

“Leaving Our Nets, Following the Light”  
Isaiah 9: 1-4, 1 Cor 1: 10-18, Matthew 4: 12-23

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*There will be no gloom for those who were in anguish.* What a wonderful, thrilling phrase! In these words, shared by the eighth century (B.C.E.) prophet and poet we know as Isaiah, we encapsulated find the whole direction of all of scripture. These words, shared for the benefit of the inhabitants of the ancient Northern Kingdom of Israel living under Assyrian oppression, must have been a life-line to the people. We look back at them now, and continue to be nourished by them. We look back at them now, and we find in them a whole direction for the universe, a cosmic movement larger than the historical moment they originally addressed: we see in them hope for humanity....we see in them Jesus the Christ.

Centuries after those words were written, some fishermen named Peter, Andrew, James, and John encountered this Jesus. Our psalm for today beckons us to “behold the beauty of the Lord,” and they certainly beheld something very beautiful in him, because Matthew reported that they dropped everything and followed him. They looked at Jesus, and they saw the promised hope of Israel. They looked at Jesus, and they saw the guy that their people had been waiting for many, many generations. They looked at Jesus, and they saw in him hope for humanity.....they saw in him the Christ.

Before Matthew wrote his account of Jesus’ life, Paul wrote his letters to several early Christian communities. In the fragment of the letter we call First Corinthians that we heard today, we know that St. Paul, too, beheld the beauty of Jesus, and changed the course of his life. And he had been really far gone! Before his Damascus road conversion experience, in the days when he went by the name of Saul, he had actually persecuted the followers of Jesus; he had harmed and perhaps even killed people. But somehow, the beauty he beheld in Christ in that blinding moment of conversion was so compelling that he emerged completely transformed. Paul looked at the post-Resurrection Jesus, in a manner of speaking, and he saw a reason to stop harming his fellow human beings. Paul looked at Jesus, and saw an overwhelming mandate for unity and mutual support in communities of faith. Paul looked at Jesus, and he, too, saw the Christ.

These texts present us with an important question. Have our own eyes beheld the beauty of the Lord? Most likely, many of us would say “yes” to this, or we wouldn’t be here in church. To behold the beauty of the Lord is to be invited to put down our nets and follow him. More questions follow here: Have we done this? And how would we know whether we have, or have not, truly followed Jesus?

We are all familiar with the custom of the writing of the one-size-fits-all Christmas letter; I myself am guilty of having written them many times. Of such letters, writer and radio personality Garrison Keillor has this to say: *I love reading Christmas newsletters in which the writer bursts the bonds of modesty and comes forth with one gilt-edged paragraph after another: ‘Tara was top scorer on the Lady Cougars soccer team and won the lead role in the college production of Antigone, which by the way they are performing in the original Greek. Her essay on chaos theory as an investment strategy will be in the next issue of Fortune magazine, the same week she’ll appear as a model in Vogue. How she does what she does and still makes Phi Beta Kappa is a wonderment to us all. And yes, she is still volunteering at the homeless shelter.’* Keillor goes on to say about these letters: *I get a couple dozen Christmas letters a year, and I sit and read them in my old bathrobe as I chow down on Hostess Twinkies. Everyone in the letters is busy as beavers, piling up honors hand over fist, volunteering up a storm, traveling to Beijing, Abu Dhabi and Antarctica; nobody is in treatment or depressed of flunking out of school.*

Among letters such as these that I receive each year, one stood out: last year and this year one family's letter began with the same sentence, "Dear Friends, We hope you are all well, and we trust that you know how much we miss you. We'd love to see more of you, but our lives are so busy we hardly have time to meet the basic requirements of daily life." What followed was one of those long litanies of success upon success, which the reader could only picture this dazzling family accomplishing while barely having time to eat, sleep, talk to one another, or brush their teeth. We do seem these days to measure the worth of a person by how successful and how busy they are in worldly terms, and we talk about our own busy-ness as if it is a badge of honor of some sort. One year, when my own family was having a really difficult time, I wrote one of those letters that emphasized the positive, but, for comic relief for Bob and me, I wrote what I called "the real Christmas letter." I didn't send it. I wasn't brave enough. But it talked about the real stuff that was going on in our lives: our teenage son's struggles, Bob's chemotherapy side effects, our old house falling apart. Reading it together, we laughed until we cried. And then we threw it out. Somehow, we didn't dare to be measured by what was really going on, but went with a more cheerful image, one that seemed more protective to hide behind.

Looking back on this Christmas custom from the light of the Epiphany season, it seems an irony that in the very season we are celebrating the birth of Christ, the hope of humanity that all our scripture for today speaks of, we cannot tell each other the truth about our lives. We submerge our hearts too much and embark on our busy, hectic schedules; our pursuit of success in the terms of the world; our clinging to cliques; our love of criticizing one another instead of working on ourselves: these are the nets we refuse to let go of, the "same-old, same-old" habits that keep us from fully following Christ.

When any of us finally do release the bonds of mental, physical, or spiritual habits that separate us from Christ, how do we know? We try to follow, but when we hear Isaiah's voice and think of his ministry, when we read Paul's letters, and perhaps especially when we read the narrative of the instantaneous way that Peter, Andrew, James and John went with Jesus, we might feel that we will never be adequate as followers. Here, let us remember two things: that even the earliest disciples of Jesus struggled, stumbled, and often didn't get it, even when Jesus was right in front of them; AND that the way we will individually be called by God to follow will not look the same for each person. Paul explored this idea when he wrote elsewhere in First Corinthians that there are many gifts among Christ's followers, and that each will express their spiritual gifts uniquely, and for the good of the whole. We all have different paths. The greatest clues our texts give us today about whether the beauty of Christ has seeped into our bones and is bearing fruit is in measuring the effect of our presence in our homes, our church family, our community, and the world.

How can we tell if we are allowing Christ to work through us? If our texts are any clue, certainly not by measuring ourselves by worldly standards; we might send out glowing Christmas letters to all in our acquaintance, but to Jesus, we send our real, struggling, imperfect selves. Isaiah might ask us: in your wake, is there joy? Are you challenging oppression wherever you see it? Are you shining light on injustice that you come across, whether small or large? Paul would most definitely want to know if we were sowing division in our church family, challenging each of us not to belong to one faction or another in the church, but to the whole body of Christ, humble before the challenge of the cross of Jesus. And Matthew might ask us which aspects of our routines are keeping us away from an encounter with God. What do we need to let go of, and to take on, to follow Christ?

Behold the beauty of the Lord....the transformative beauty of the Lord....the beauty that would so astonish us that once we fully apprehend it, we could not help but be instruments of joy, of peace and justice, of unity, of spreading the good news, and of healing. We might even look foolish to the world, a sure sign that we are perhaps doing something right. Amen.