

When God Sees Us, What Does God See?

Jeremiah 17:5-10

Luke 6:12-26

“Then he looked up at his disciples and said, ‘Blessed are you....’”

For the past few weeks, we have been trying on the lenses given us in Luke’s Gospel so that, more and more, like Luke’s characters, we too may see and follow every manifestation of God’s light shining in our ordinary lives. But in the sixth chapter of Luke, it seems to me that the seeing we are meant to notice is not ours but God’s.

When day came, Luke writes, Jesus called those who had seen God’s light in Jesus and had begun to follow him, namely his disciples, to join him on the mountain where he had been praying all night. There he chose twelve among them to be apostles. Together they walked down the mountain and into a great crowd of *more* disciples as well as a curious multitude that must have included Gentiles from Tyre and Sidon. All of them were waiting to hear him and be healed. He healed all of them. Then Jesus “looked up at this disciples and said, ‘Blessed are you....’” When God sees us, when Jesus looked up, what did he see?

You could make a case that God had not been looking up but *looking down* on God’s creatures since God first began to create. On the sixth day of creating, “God *saw* everything he had made, and indeed, it was very good.” A few chapters later, east of Eden, “The Lord *saw* that the wickedness of humankind was great on the earth.” So God blotted out every living thing God had made. A few chapters after that, God “came down to *see* the city and tower, which mortals had built,” and confused their language. You can also make the case that, throughout the rest of Genesis, God is looking down, is watching from a distance as Abraham and Sarah make their way to the land God had promised, watching as the sons of Jacob are born and become the twelve tribes of Israel, watching as Joseph is taken down to Egypt, watching as God’s chosen ones become slaves in Egypt.

In Exodus God continues to look down on God’s people. God says to Moses, “I have surely *seen* the affliction (I have observed the misery) of my people who are in Egypt...and I have come down to deliver them....” In the midst of the wilderness, God summons Moses to the top of a mountain “where the Lord [spoke] to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend.” There God says, “I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them....” Moses instead gets in God’s face so that through Moses’ face God sees the people with compassion. Now from out of the smoke and fire, God sends Moses down the mountain with stone tablets. The law will be as close as God’s people will get to God-with-them until Messiah comes. I will spare you the kings and the prophets and the exile. Suffice it to say, from the beginning of Old Testament to the end, God *looks down* and what God sees, from a distance, is the people’s goodness, wickedness, arrogance, rivalry, misery, idolatry and longing. The time had come for a closer look!

Staying in Old Testament cosmology, Jesus quits heaven up there for earth down here. But because Matthew sees Jesus through the lens of the Exodus, he casts Jesus as Moses and places the Messiah on a mountain for his inaugural sermon. The beatitudes that punctuated our confession of sin and the beatitudes the choir soon will sing are Matthew’s rather than Luke’s. The destruction of the temple a few decades before Matthew writes his Gospel has landed God’s people in a different sort of wilderness. They are spiritually lost and without God in the world. Therefore, from the mountain, Matthew’s Jesus sees and blesses the poor in spirit, those who mourn, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness as well as the meek, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers and the falsely accused. Jesus sees them as better than they are—not only from the physical height of the mountain but also from the perspective of eternity entering time.

So God in Christ sees God’s people as they will be when God’s kingdom comes. There is something about Matthew’s so-called spiritualized beatitudes that brings to mind a song made popular by Bette Midler but best sung, in my opinion, by Nanci Griffith called “From a Distance.” The words are, in part,

From a distance we all have enough/And no one is in need/And there are no guns, no bombs and no disease/No hungry mouths to feed....God is watching us/God is watching us/God is watching us from a distance

Translating Matthew's beatitudes into this crowd, when Jesus sees the lost look on your face because you are afraid of what the future will bring, sees your heart breaking beneath your Sunday best, sees the scars from cutting to ease the pain, sees the dark circles under your eyes because you have not slept for weeks, God sees you whole, sees you as you will be in God's love eternally, sees you through the mediating eyes of Jesus.

But it was Luke who quietly blew my mind this week as he placed Jesus on the plain, on a level place, on the same ground where people really live and really die. Then, Luke says, one on their level, Jesus looked up at his disciples. I take that to mean that this teacher sat down to teach as was the custom. But I also take that to mean the great Almighty God humbled himself in the midst of real people whose suffering was palpable. "Blessed are you," he said, a blessing made flesh in his being with them, his assuming their poverty, their hunger, their tears, their shame as his own. "When a [person] is blessed," Old Testament scholar Johannes Pederson says, "it may also be [said] that God is with [that person]." He saw them from heaven at a distance or from the mountaintop in the third person but in the second person face to face. He saw the reality of human beings who did not have the basic means to live. He came close enough to see the effect of empty stomachs on their faces and the faces of their children. He looked up at them as their tears fell down on his own human face. He could read in their wrinkled brows the way the world had treated them, hated them, excluded them, and shamed them. Therefore he said, looking them in the eye, "Blessed are you (second person plural), blessed are you who are poor, blessed are you who are hungry *now*, blessed are you who weep *now*, blessed are you when people hate you, exclude you, revile you, and defame you." The distance in time and space ended in him.

But clearly this is not all that Jesus sees. I imagine as his presence blesses each one in the crowd whom society looked down upon in God's name, believing the wretched condition of the poor to be a sign that the God who sees from a distance has judged them, I imagine Jesus also sees eyebrows raised, backs arched, jaws set against him. I imagine he sees some in the crowd stepping back, keeping *their* distance, beginning to judge him for the company he will keep throughout the rest of Luke's Gospel. I imagine he saw some who lived so as to be seen by the proud and the powerful and the prosperous. Therefore he says, "Woe to you who are rich...Woe to you who are full now...Woe to you who are laughing now." My friend, the late David Bartlett calls the "woes" that Luke alone records "God's preferential annoyance at the rich—at us." Or you could say Jesus was simply singing Mary's song. Except that now, with a word, he literally scatters the proud in the imaginations of their hearts, brings down the powerful and lifts up the lowly, fills the hungry with good things and sends the rich empty away. His words are performative: they make true what they say.

But remember: we are in Luke's Gospel, the Gospel written with the beginnings of the church in mind. For Luke, the church's place was on the plain where people really lived and really died. The church's mission was with those who were invisible in an economy created to make the rich richer and the poor poorer. The church existed to bless, which is to say, to assume the life of the poor, the hungry, the weeping, the hated as its own. As soon as the Spirit was given to the disciples at Pentecost, Luke writes that "All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need."

When God sees the church, what does God see? My friend Ken Kovacs posted a news story from Baltimore about a Presbyterian church led by David, Norse Thomas, who used to be at Broad Street Ministry. Two signs were vandalized on the church lawn. One that said, "We love our LBGQT family" had been vandalized to say "We hate our LBGQT perverts" and another that said "We love our Muslim and Immigrant Neighbors" had been vandalized to say "We hate our Muslim and Immigrant Neighbors." Christians seeing from a distance in God's name? A few hundred years after Luke wrote the Book of Acts, the church would see itself as the representative of the God who watches from a distance, the God who sees from above, the God who *looks down* to judge the poor, the hungry, the weeping and the hated while the church spiritually blesses the status quo. Matthew and Luke and Jesus would be appalled. When God see us, when God sees The Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill, what does God see? The good news is this: the God who sees us through the eyes of love made flesh in Jesus Christ is not finished with a one of us, and for that reason alone he is looking up at us even now, seeing us just as we are, and saying, "Blessed are you...." Thanks be to God.