

# **SEEING IS BELIEVING**

**A Sermon by the Rev. Janet L. Abel  
Preached on Sunday, January 18, 2015**

## **Celebrating Epiphany, the Season of Light**

“Seeing Is Believing” is my title. Or is it all about seeing? In our church year, we come to the end of what we call Epiphany, a season that’s not particularly well-known, certainly not compared with Christmas. But we celebrated it last week, and it’s a season of light. We know that Christmastime is a festival of lights on houses, on trees, in the church.

I miss the outdoor Christmas decorations when we take them down, as most people have done by now. I’ve noticed a couple holdouts when driving around, and we sorely miss it when the indoor Christmas tree is finally put away or thrown out. Everything seems kind of dark, and we’re still in a very cold midwinter.

Nevertheless, this week we are still celebrating this season of light in our passage of songs, Christmas, and Epiphany. But we also celebrate the scene, the sight, and the light on which they certainly depend. You can’t see without it. Different kinds of light, perhaps, for different kinds of sight.

The scriptural passage before us today is a “call” story. That’s what we call it when disciples are called, this being the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. He has called Peter and Andrew and then a couple of other guys in John’s version – Philip and Nathaniel – and there’s a whole lot of seeing going on.

## **In John, There’s Always More to the Story Than What’s on the Surface**

This is the gospel of John, and what it’s famous for is that you have the surface story and you also have other things going on underneath. So we’re told right away, because it’s John, that there are more than one way to see and more than one way to understand. Seeing is highly important, and we are people of vision today.

We know that lots of books are made into movies. There’s a new one coming out, or perhaps it’s out already under the title “Still Alice.” Is that out? Has anyone seen it? Not yet, but I highly recommend the movie to you. The book is fantastic, and I hope the movie is as well.

It’s a tale of our times as more and more people are afflicted with Alzheimer’s disease. It’s not a happy story necessarily; a woman is diagnosed with early-onset Alzheimer’s, and the gripping story is told from her perspective.

This pernicious disease is the fate of a lot of people whom we know and love. Reading the book is a great way to understand Alzheimer's more deeply.

**Like the Book for the Book;  
Like the Movie for the Movie**

Movies exert tremendous visual power, Sometimes I compare books with movies, and I'm disappointed. You've done that, right? You picture a certain character in a certain way, and the producer hires somebody else, leaving you thinking, "No way. The guy in the book was blond and here's this brunet. Or, you know, she's not right."

And they change the story so that when you really love a book, you're sitting there comparing scenes: "They left that scene out. It is the most important scene in the entire book, and it's not there."

I once had a professor who said, "You know, try to let that go. Like the book for the book, and like the movie for the movie. Understand that the book was an inspiration, but the movie stands alone as its own thing and is very much a visual piece of art." What it looks like, the colors, the scenery, the set or location, the wardrobe, the script, the dialog, the actors – they all contribute to the story.

Art's favorite movies are the "Lord of the Rings" trilogy. He quotes them a lot, and I have seen them. I never admitted to Art that I fell asleep in movie number one. Whether or not you want to tell him this, I'm not sure, but I never fall asleep in the movies. But in one scene there was a long elf council, and I just could not keep my eyes open. Art will quote a scene to me and say, "Remember that?" And I would say, "Well, sort of. Well, no." But I have seen the movies. I have read the books, and I do like them.

**My Favorites: Read the Books, See the Movies –  
"Harry Potter," "Casablanca," "Star Wars"**

My favorites? Well, "Harry Potter" is probably number one. "Casablanca" is number two. Some people tell me they do not watch black-and-white movies. At a certain age, people don't love them, but you're nodding in agreement, right? That's a great movie, starring Humphrey Bogart.

And I am a lover of the "Star Wars" sextuplicate. I saw the first one about ten times in a movie theater. My parents kept saying, "Really, you want to go again?" I was enamored of the music, the dialogue, and the theme, and now there's a new episode coming out with the original cast. I can't wait.

Vision is all-important, of course, when watching the movies. My love of "Harry Potter" gave me the idea to get a Hogwarts Express train for Christmas, which thrills me. It's a Lionel set, and it looks just like Hogwarts.

I admit I'm something of a nerd, so I got this train and decided to build a Hogwarts castle out of cardboard, shoe boxes, paper-towel tubes and using glue, scissors, and staples – really simple stuff. It doesn't look exactly like the real one, but I'm going to paint it and put it right in the middle of my train set. Other people have also come up with this crazy idea.

### **Find Any How-to-Do-It Help on Line**

If you ever want to do a DIY project just go on line. Go to YouTube, where prepubescent boys, mostly teenagers, have built Hogwarts castles. It's me and a bunch of thirteen-year-olds who think this is a cool idea, and there are unintentionally funny videos. I have watched them show their castles. They knock pieces over and say, "Oh darn." It's really funny.

There are all kinds of how-to-do-it stuff on line. We spend a lot of time looking, don't we? I know a number of people who go right on line after they get home from work. You know, facebooking, tweeting, and so forth. There's DIY for everything imaginable.

