

What They Saw

3afterEpiphany

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Matt. 4:12-25

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

As you know, seeing is not believing. Sure you might look at the world and everything in it—from the purposes of cell parts to the grandeur of the mountains and see the hand of God. Yet these things cannot tell you which god created them. Looking to the world and the things created in it are one way to know of God's existence, but they are not enough.

In fact, you yourselves are beings created by God, but your bodies, even down to the ability of your conscience to warn you when you're about to do something wrong—provided it hasn't been tainted misled by sin—cannot tell you which god desires for you not to do this act or that act. Your conscience is also a means of natural knowledge of God's existence; but it also is not enough.

The only true source of revelation as to who God is is His Word, the Scriptures. Yet this knowledge does not come from seeing. At one point, Jesus would ask the crowds, “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see?...A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet (Matthew 11:7b-9).”

Jesus would speak these words later in the Gospel of Matthew about John the Baptist, the very man arrested at the beginning of our text. He reminds the ones who believe in Him that they did not go out to see great things, but to hear that the Messiah had come from John the Baptist, who was the last prophet.

Jesus, then, was that very Messiah John was proclaiming. Yet the same question could be asked the crowds following Him in our text this morning, as well as each of us, me and you: What did you come to see? Great signs in your own life? What then did you come to see? Or did you rather come to hear about Jesus, that great Messiah of God, who had come to take away your sins?

Turn with me, then, to our text and we'll see how this account from Matthew has, if you'll pardon the phrase, more than meets the eye.

Verse 1

“Now when he heard that John (again, John the Baptist) had been arrested, (Jesus) withdrew into Galilee. And leaving Nazareth he went and lived in...Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: ‘The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali...the people living in darkness have seen a great light, and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on them a light has dawned.’”

Jesus went to live in the lands of Zebulun and Naphtali, fulfilling the prophecy from Isaiah you heard this morning in our Old Testament text. The people there were able to see Him, that “great light.” But the text does not say that all the ones living there came to believe in Him.

Should that really be a surprise to hear? Would not the Pharisees, scribes, and Sadducees also get their chance to see Jesus in action—not only preaching but also healing and raising the dead? And did they all come to faith based on what they saw? A few days ago, the brother pastors and I who study Greek on Thursday mornings were talking about this very thing. One of them asked, “How many times did Jesus walk right by them (that is, these great teachers of the time) and they missed it (that is, that Jesus was the Christ, the promised Messiah of God)?”

So what about you: do you expect God to do great visible signs in your life? Do you expect Him to suddenly drop a new job or new car in your lap? And even if He did, would that cause you to believe? On top of that, God has done great signs in your life, even if you have not always noticed. Every baptism, every confirmation vow to continue in the Church until death that has been kept, every adult brought to faith through adult instruction, and yes, every time you have partaken of the Sacrament of Holy Communion from this very altar—they have all been great works done by God in your very presence. Do you have the faith to believe that?

If all you rely on is what you can see, then you may not. But if you trust God's Word, then you do. As you'll see as we continue the text, it was not seeing the healings which created faith, but the preaching Jesus did which accompanied those signs which created faith. The same is true for you; you have received faith and have been strengthened in your faith as you hear the preaching of God's Word week by week. We continue our text.

Verse 2

“From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.’ While walking by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon (who is called Peter) and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And he said to them, ‘Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.’ Immediately they left their nets and followed him.” In the same way, Jesus also called James and John. And again, the text says that “Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.”

These verses make a stark contrast with those which follow. Here Jesus chose His disciples, and they immediately followed Him. According to commentary notes in the Lutheran Study Bible, this was different than the other rabbis of the time who had students who chose to follow them, rather than picking them out as Jesus did. Even in the words at the end of the text where it says that “great crowds followed him,” the actions of that great crowd were based on what they had seen rather than being called. Many of these may have left when trouble would come along.

You, brothers and sisters in Christ, have been called. You have not come to faith based on great signs but through the Word of God taught to you by Pastor Speers and all of the faithful pastors you have had. In the LCMS, you and I know that we could not have come to Christ Jesus or God of our own. We are poor miserable sinners. But God chose to come to us.

He came to us in His Son, Jesus Christ, the babe in the manger whose birth we just celebrated and the man who would preach and teach following His baptism by John. He came to live among us then, and He died among us on the cross, facing the punishment you and I rightly deserve. He faced hell itself, separation from God the Father, for you and for me. And then He died, proclaiming “It is finished.” He descended into hell and the Third Day He rose again. Today, you and I receive the benefits of His death and resurrection. He has come to us, to you and to me, through His Word and through the waters of Holy Baptism. And He has given you and me His forgiveness in those waters of baptism; and in the absolution pronounced at the beginning of service, and the Sacrament of the Altar, where you and I eat His very body and very blood for the forgiveness of sins. It is there that we taste and receive His body and blood offered two thousand years ago so that you and I receive His forgiveness today, in our own lifetimes through these means.

Verse 3

At the end of our text, we find that once He had called His first disciples, Jesus “went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people. So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought him all the sick,

those afflicted with various diseases and pains, those oppressed by demons, epileptics, and paralytics, and he healed them. And great crowds followed him from Galilee and the Decapolis, and from Jerusalem and Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.”

Again, those great crowds saw the works Jesus did, but did not necessarily believe. You have received the call to faith through the hearing of His Word and the Gospel of your Savior Jesus Christ. You receive the forgiveness of sins earned by Jesus’ death and resurrection in His means of grace, and you will receive the ultimate healing at His return.

It is true that Jesus healed many when He came the first time, and that He Himself rose bodily from the dead. These are glimpses of the restoration He will bring when He returns. For you who have been called into faith, Jesus’ return will mean receiving your body back if you have died before that happens. It will mean having your bodies cleansed of sin. And it means you will get to see your Savior with your own eyes, just like Job had prophesied: “And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another.”

Seeing is not believing; yet as we carried along in the faith by God’s Spirit, when Jesus returns, our faith will become sight. We will see the resurrections of every believer in their bodies; their bodies cleansed along with our own; and we will enter into the new heaven and new earth together with them, and most importantly, with our Lord Jesus, the Lamb of God, who has taken away your sin, and the sin of the world. In Jesus’ Name. Amen.