

11 March 2018
The Fourth Sunday in Lent

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church

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“What Are You Looking At?”

Text: Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:14-21; Ephesians 2:1-10

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

There was a video going around on the internet a little bit ago; an experiment on seeing. Maybe some of you saw it. If you didn't you can Google it and find it. It was a rather simple test. On the video there were two teams, one dressed in black and one dress in white. They were throwing a ball around. And the challenge was this: just count how many times the ball was passed by the team in white. Simple.

So this group of people did. They watched the video and counted. At the end, most of the people had counted fifteen, and they were right. They patted themselves on the back. This was way too easy. And they were right again. For then the researcher asked them: *Did you see the gorilla?* And many of them said: *What gorilla?* So they watched the video again and about a minute into the game, a man dressed in a gorilla suit walks right into the middle of the game, stands there for a few seconds, beats his chest, and then walks out. Something like half of all people who watch that video, watching on the ball being passed by the white team, miss the gorilla. They're blind to it, focusing too much on the ball being passed around. Scientists call it *selective vision*. Something, it turns out, we do all the time.

Which maybe we need in this life. Maybe if we saw and noticed everything, our minds couldn't handle it. I'm certainly no expert at that so I don't know. But here's the thing for us to consider today: If this is something we do, *selective vision*, what are we selecting to look at? What are we focusing on? And is it the right thing, or the wrong thing? And what are we missing?

It seems to me this was a problem for the people of Israel we heard about in the Old Testament reading today. They saw the manna, the food God was giving them, but they *weren't* seeing God's love, God's care, God's faithfulness - they saw only the food they had grown tired of and now loathed. And because that's all they saw, they loathed God as well. They forgot about what He had done to the Egyptians, the plagues, the dividing of the Red Sea, and how He took care of them and gave them life in the midst of all kinds of dangers, and so they now could do nothing but complain, against God and against Moses: ***Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?*** If only they had stayed in Egypt, they selectively *thought*, things would be so much better . . .

So God wanted to help them see again, to focus their eyes *on Him* again. He was the gorilla, if you will, in the midst of them, with His heart and arms wide open . . . but all they could see was the manna they loathed. He had to get their attention back on Him. So He sent fiery serpents among the people - serpents that when they bit a person caused their flesh to swell and burn, like it was *on fire*. Think of it - every time they went out and every time they bent over to pick up a piece of the manna they loathed, yet needed to live, there was potentially a serpent where you were going to step, a serpent under the piece of manna you were ready to pick-up, ready to strike. And that did strike.

So as you can imagine, this caused the people to change their tune pretty quickly! *We have sinned*, they cried out to Moses, *for we have spoken against the Lord and against you. Pray to the Lord, that he take away the serpents from us*. So Moses did, but we're not told that the Lord took the serpents away. Instead, **the Lord gave them something to look at**; something to focus their eyes *and their faith* on: a bronze serpent on a pole. So that when they got bit, they could look at what God gave them and remember His promise: *everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live*. The bronze serpent itself didn't have any special power - in fact, when the people later turned it into an idol, God commanded that it be destroyed (2 Kings 18:4). Because it was the Word and promise of God that gave it the power. The Word and promise of God that directed the people *to Him*, to see Him and His goodness and life again.

Nicodemus surely knew that story, as He talked to Jesus that night He had gone to Him with so many questions. So imagine His surprise when Jesus says that story was not just a nice story from the past, but meant something for them - both for Him and for Nicodemus. That just *as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life*. So that meant that for Jesus, He, the Son of Man, must be *lifted up* - which meant lifted up onto a cross. And for Nicodemus, it meant he was to look at that gift of God lifted up on the cross, and remember this promise: *that whoever believes in him may have eternal life*. For Jesus on the cross was showing God's love for him and for the world. **For God so loved the world that** He did this - put His Son on the pole of the cross for the life of the world. That a world of people bitten by the satanic serpent not perish in the fires of hell, but have life.

For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Just as He did not send the fiery serpents in the wilderness to condemn the people, but to save them; to refocus their eyes and their faith on Him, His love, His goodness, His faithfulness. That they know and trust Him again as their Father, Saviour, and Redeemer.