"Prairie Woman Cooks." Ever go to that blog? "Prairie Woman" now has a TV show. What she does is to show you how to make her dishes through the use of pictures. For the novice cook, it's really helpful. The pictures don't always look like what she's doing, but she shows every step, so I really like it. I've used "Prairie Woman's" blog to make certain dishes.

"How to Play the Bagpipes." I have gone to that site. You notice I didn't bring my chanter in, but it didn't really help me to watch somebody making the chanter bleat like a cow with its udder under his arm. It's very hard, but I'm still working on it.

### **Pin It on "Pinterest" for Any Topic**

We see many things in this life. "Pinterest" is one I just turned on to this website. Does anyone know what it is? It's an on-line site where you enter your interests – "Pinterest," right? – and it shows you images of all the stuff you might find interesting. I'll volunteer Reverend Downing to put in some of his interests here. Enter cows, dairy, aliens, and up come the pictures. I mean any topic you can think of. For me, enter "Star Wars," American history, church. You name it, it comes up, and then you can pin it if you think the topic is really worthwhile to you. After that, "Pinterest" shows you where to go. It's pretty darn interesting.

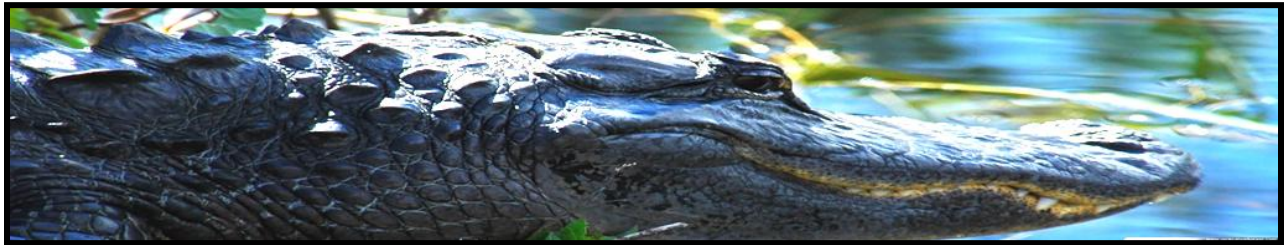
Art uses a lot of photography in his preaching, doesn't he? He showed the latest picture of the Andromeda galaxy, taken by the Hubble space telescope. The view is amazing, really up close. Seeing can be believing. In Art's lectures, the Hubble can help us wrap our minds around the beauty and magnitude of our universe, how many galaxies there are. I mean it's hard to understand, hard to imagine. Pictures help us, and those pictures of outer space are so beautiful.

There's such beauty and meaning in nature, in photography, in seeing something, in noticing something that we might otherwise have missed, in seeing something or someone anew.

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## **ABEL'S MENAGERIE OF WILD ANIMALS**

I do have a little story, before I move on, about seeing something that wasn't exactly beautiful but was straight out of nature. It was a strange episode from Abel's Menagerie of Wild Animals. (Remember the alligator?)



As I walked into the church Wednesday to lead our discussion in the Spiritual Book Group, I was shocked into breathtaking surprise. While going on my way to the ladies' room, something brushed my back and flew at top speed into the bathroom ahead of me.

## **WE ARE HOME TO A BAT!**



Probably not one but at least a bunch, considering the penchant of bats to hang upside down in large coveys.



The furry little mammal with the pointed ears and nasty clawed wings is now somewhere aloft in our building.



I thought I'd warn you in case you ever bump heads with this monstrosity. It invaded the peace and quiet of our church by swooping into the bathroom with me. I was seeing it but didn't quite believe it. Know what I mean?

Oh no, I thought, that can't be what I think it is! Suddenly the bat executed a sharp U-turn and aimed its echolocation device straight at me.

**I YELLED! "OH, YES! IT IS!"**



And I slammed the door shut, holding prisoner and attacker at bay together in the bathroom. But the thing re-aimed its echolocation apparatus and fired its fat body at the impossibly narrow slit under the door, where it flattened itself like a pancake and skittered between the doorsill and the door to get out of the bathroom and engorge itself on the blood of bigger prey.

**WE WERE BOTH TERRIFIED!**

Not wishing to stay alone in the confined space of the bathroom with my dreaded opponent, I then ran **SCREAMING(!)** back out into the hall.

Just at the very moment of crisis, Elizabeth and Bob walked into the church. Bob assumed his best deadpan look and wryly said, “You know it’s going to be an interesting day when you see the Associate Pastor running down the hall screaming!”

I lost my usually dignified demeanor and was **SCREAMING(!)** as loud as I could,

**“BAT! BAT!”**



Followed by incoherent words: I wasn’t . . . I do . . . Bats are . . . You know . . . I don’t . . . Like them . . . I mean . . . They eat . . . Bugs . . . I know that . . . Outside they’re fine . . . But inside . . . Anyway . . . I managed to elude . . . That dive-bombing . . . Creature from hell.

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## **Seeing Can Be Believing, but What You See Can Be Misleading**

You can misunderstand what you see. But you know, there's often a deeper kind of seeing that comes with understanding. We can make judgments based on what we see, although we can be wrong, of course.

