

“Seeing Jesus”

May 21, 2023

Psalm 27

Acts 1:6-14

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For those of you who may not know me, my name is Bethany. I joined the sanctuary choir in December of 2021 and got confirmed last May. Given that I'm the only graduating senior out of our youth group this year, it was only appropriate that I assume the responsibility of delivering this year's youth Sunday sermon. While I was contemplating the scripture, I thought to myself "what could anybody possibly get out of what an 18 year old girl has to say about the Bible?" But then I realized that what the disciples went through during Jesus' ascension is maybe a little similar to what I, as high school senior who is graduating in 4 days, am going through. I have to leave behind the school I've been attending for the last 13 years and find my way in the world. I am only moving 30 minutes away from home for college, though, so I don't have to do my own laundry quite yet. But I can only imagine how the disciples felt when their greatest teacher and friend had left their physical presence for good. I believe that the wording of this scripture was very intentional as Acts chapter 1 verse 9 states NOT that Jesus disappeared completely but that He was hidden from their sight. As humans, it's very hard for us to believe in something that we can't see or rather, something that isn't seemingly tangible to us. The disciples were challenged to go on with life using what Jesus taught them and maintaining their faith even when Jesus wasn't in their physical presence. So that leads me to ponder... how do we keep our faith so strong when we can't "see" Jesus? The disciples and the rest of the those who actually experienced Jesus's presence were lucky because their faith was technically based off of their sight. But God commands us to live by faith and NOT by sight, so how have we been doing that? And how can we continue? I believe we can find one of the answers in Acts chapter 1 verse 10-11. It says, "They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. "Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven." I interpret this scenario as a reminder to stay present and mindful. Instead of looking towards what they had in the past, the two men (who I assume are angels) command the disciples to be secure in the fact that they WILL see Jesus again. They are also commanded BY Jesus to go out and be witnesses to him in Jerusalem and eventually the entire world. This tells them to be present and focused on what they are called to do in this moment and in their time on earth rather than ruminate on what they had to leave behind. In their case, it was Jesus's presence on earth. In our day to day

lives, we, too, struggle like the disciples to stay present. Instead of being fully in the moment, our minds can also wander towards the past or future.

Personally, I have experienced many instances of getting lost in my head and in my thoughts when I should be present and experiencing the current moment. As much as I hate to admit it, I have fallen victim to this sort of mind wandering a lot at church. I have been getting better at returning my mind to where it is supposed to be recently and I feel as though that was God's way of preparing me to deliver this message. Sometimes, during a long prayer or sermon, I find myself thinking about my school assignments, my work schedule, or even what I'm going to eat after the service. Lately, as I've caught myself getting lost in thought, the first thing I do is look around. I first look at the vibrant colors of the stained glass windows. Then, I look at the beautiful arrangement of flowers for that day. And after I've reminded myself of where I'm at, I take a deep, centering breath, and try my best to take in the rest of the service. Since most of you should be familiar with deep breathing from the lectio divina we did during lent, I am going to invite you all to take some deep breaths with me. We will be doing the 4-7-8 breathing technique. This method comes from an ancient yogic practice called pranayama. It has been proven to reduce stress in turn producing many health benefits. Before we begin our deep breathing practice, I just want to walk you through some simple grounding techniques. First, I want you to feel your feet firmly on the floor. Then, you can feel all your weight being supported by the pew beneath you. And if you would like, you can use your hands to feel the soft cushions you're sitting on. Now, I am going to ask you to inhale for 4, hold for 7, and exhale slowly on 8, and don't worry, I will count for you. (Start breathing practice and count) I just want to remind you that this is Sunday morning, we're in church, and in this moment, we are called to hear God's word. You do not have to think about what happened in the previous week, or what you're going to do in the coming week. Rest in the security that God will reveal to you the answers. He will guide you and comfort you and fill you with the strength you need to fulfill your calling.

The things we just did: the grounding techniques and the deep breathing are all ways of practicing something called mindfulness. Mindful.org defines mindfulness as being the "basic human ability to be fully present, aware of where we are and what we're doing, and not overly reactive or overwhelmed by what's going on around us." In practicing mindfulness and staying present, we will be more able to live by faith. We will be able to fully experience what's around us and "see" God in all people, places, and things. Although we do not have Jesus physically with us like the disciples did, we can find God's image everywhere. When we are mindful, we can receive God's word more efficiently and be better able to fulfill God's will.

The last thing I want to point out from the Acts text is the disciples' fellowship with others. After they had heard what the two men in white said to them, they returned to the upstairs room they were staying at in Jerusalem and joined together in prayer with each other and with women and Jesus' brothers. The disciples decided that in order to go out and be witnesses to Jesus, they first had to be present to one another and pray. Being in fellowship with one another is yet another way we can stay present and mindful. While the disciples were in fellowship and prayer, they weren't stuck yearning for the past when Jesus was right in front of them, and they weren't anxious about the future. They were enjoying the presence of one another and completely grounded into the present moment. Now, after hearing about how the disciples connected back to the present and experimenting with some mindfulness techniques, I ask you: what is your upstairs room? Where

is the place that you can go, whether physically or in your mind, that can connect you back to what is currently going on around you? What are the things you can do to remind yourself of where you're at? Being mindful is one of the many ways we can "see" God when God's human embodiment, Jesus Christ, is not on Earth anymore. If our minds are stuck regretting or longing for the past or worried about the future, we will miss everything that God is trying to say to us right now.

My favorite contemporary Christian singer, Lauren Daigle just released a new album with a song on it called "Kaleidoscope Jesus". The whole song is about the wonderful and vibrant ways that Jesus reveals himself to us. The first verse especially stuck out to me as I was listening to this song for the first time on my way to school this past Monday morning. It says,

You go out of your way to make me feel like I'm the one You love
You take on a different shape every time I see You in someone
It's in the heart of the neighbor on the corner, in the spirit of a little girl's eyes
In the hello from a stranger at the grocer, in the people passin' by
Then in the chorus, she sings
"How colorful the many ways you meet us
Can't believe the places that we see ya"

All of these lyrics point to how we can see God's spirit in the spirits of others. The hello from a stranger, the people passing by... all of these things would go unnoticed to us if we weren't mindful. If we weren't connected to the present, we wouldn't be able to notice the little ways in which God reveals her grand presence.

Since this is youth Sunday, I just want to address the students that are either in the congregation or listening to the service. I want to say that I'm so proud of all you for making it through this year and especially this past month that has been full of finals and various end of year events that all got crammed into a short period of time. I know that when there are so many things happening back to back, it's hard to enjoy any of them because you always have to be prepared for what you're doing next. But we made it through, and I hope that you can take the mindfulness techniques that we discussed and practiced and apply them to your future years in school or whatever else you may need them for.

With that being said, let us go to the Lord in prayer...

Almighty God, we thank you for the time that you allowed your Son, Jesus Christ, to exist alongside humanity. And we also thank you for the lessons we learned when Jesus had to leave. I pray that just like the disciples, we can go to our upstairs room, wherever or whatever that may be for us, and reconnect to the present moment. Lord, help us to not get caught in the past like the disciples when they kept looking up to the sky at Jesus, and help us to remain calm towards the future and not full of anxiety and worry, for we know it is in Your hands. Instead, let us be able to fully experience what is going on around us right now so that we might be able to hear you and see you better. Let the mindfulness practices we learned today serve as gateways to prayer and time spent with you. Make your voice clear to us so that we can be better witnesses to you throughout the world. In Jesus name, Amen.