amen.