

“Seeing with the Eyes of a Prophet”
A homily by Ethan Jewett for the people of St. Nicholas
16 December 2007 + The Third Sunday of Advent
Isaiah 35:1-10 + Psalm 146:4-9 + James 5:7-10 + Matthew 11:2-11

The holiday season can be bit of a vision test. I’m not talking about the blinding glint of gold and silver and blinking lights, although that can be hard on the eyes. Instead, as I reflected on this week’s readings, I realized how much the Advent lessons focus on our ability to see beyond this glittering spectacle. In fact, today’s Gospel lesson uses words about sight 8 times. Remarkable! Clearly, then, sight is integral to the incarnation of God in the person of Jesus. But how and why? As I processed these questions, I discovered that seeing is, indeed, believing. The Scriptures, though, are not talking about a vision test in the classic sense. What is at stake here is not humankind’s physical ability to see, but its ability to cultivate and apply prophetic vision. As we shall see, the test of one’s vision through which the Incarnation is experienced as real and eternal is practiced in the crucible of Christian living and discipleship.

The Bible is replete with imagery of eyes, blindness, visions, perception, discernment, and mistaken identity. It all relates to how people see or don’t see. As a sensory organ, the eyes respond to stimuli in the here and now, and that’s largely what our conscious minds attend to. There is an immediacy to sight that keeps us grounded in the present and seldom allows us to develop and refine our visual acuity. This, in turn, prevents us from delving beneath the surface of our initial perceptions to see what else might be there. Our experience shapes our vision, because repetition, habit, and predictability foster expectations of what we will see in particular situations, with particular people, and in particular places. We become conditioned to see in a particular way. When our expectations of what

we should see in a certain context are satisfied, our way of seeing is reinforced as accurate and true.

Today's lessons offer a very different vision of sight that contradicts our normal modes of seeing in a number of ways. **First of all, unlike our common eyesight, prophetic vision frustrates expectations.** The prophet is always the person with the dissenting voice, the one who challenges the conventional view of things and won't satisfy others' expectations for truth or reality. We like events to unfold the way we expect them to, and when they don't, it's unsettling. For some, the alternate reality is so threatening that they may respond with hostility or violence. Prophets are, consequently, identified by other names, such as troublemaker, rabble-rouser, dissident, anarchist and nut-job. In today's Gospel reading from Matthew, Jesus chides the disciples of John the Baptist for failing their test of vision. John is evidently not the prophet they expected to find. Instead of being clothed in soft robes, their prophet is covered in a crude camelskin garment, subsisting on a diet of locusts and wild honey. But does this ragged attire make John any less of a prophet? Is his message any less radical and trailblazing? There must be something fundamentally subversive about the message of repentance and amendment of life coming from this shabby wild man, rather than from a respectable, well-dressed rabbi. The people of Jesus' time certainly thought so. People of our time often react similarly to such prophets.

Second, prophetic vision peers deep beneath the surface, where it catches a glimpse of what God sees. Once the prophet uncovers the being hidden underneath, the familiar becomes unknown and foreign. Whether a façade or stereotype, a prejudice or persona, the outer layer of "truth" loses its aura of unimpeachability. Both John the Baptist and Jesus strip away the superficial to uncover the substantive, and in so doing, challenge the society around them to reexamine their notion of truth, to question the way they see. Jesus says

significantly “among those born of women, no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist.” The prophet, like God, does not see merely the camelskin garment, race, gender, age, sexual orientation, or disability. She also sees the nuances of human nobility and vice tucked away in the recesses of our being. She sees a society in all its beauty and all its ugliness. The complex dynamics of relationships that shape and drive the power structures that liberate some and enslave others are not hidden from her view. She cuts through the trappings that rationalize immoral behavior and make it palatable. She sheds light on all the dark, gritty places that we try to cover up. Prophetic vision requires us to see what’s hidden, and to see the familiar in unaccustomed ways.

Third, prophetic vision plumbs the hidden potential of humanity by being grounded in the future, rather than the present. It sees things as they could and should be. Both Isaiah and Jesus envision a glorious reality that has yet to be born. In the case of Isaiah, the prophet describes in dramatic language the deliverance of the Jewish nation from the Babylonian Captivity and their repatriation to the Holy Land. Isaiah’s portrait of this future golden age is not only of physical prosperity, but of a deeper moral regeneration of the Jewish nation. Jesus, too, articulates a vision that goes beyond the simple physical realm. In his vision, “the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.” These events are both physical signs of the coming of the Kingdom of God, as well as metaphors for the moral and spiritual renewal of marginalized people. In both cases, however, the message is universal. The future is not yet written, and where the future is not yet written, there is hope for the oppressed.

Fourth, prophetic vision is exercised in pursuit of a moral agenda. Isaiah and Jesus demonstrate in their own ways that prophetic vision always has a moral valence. It focuses on forging a world of love and justice, peace and

prosperity, from a world of sin, vice, and violence. I think of people such as Nelson Mandela, Rosa Parks, Mahatma Gandhi, and Harvey Milk who defied the established authority of their societies to inaugurate a better world, where the false truths of apartheid, separate-but-equal, imperialism, and homophobia would be discredited and dismantled. Their visions have not been entirely fulfilled, but it is often the fate of prophets to expire without seeing their grandiose visions realized. It is, at least, a beginning.

Finally, prophetic vision is patient. We cannot expect to see the full complexity of the ever-expanding universe in an instant. In the on-demand, instant-gratification society in which we live, we view immediate results as an entitlement. The author of the letter of James quite clearly cautions us about this. “Be patient, therefore, beloved,” he tells us, “until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains.” A world governed by love and justice, with all of Creation in right, mutual relation, must be cultivated patiently through unstinting commitment and work.

In this sense, Advent is a season of patient waiting for this work to begin. We anticipate Jesus’ coming with excitement, but his arrival serves as a call to action, and this action, too, must be undertaken and sustained with patience. The Kingdom of God Jesus’ life will challenge us to create cannot be formed in the blink of an eye, but through generations of combined labor. The Kingdom will be established by the shared vision of social workers and teachers, pastors and politicians, child advocates and LGBT activists, and through the prophetic priesthood of all believers, like you.

But this means that we will need to learn to see the coming of Jesus differently, too. We will need to make that prophetic leap from seeing Jesus as the baby who will become a Lord and King over us to engaging with him as teacher,

spiritual guide, and self-emptying brother. Through baptism, we share with Jesus in God's anointed, sacred priesthood. In emptying ourselves, as Jesus, our great high priest, emptied himself, we make space for God and others, and become the Incarnation of that life-giving force revealed in the helpless baby lying in the manger. Such a psychological leap requires faith and trust, but most of all, it requires prophetic vision. May all of us pass this test of vision with flying colors, discover our prophetic eye and voice, and become the Incarnation of God for the least of Her children. *Amen.*