

Fourth Sunday of Advent: Don't Just Look; Don't Just See; But Behold!

Behold!

When I prepare young couples for marriage, I spend a session just on communications and problem solving. I begin the discussion by considering the various levels of communicating. I start with hearing. Hearing alone is not communicating. Someone could be engrossed in watching TV or reading the newspaper and not be paying any attention to what another person may be saying; yet if he or she is asked, "What did I just say?" they can respond with what they heard. That is shallow. I'll mention that a deeper communication is when someone is listening to the other person, attuned to what he or she is saying. But then I'll somewhat shock the couple by noting that listening is important, but not sufficient for a marriage. What they need to work towards is to bring their communication to a deeper level, the level of understanding. They do this by asking themselves, "Why?" Why is my husband or wife saying this. How can I respond not just to what is being said, but why it is being said? When a husband or wife says he or she really understands me, it doesn't just happen. That is a result of intense work.

Something similar takes place regarding our sense of vision. At its simplest level, we can look without paying that much attention to what we are seeing. Still, what we have seen is implanted somewhere in our mind, just as what we have heard is implanted somewhere in our mind even if we paid no attention to it. My guess is that the reason why detectives ask a person who is a witness to a crime to tell what they saw over and over again is to unveil something in their minds they have not paid a whole a lot of attention to. Maybe the third or fourth telling they might say, "Well, there was a guy there with a green bow-tie, but he wasn't part of the bank robbery." And now the police have a lead on someone. A man with a green bow tie was also present at another robbery.

Deeper than looking is seeing. Seeing, like listening, answers the question "What?" What am I seeing? The mind is focused. "I know what I saw," the witness to the crime says emphatically. "I know there was a man there with a green bow-tie. He seemed to be part of the robbers, even though he didn't make off with the money."

Seeing in this way, focusing on what is in front of us, is important, but there is an even deeper level of vision. That is the level we find in scripture, particularly in the readings of the Christmas Season. The deeper level is beholding. To behold is to see and understand. "Behold the virgin shall be with child," the *Gospel of Matthew* quotes Isaiah, only adding "behold." Understand what this is about. "Behold, the handmaid of the Lord," Mary responds. "I see, and I understand," she says, in the *Gospel of Luke*.

Joseph, in today's Gospel, is a righteous man, unwilling to have Mary put to death for being pregnant. He falls asleep and, behold, an angel appears to him in his dreams. See and understand he is told. Shepherds were tending their flock, when the Angel of the Lord appeared to them and said, "Behold, I proclaim to you news of great

joy. Go to Bethlehem. Find the infant in the manger. See and understand.”

Behold!

King Ahaz in the first reading did not want to behold. He did not want to behold the work of God. He would rather decide his own fate and that of his Kingdom, then trust in God. Ahaz’s kingdom was the Kingdom of Judah, the southern of the two Hebrew Kingdoms. Here is what was happening: in the middle of the eighth century before Jesus, the powerful nation of Assyria was threatening to conquer its neighbors. The Northern Kingdom of the Hebrews, the Kingdom of Israel, had made a pact with Syria to go to war against Assyria. Israel was in an alliance with pagans, the Syrians. Ahaz considered joining Judah to this alliance, or possibly making an alliance with Assyria, and then conquer the Northern Kingdom and become king of all the Jews, like David and Solomon.

This is when the prophet Isaiah came to him and told him to stay at peace and trust in God. Ahaz balked at this. He had his own plan. So Isaiah told him, "If you want proof that my message is from God, ask for a sign, and God will provide it." Ahaz might have appeared to be holy and pious when he said, "I will not tempt God," but actually what he was saying is that he did not want anyone telling him what choices to make. He certainly was not going to allow some prophet to determine his policies. He did not want to behold.

There is a temptation that we all have to react as Ahaz reacted when confronted with the action of God in our lives. We have a temptation that we rather trust in our own ability to find happiness than be exposed to God and be forced to reject the pseudo joy of the world. There is a temptation we all have not to behold. A number of years ago a young man told me that he had avoided Church because he knew that if he started taking his faith seriously, he would have to change his life. He said it took him years to realize that his immoral lifestyle did not bring him happiness. When he finally took the step to return to the Lord, everything changed. Others told him that he wasn't the same guy. He agreed. "That's right," he said, "I'm happy now." Perhaps all of us to some degree or other have avoided God. Perhaps there are times that we think that embracing God in our lives would cost too much. And, consequently, we ended up avoiding happiness. There is a temptation for all of us to act like Ahaz.

Back to that first reading. Isaiah told Ahaz that God had a far greater enterprise than the immediate political situation Judah was in. God was concerned with saving all His people for all time. "Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a son, and name him Immanuel." Seven hundred years before the angel Gabriel came to the Virgin Mary, the King of Judah was told how God would accomplish His plan to be with His People for all time.

Only Ahaz did not want to behold. He did not want to trust in God.

In direct contrast to Ahaz, today's Gospel presents Joseph, a man who was also

faced with a dilemma. He was betrothed to a beautiful young girl and anxiously awaiting the time that she would be ready to leave her parents and come into his home. Following the custom of the day, the first stage of marriage had taken place when Mary was still very young. That was the betrothal ceremony. From that point, Mary was Joseph's wife, even though she still a virgin living with her parents. The marriage would be completed with the celebration of the entrance of Mary into Joseph's home. That is when they would have the big wedding feast, like Jesus would later attend with his disciples at Cana. There would be a great banquet and dancing and celebrating the new life of this couple and the new lives they hoped to bring into the world. It was exciting for Joseph.

Then it all came crashing down. Joseph learned that Mary was pregnant. Now, the reading says that Joseph was an upright man, a just man. According to the common interpretation of the law, he could have declared that Mary was unfaithful, guilty of adultery, and had her put to death. Joseph could have had Mary killed, but he was a just man. He had a real relationship with God. The girl was young. He could not fathom God wanting her dead. He would just send Mary away. Joseph was open to the will of God. And because he was open to God in his life, because he trusted in God rather than his own plans, his own thoughts, Joseph was able to behold the wonders of God's love in the world.

Unlike Ahaz, Joseph chose the way of faith. And he chose well. And the baby was born. What must it have been like for Joseph to hold the King of Kings in his arms? What must it have been like for him to experience the Love of God become flesh? What must it have been like for him to realize that Mary was the polar opposite of his fears? She was not a sinner. She was the one who never sinned. What must it have been like for Joseph to live in a home filled with the wonders of God? We know that Joseph protected his family, leading them to Egypt to avoid Herod. We know that Joseph returned to Nazareth where he cared for Jesus in his infancy and childhood, even teaching him how to be a carpenter. Joseph had to have been a very happy man, for happiness is found in the presence of God.

"Behold!" the Church tells us on the Fourth Sunday of Advent. Behold where happiness is found. "Trust in God," we are told. His wonders are beyond our imagination. Trust in Him and behold His wonders, and live in His happiness.

Next Sunday we will be giving tokens of our love to the people who mean so much to us. We will be giving out Christmas presents. Now, we can give those we love all sorts of things, but we cannot give them happiness. Only God gives happiness. And He gives happiness to those who entrust their lives to Him.

And a virgin shall be with child, and bear a son, and his name shall be Immanuel, which means God is with us.

Behold Jesus.

See and understand.

Behold happiness.