

SEEN AND HEARD

Luke 2:1-20

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The shepherds returned home, glorifying God for all they had heard and seen. And then what? It's not in the scripture, but I can't believe that - after a night like this - the shepherds would have kept the news to themselves. It's only reasonable to assume they would have shared it, just like they told Mary and Joseph what the angels had told them about the child. It would have been natural for the shepherds to want to tell and re-tell the story of this most wondrous night.

When you've seen and heard something wonderful, you want to tell about it.

This baby Jesus grows up to become a person who really sees people, especially the people no one else notices - the beggars on the side of the road, the ones who need healing, women and children everyone else ignores. Jesus pays attention to rich tax collectors like Zacchaeus whom people loved to hate and make fun of. When a young man approaches Jesus and asks him a question from the heart, "What can I do to experience eternal life, Jesus?", Jesus sees him, sees inside his soul.

On one of his long journeys, Jesus stops in a Samaritan village for a break, a rest and some water, probably sitting down to eat the lunch he'd brought. A woman is at the well with her bucket to draw water; he asks her for a drink of water, and she's shocked that he - a Jew - would speak to her, a Samaritan. He not only asks her for a drink but he enters into a sacred conversation with her, telling her that he knows all about her - including the fact that she's had five husbands. He sees her, really sees her, through the eyes of love. And she spends the rest

of her life telling this story. Because of what she has seen and heard, more people know about Jesus and his way of life.

A few months from now, we'll read the story of the end of Jesus' earthly life, and remember that Mary Magdalene goes running from the tomb where she has experienced the risen Christ. "I've seen the Lord," she tells everyone she knows.

The things that we have seen and heard change us. Being seen and heard changes us. These experiences, when we tell about them, can change the world.

Let's say that you and I see each other at Coffee Hour a few months from now, and begin to chat about nothing in particular. The subject of restaurants comes up, and we begin to talk about our favorite restaurants in Little Italy. I might tell you that I recommend you try a restaurant called Nora - I've heard it's really good and I've been wanting to go. But I can't describe it to you wholeheartedly because I've never been there myself. My witness about it to you, my testimony, is only second-hand, and therefore won't be as compelling as if I tell you about a place I've been and describe the experience to you in my own words.

I love it when our youth come back from their mission trips and talk about what those experiences have been like for them. Many of you have told me that our Mission Trip Sundays are some of your favorite hours of the year in worship. From Tim's pictures and videos, we see how their eyes light up when they engage with their mission partners and those they're serving. We see with our own eyes the fun they're having, and the passion with which they work. We hear the stories that impacted them, the conversations they had, what they learned. We see and hear the experiences that shaped them, and we are all changed.

I also enjoy talking to our youth when they come home from church camp. I like hearing about the mountaintop moments at camp, the relationships that spark something deep, the times when God's presence was powerfully felt. And I like hearing which songs are the new favorites at camp every year. When I was at church camp, I learned the old favorite called, "Pass it On." I know some of you know it. It includes these lines, "I wish for you, my friend, this happiness that I've found. Shout it from the mountaintop - I want the world to know - the Lord of Love has come to me - I want to pass it on. That's how it is with God's love - once you've experienced it, you spread the love to everyone, you want to pass it on." The song doesn't work if it's a secondhand experience. You can't sing with gusto, "I've heard rumors about some good news. A friend of mine had a transforming experience with love." No, it has to be a first-hand experience. **YOU** are seen and heard by the God of love. You are called "beloved" and "blessed." You are accepted just exactly as you are - and then you want to share that with others, so that others, too, can be seen and heard.

The shepherds returned home, glorifying God for all that they had seen and heard. They chose to tell a story of celebration, of gratitude, of thanksgiving. They could have told a different story. They could have complained about how the angels distracted them from their work, about how far they had to walk to follow the star. But something happened to them when they were in the presence of that newborn baby, something that caused them to see the world differently. Perhaps they realized that the angels had seen THEM, smelly shepherds, workers no one ever paid attention to...the angels noticed THEM and called them to witness something beautiful and miraculous. It's all miraculous, really. Every time we're really seen.

Every time we stop what we're doing, put down our phones, turn off the TV and really listen to each other it is a small miracle of loving attention.

Being seen and heard is the kind of experience that you want to pass on.

The story of God choosing to enter the world as a human being tells us that God notices us. God is paying attention. God cares about what our ordinary daily lives are like.

<https://images.app.goo.gl/3La63Bhnm5iFt7jYA>

Artist Janet McKenzie here portrays a Jesus who looks to be about eight months old as his mother holds him - do you notice that there is a cross in the background? Writer Diana Butler Bass says that this cross is not THE cross; to her, the artist is not foreshadowing Jesus' gruesome death. Rather, this cross made of African cloth represents everyday life and the difficulties it brings. She puts it this way: (This) "...cross is not something big, dramatic, or unusual beyond normal experience. Rather, the cross is just what it is—the fabric of daily life: all the things that deaden our souls and threaten our children; the things that keep us from our full humanity; the things that cause mothers to worry and to cling more tightly to their babies."

Jesus was born to defeat the fear, oppression, and enslavement of the daily cross. As preacher and teacher, he inverted the daily cross, always extolling the meek, the merciful, the peacemakers, and the poor. He pointed out how the everyday was holy. Jesus wore the regular fabric of humanity and by wearing it he redeemed it, coming to us as an infant to teach us the way to live and draw us into union with God. Through Jesus, God made the daily cross the path to life.

On this Christmas Eve, as we live so very much in the shadow of a pandemic, we are aware of the suffering that is part of human life, yet we give thanks for the light that shines. We give thanks for the humanity we share. In the person of Jesus, God sees us and knows us.

The gift of this time, the gift of our awareness of life's pain, is that we are sometimes more open, more vulnerable, more conscious of the beautiful experiences of being seen and heard. Because we know how our own hearts have been broken, we may be kinder and gentler, more tender with one another, seeing and hearing others, noticing each other, genuinely paying attention. Those experiences cause us to want to share the good news.

A few weeks ago, about 8:30 on a Wednesday night, my phone rang, and I saw - before I answered - that my dad was calling. He and I stay in very close touch by email, but we don't talk often on the phone, so this was out of the ordinary. He told me he had a story he wanted to tell.

"I was at Costco late this afternoon," he said, "and I realized I didn't have anything much for dinner at home, so I called and made a reservation at Bonefish Grill." This wasn't unusual - I know he goes out to dinner about once a week. "I enjoyed my dinner, but noticed the restaurant was very crowded and understaffed, so I took out my credit card and put it on the table, signaling to my server so that she didn't have to make two trips to my table, bringing the check then picking up my card." The server came to the table, but instead of picking up the card, she said, "I won't be needing that. Your dinner is being paid for tonight, by the Bonefish Grill." "I don't understand," my dad said. "And what about the tip?" "You don't need to leave a tip." But he wanted to anyway, so he went to the host station and asked for change, and said, "May I ask why the Bonefish Grill is paying for my dinner?" The host said, "Because we thought

you looked like a very nice man.” My dad looked him in the eye and said, “I want you to know that your kindness means a lot to me; today is the one year anniversary of my wife’s death.” My 91-year-old father was seen and heard, and then he called to tell me about it - and I’m telling you about it - because good news is meant to be shared. Love and light are meant to be shared.

Friends, we will get through this time of shadows. We will get through it together, with kindness and compassion, working together for a more just and peaceful world. We will get through it as we feel God’s presence strengthening and encouraging us. We will get through it as we remember that God sees us, knows us, accepts and loves us. Let us open our eyes and ears to one another, as God has done for us. Merry Christmas!