

Holy Advent: Holy Seeing (Advent 3)

Luke 2:15-20 & Exodus 33:12-23

December 17, 2023

First Presbyterian, Luling

We're wrapping up our Holy Advent series this week, as we anticipate Christmas Eve next Sunday. Holy keeping, holy pondering, and this week is holy seeing. I want to talk about two kinds of holy seeing this week, and that probably means we have two sermons instead of one, but I didn't want to get rid of either, and they are tied together, and I have every confidence that y'all can keep track of two sermons in one week.

The first kind of holy seeing is when humans get to see holy things. The shepherds unquestionably got to see holy things, the glory of the Lord, the heavenly host. And the baby, wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger, just as the angel had told them. Holy things.

Moses has seen holy things. Moses has seen the bush burning but not be consumed by the fire. Moses has seen God lead them out of Egypt, with a pillar of fire by night and a pillar of smoke by day. Moses has seen manna fall from heaven, and water spout out from a rock. Moses wants to see God's glory, God's face, Moses has wanted God's name from the beginning. Moses wants to see more holiness than a human can handle. God places Moses in the cleft of a rock, and God passes by. Moses only sees God's back, that amount of holiness, of God's glory, all that even the chosen one Moses can absorb.

Neither Moses nor the shepherds have any question that they have seen God's glory, that they have seen holiness. Holiness, God's glory, is unmistakable. We have some sense of this, especially in the majesty of nature. When we see the Grand Canyon, or the Milky Way, or the perfection of a red leaf in the fall, we get a sense of God's glory, of holiness, of what it might mean to see God's holiness. It leaves us with a sense of awe and wonder. Holy seeing, seeing the holy, is rare enough that we know it when we see it, we sense it in our souls.

The shepherds respond to holy seeing by obeying what the angels had told them to do. After that, they return to their regular lives, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Holy seeing, catching glimpses of the holy, is supposed to lead us to worship and praise God. And following the model of the shepherds, the worship and praising God is supposed to happen in our everyday lives, back among the sheep. Seeing holy things, holy seeing, doesn't mean that our problems go away, or that

our life circumstances change dramatically, or that we are somehow now holier than others, like holiness has somehow rubbed off on us. They were still shepherds, but now they were shepherds who had seen holiness, shepherds who understood holy seeing. They had seen holiness in God's overwhelming heavenly glory, and they had seen holiness in the baby in the manger. They'd seen holiness in expected and unexpected places, and in expected and mostly unexpected ways.

There's another side to holy seeing. And that is *being seen* by the holy. The shepherds are chosen to receive the good tidings of great joy, no less than Moses was chosen to notice the burning bush. They are seen by the Holy One. They are seen as humans, valuable, worthy of carrying those good tidings of great joy to all people. Shepherds weren't accustomed to being chosen for important roles. These shepherds were likely hired hands, moving around from place to place in the desert, so the flocks of the owner could find water and grazing. Consequently, they were probably dirty and smelly. They couldn't just drop everything and leave their flocks to go into a town for food or shelter or a bath. They weren't tops on the list of "most likely to be chosen to carry God's message."

Of course, neither was a baby born to a poor mother in a stable. God, as we know, has a habit of seeing unlikely people as valuable and worthy to receive a holy calling. God's way of seeing is holy seeing.

God's way of seeing can be our way of seeing too, holy seeing. Mary and Joseph see the shepherds with holy seeing. They receive the shepherds into the space of their newly created family. The smelly, low-status shepherds arrive to see the baby, with a fantastical tale of angels and heavenly host and good tidings of great joy to all people. Mary and Joseph hear the holiness in their words, and see them through eyes of holiness. They're still smelly shepherds, and they are also God's messengers, carriers of good news. Mary and Joseph know what it is to be unlikely chosen ones, and they see the shepherds with holy seeing, as human beings worthy of value and human beings entrusted with the greatest news of all.

We can be those who see with holy seeing, in both senses of holy seeing. We can catch glimpses of the great holiness of God's glory, and return with new vision, praising and glorifying God for all we have heard and seen. We can see holiness and make known what we have seen, so that others are amazed.

We can also see unlikely folks with holy seeing, as human beings, worthy of God's love and attention and notice. There's a new book out by New York Times columnist David Brooks. I was watching a speech by him about the book this week. The title itself speaks to holy seeing. It's "How to Know a Person: The Art of Seeing Others Deeply and Being Deeply Seen." He says seeing people, really

seeing people, takes some skills, but they are skills that can be practiced and learned. Listen to his list of skills: being openhearted, being a listener, revealing vulnerability appropriately, offering criticism in a caring way, disagreeing well, and sitting with suffering. Some of those come more easily to me than others, but none of them are out of reach for any of us. He challenged his listeners to be “illuminators” rather than “diminishers,” that is to be people who are curious about others, who make others feel special, and “lit up.” He wrote the book because he believes seeing people deeply is the most effective way to fight back against the dehumanization of others we see in our culture.<sup>1</sup>

We see other people, and when we see them as unique, individuals made in the image of God, regardless of their outward appearance or disagreeable opinions, that is holy seeing. It is holy seeing to ask questions and listen carefully, to be willing to be with others in whatever circumstance. That is holy. Mary and Joseph saw the shepherds with holy seeing, and we can too.

We experience holy seeing when we see God’s glory. We enact holy seeing when we see other people as God sees them. I invite you, therefore, in the name of Christ, to observe a holy Advent, to see a holy God, and to see your neighbor through the eyes of holiness.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YwENbKn3tql>