

Do You Believe Because You See? John 1:43-51
Timothy L. Carson January 14, 2018

“Do you see what I see? A star, a star ...” That could be the song of the Magi as they followed what was most likely a great comet the over 500 miles from Babylon to Jerusalem and then to Bethlehem. They were celestial gazers, scanning the skies for signs of significance. And this was a big one, the rising signifying the birth of the Jewish Messiah.

That’s where we left them last week, the caravan pulling into Bethlehem, the upward tail of the comet marking the spot where it set in the south; the Magi offering precious gifts to what was now a young toddler; the Magi returning home by a different way to avoid malicious King Herod; the paranoid King ordering a genocide of all young boys to kill the child King of the Jews; the Holy Family warned in a dream to escape to Egypt until trouble passes.

As regards the Magi this is a story of the great quest, of noticing the signs, picking up and going, trusting with nothing more than a comet to follow.

Did it ever occur to you that lots and lots of people saw the same phenomena but didn’t assign any special meaning to it or didn’t do anything about it? The Magi already had a disposition to look and then do. We would say that their worldview or faith predisposed them to noticing. They were always on the lookout. They didn’t take anything for granted.

It’s just like us today. Two people can behold the same object or same event, hear the same words, and one is moved and the other is not. What is different is the internal experience of each of those persons. In great part, the life of faith provides us with a set of spiritual eyeglasses, an inclination to be on the lookout for the moving of the Spirit. The parables of Jesus tell us to be watchful for you never know what is coming next.

“Do you see what I see?” might be the theme song of the Magi and every person who is watching for the signs around us. And of course, looking in unlikely places, in the margins where God specializes.

It’s an interesting interplay, the connection between our inner reality of faith and the outward world of sense. People of faith need to notice what’s happening around them but faith is often required to see that in the first place. Every sign in the world may appear before you but unless you are ready and able to see them they simply pass by unnoticed. Imagine everything we’ve missed!

Now I admit, the seeing of signs everywhere can be overdone. My stepmother, rest her soul, fell into that camp. She could find an angel or the face of Jesus in every burnt piece of toast. “Look at this!” she would say. “What do you see?” I’d look and say, “A burnt piece of toast.” She would answer, “Oh no, no, no, that’s the face of Jesus and that means there is an epiphany, a revelation meant for us right now.” She was that way for as long as I knew her.

That said, I really do believe it is important to keep our spiritual antenna tuned in on what is transpiring around us. For me it is the alignment of many events, their timing and the way one aspect of our life is a preparation for something else later. I can see how a long arc of events connects to create a star-rising moment. For me that arc has been as long as 20-25 years in some cases and as short as 3-5 years in others. Those arcs of experience, events and people are showing up right now in my life. But I have to be awake to how they are connecting in a star-rising moment in the present.

Since more is happening that we don’t see than we do, I think it’s safe to say that most appearances in our present have been prepared for from our birth or before our birth. They come together in very mysterious ways beyond our control. And yet our part in the drama – especially noticing and responding – is so very important.

In fact, this morning’s story from John’s Gospel plays with exactly that. It transitions the song from “Do you see what I see?” into “Do you know what I know?”

The first part of this call story from the Gospel of John sounds familiar. Jesus simply gives a command to Phillip: “Follow me.”

Imagine that Jesus is himself the rising comet and the disciples are the Magi. Follow me, follow the star, he is saying. And Phillip, like those watchful and responsive Magi, did just that; he got up, left what he was doing, and followed.

But Phillip wasn't the only one in the story; there's more. When Phillip shared his star sighting with Nathanael we get a different response altogether. It's not a Magi follow-the-star response but more the response of skepticism. We could call it the anti-Magi response.

Phillip tells Nathanael that we've found the one we've been waiting for. Nathanael is curious. But when Phillip tells the rest of the story, that Jesus is from Nazareth, everything changes.

It doesn't mean much to us, but to a Galilean Jew saying Jesus is from Nazareth is a deal killer. That's like saying he's from nowhere important.

Finally Nathanael can't help himself and he betrays his true colors: “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” he asks rhetorically. What a putdown! How could something that good come from a no count place like Nazareth?

So here we have the classic struggle between seeing and believing and seeing and not believing. Without the right inner disposition Nathanael can't imagine anything good coming from an outhouse like Nazareth.

Rather than try to argue his friend into believing, which by the way never works, he simply invites him to see for himself. “Come and see,” he says. And Nathanael does, trusting his friend first.

In a way, that's the very best way to introduce our friends to the Christian way, to simply invite them to come and see for themselves. No matter their skepticism we offer an open hearted invitation. Instead of argument we ask them to trust us. And a one-on-one testimony of a friend is always the strongest witness.