So I don't know if you've noticed or not, but all this Lenten season the Gradual that I chant between the Old Testament reading and the Epistle has said this: **O come, let us fix our eyes on Jesus**. My question for you today is a simple one: *Have you? Do you?* Or

are you like the people of Israel in the wilderness, with selective vision? Seeing but not seeing? Focusing on something in your life, be it something good or something bad, something you have or something you desire, something in the past or something in the future, something right or something wrong, a challenge or a pleasure . . . whatever it is, but focusing on it so much that you're missing the gorilla? You're missing your Saviour, who is with you, caring for you, strengthening you, forgiving you, saving you? It's easy to do, right?

And not seeing our Saviour - not because He's not there, but because we're selectively seeing - do we maybe not loathe Him, but question Him and His love? Wonder what He's doing? Get impatient and begin to grumble against Him, and maybe also against the people He's given to help us?

You see, when we take our eyes off of Jesus, the devil can fill our eyes and our hearts and minds with all kinds of stuff. You can be sure He will try to deceive us and mislead us - and not necessarily with lies! Maybe even with the truth. Remember, the people watching the video got the question right: the white team passed the ball 15 times. It's what they didn't see . . . because their eyes were filled with something else . . .

So come, let us fix our eyes on Jesus. That's what this season of Lent is all about: learning to see again. And Lent comes every year because we need it every year, don't we? To point out to us what we should have been seeing all along - that our Saviour is with us in the wilderness. Remember? We started Lent by hearing that story, of Jesus *in the wilderness*, for us, being tempted by the devil, just like we are. Except He was victorious. Because He saw what we so often fail to see, what satan so wants to cause us to doubt - the goodness and faithfulness of our Father in heaven.

And then the next week we heard of that goodness and faithfulness again, this time as Jesus taught about His cross, that He must go, that He must lay down His life for us and there was no way anyone or anything was going to stop Him. So much He loves you. And the crosses we bear in this world and life, they're from His love too. They crush and kill us, the old sinner in us, in order to save us.

And then last week Jesus cleansed the Temple, overturning and driving out all that was filling the eyes of the people, that they were selectively seeing, so they would fix their eyes on Him. The religious leaders of the day did, and killed Him. But it had to be that way. **The Son of Man had to be lifted up**, for all the world to see, that whoever see Him there remember the Word and promise of God, and have eternal life.

That's what it's all about, Nicodemus. Jesus didn't come to condemn the world - we did that ourselves, and to ourselves, with our sin. We don't need Jesus for that. He came to do something about it. Which means showing us our sin - which maybe *seems* like He's condemning us when He's really just pointing out the reality and helping us see rightly -

and then showing us Himself, on the cross, that we see Him and live. That we see our sin there, on Him, and hear the Word and promise of God proclaimed to us: *I forgive you all your sin*. The gift of God, to you.

And this seeing rightly . . . it's really what those things we do during Lent are for, too; our prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. Not that we're doing something for God; those things are to help us. We **fast** to take our eyes off the things of this world, that we might focus on Jesus and **pray**, and see our neighbor in need and **give**. *By grace you have been saved*, Paul wrote to the Ephesians. *This is not your own doing; it is the gift of God*, so no boasting. But once you see that, fix your eyes on Jesus, then this too: *good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them*. Good works, which are *for my neighbor* works; which are *not so obsessed about me* works; which are *seeing rightly* works. **So come let us fix our eyes on Jesus on the pole**. And live.

And finally this too: eat the manna that has been given to us here, the bread from heaven that is here for us every Sunday. Just as Israel came through the waters of the Red Sea, so have you come through the waters of Baptism. And now, on your way, God has provided food; food that is not worthless, but the Body and Blood of Christ, *given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins*. *Immeasurable riches*, Paul calls them. Gifts that you may see rightly. Gifts for you. Gifts which show us God in the midst of us, God with His heart and arms wide open, embracing you with His love.

So what are you looking at? O come, let us fix our eyes on Jesus.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.