Driving downtown at 3:00 p.m., sometimes I see people walking around town in pajamas. I know this thought is judgmental, but it bugs me. Three o'clock and there's somebody shuffling across the street in pajamas. Maybe there's good reason for that, but I'm not so sure.

I go back to the home, and the residents tell me what downtown used to be like. Do you remember? One of them said that we used to get dressed up, put on our hats and gloves, and away we'd go shopping and lunching. You dressed up when you went out. That's the way it was.

Not so much anymore. You're thinking about these things as you're driving. I try not to be judgmental, truly, because I know seeing does not always give you the whole picture. Not always.

There's a whole lot of seeing going on in our scriptural passage for this morning (John 1, 43-51). Philip gets picked by Jesus, who says, "Follow me," and he does. Then Philip finds his buddy Nathanael and says, "We have found him of whom Moses . . . and also the prophets wrote." That's interesting. Who is that exactly? Isaiah says there's one coming, both a servant of sorrows, a servant of suffering, and the One.

He is Jesus of Nazareth, Philip says. He is from Nazareth, and Philip tells them it's Jesus, and his "last name" indicates he is from Nazareth.

### **"Can Anything Good Come out of Nazareth?" "Come and See."**

That's how Nathanael reacts to Philip's remark about Jesus' origin before realizing whom Philip was describing. "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Right? It's like Nazareth must be the pits. The worst place possible. I won't interject what you might think. I won't say it's Scranton. I like Scranton. But I have been there. I've stayed there overnight. Anyway, what good can come from Scranton? And Philip's response to him? What does he say back to him? "Come and see." Come and see what, exactly?

When Jesus asked the crowds, Why did you go out and listen to John the Baptist, that crazy nut out there in the wilderness. "What did you expect to see? A reed shaken by the wind?" What do you think that means? It sounds poetic. Nothing? Were your expectations just that, same old, same old?



And then we're told that, when Jesus sees Nathanael coming to him, Jesus said of him, "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no guile!" Nothing fools Jesus. Nathanael is a straight-shooter. How does Jesus know this? Just Nathanael coming toward him? Apparently, Jesus is right on, for Nathanael says, "How do you know me?" And Jesus replies, "When you were under the fig tree, I saw you." Well, that sounds like seeing somebody in pajamas at three o'clock downtown. Is Nathanael hanging out? Was he just lollygagging? Idle?

### **Sitting under a Fig Tree Is Enlightening?**

Well guess what I found in looking up the term. Ancient rabbis state that sitting under a fig tree actually means that you're studying the Torah, the Bible. It is the mark of a scholar to sit under a fig tree. That's what Nathanael is doing. He is a student, a scholar, which reminds us of Buddha, who achieved enlightenment while sitting under the Bodhi Tree. You sit under the tree to gain enlightenment.

So Nathanael wasn't just hanging out. He was seeking enlightenment. He was seeking light. He was looking for something. He was studying. Even so, his intellect doesn't mean he is free of poor judgment, right? What good comes from Nazareth? Being bright or scholarly, we know, does not mean there is no bias, no racism.

This is the eve of Martin Luther King Day, and we are living through a time of restlessness, a new wave of civil rights and protests. Once again, we are reminded to try to see people for what they really are, not stopping to judge skin color, dress, intellect, where they went to school, what their background is, what they might make for a living.

### **True Seeing Requires More Depth Than Seeing on the Surface**

True seeing requires more depth, more knowledge, more than seeing on the surface. That kind of seeing each other is divine.

In the latest issue of "National Geographic," there's quite an article about soldiers who have been hurt, but not on the surface. Some have, but it's about what used to be called "shell shock" and what happens when improvised explosive devices (IED's) go off. For some men and women, they didn't lose arms and legs, but their brains were seriously damaged when shells like these went off and personnel were close enough that their brains jolted around inside their skulls, leaving them severely disabled in many ways.

At the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Maryland, there's a program in which our warriors, wounded by IED's, sit down and paint their own face masks. These tough young soldiers paint their masks to show what's really going on inside their heads. As one Army Sergeant opined, "Sometimes I wish I had lost a body part so people will see – they'll get it." Really see me and know that I am disabled. Another told of a friend who committed suicide.

Other people just didn't see him. They didn't see what he really needed. His injuries were on the inside.

And so these soldiers painted hideous masks of themselves. I highly recommend this article. It's a series of paintings, and a lot of these guys said, "Ah, you know, they're going to have me, big tough me, a Marine, an ex-Marine, sit down and give me a paintbrush? I'm not doing that." And yet they did it, and they got a lot out of it, showing what's going on underneath.

**What Kind of Seeing Is Divine?  
It Is a Gift of Grace.**

Nathanael's response to Jesus is like a confession, a recognition of the divine, because Jesus really knows who he is. And Jesus promises him something extraordinary. It's easy to skip over. "You shall see greater things than these." "You will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man" – the vision of Jacob way back in the Old Testament.

We will see great things. May we all see them, beautiful things, loving things, things of God in nature and in our family and friends, in ourselves, in each other, in this world.

*Amen.*