Think of the position of people of faith in our society right now. Those who actually practice their faith in the midst of a community and a living religious tradition are fast becoming a minority. Look at all the reasons a person wouldn't want to ever try or return to the church, to a religious community. They might really, really like Jesus and everything he represents. They might feel deeply connected to the Spirit, the source of life. But we are surrounded by piles of false, disingenuous, scandalous, judgmental, power-driven, tradition-shackled religion. "Could anything good ever come out of that?" we might ask.

What else can you do when you care about your Nathanael (and who is that for you) but to say, "Come and see." In spite of skepticism, evidence to the contrary, and the gravity that pulls people in every other direction, we offer a simple invitation.

With all the cold weather we put out more bird seed for the birds. When no seed is out the birds vacate the premises and go look elsewhere. But after we pour the seed mix into the feeder they all start to assemble, one by one, until whole flocks arrive.

At first it is like a reconnaissance bird scouts out the area and upon finding the treasure trove sends out some signal, an alert, rings the dinner bell. And here they come. First the Blue Jays, then the Cardinals, and finally all the others feeding on the ground where the seed has been kicked overboard. It doesn't take a whole lot of persuading. "Come and see for yourselves, fellow birds."

And I think that's how it is with the two-legged creatures, too. If hunger is there it doesn't take much of an invitation to draw a crowd. If hunger is there, that is, and seed really is available.

If spiritual hunger is present then an invitation to find what the heart desires is welcomed. "Come and see" is quite enough.

By the way, Nathanael did go to see for himself.

What he found was a man who knew him before he got there and called him by name when he did. For Nathanael *that* was the sign, his star rising. Finding out you've been known all along is most certainly a sign and the kind of thing that causes you to follow.

That Jesus offered a caution to Nathanael's in regard to his sign-based faith might surprise us. After all, haven't we been called to rise up and follow?

The Gospel of John is a strange bird. On the one hand it is full of all manner of signs that point to Christ. On the other hand it is full of cautions about your faith being too reliant on signs. This generation is always scrambling about for some miracle or sign, Jesus says. Blessed are you if you believe without a sign, Jesus says. You ask for a sign but all you will get is the sign of Jonah, which is three days in the tomb.

So John recognizes that the world is full of signs that lead to God if you will but look with spiritual eyes. But at the same time the Jesus of this Gospel wants to make double sure that you know which comes first, the chicken or the egg. What comes first is faith of the heart that allows you to see anything that matters. Don't be too dependent on externals; everything you need is already on board.

I love the classic Jewish prayer from the Passover liturgy, the *Dayenu*. It comes from the medieval *Haggadah* and is over one thousand years old.

The *Dayenu* roughly means, "It would have been enough."

And the prayer goes this way:

If God had brought us out
from Egypt,

and had not carried out judgments
against them

— Dayenu, it would have sufficed!

If He had carried out judgments against
them,

and not against their idols

— Dayenu, it would have sufficed!

If He had destroyed their idols,
and had not smitten their first-born

— Dayenu, it would have sufficed!

If He had smitten their first-born,
and had not given us their wealth

— Dayenu, it would have sufficed!

If He had given us their wealth,
and had not split the sea for us

— Dayenu, it would have sufficed!

If He had split the sea for us,
and had not taken us through it on dry
land

— Dayenu, it would have sufficed!

If He had taken us through the sea on dry land,

and had not drowned our oppressors in it
— Dayenu, it would have sufficed!

If He had drowned our oppressors in it,
and had not supplied our needs in the desert for forty years

— Dayenu, it would have sufficed!

If He had supplied our needs in the desert for forty years,

and had not fed us the manna

— Dayenu, it would have sufficed!

If He had fed us the manna,

and had not given us the Shabbat

— Dayenu, it would have sufficed!

If He had given us the Shabbat,
and had not brought us before Mount Sinai

— Dayenu, it would have sufficed!

If He had brought us before Mount Sinai,
and had not given us the Torah

— Dayenu, it would have sufficed!

If He had given us the Torah,
and had not brought us into the land of Israel

— Dayenu, it would have sufficed!

If He had brought us into the land of Israel,

and not built for us the Holy Temple

— Dayenu, it would have sufficed!

If we have not received the sign, it will be sufficient.

So the end of the story is that we are thankful when the stars align, we perceive a sign and follow it on the way to God. We are thankful when the signs arise out of unlikely places like Nazareth. We are thankful that all we have to do is invite others to “come and see” for themselves and then trust that need of the heart will connect with source of life, that the birds will find the seed.

And we also know that the first term, the faith of the heart, allows us to see in the first place. We hear the caution of Jesus to not be too overly reliant on external signs, because indeed, even if we did not see a star rising, *Dayenu*, it would be enough, it would be sufficient.

The star in its rising and the faith to follow it are blessings. But even more blessed are those who do not see but yet believe, those who walk by faith and not by sight.

Dayenu, it is sufficient.