

Sermon for Pilgrim Church, February 28, 2021

Good Morning . As we journey through this season of Lent, I invite you to focus on one word:BEHOLD!

“BEHOLD!” can be well paired with advice by the American-born but mostly British novelist Henry James, “Try to be the one on whom nothing is lost.” This call ==to be observant of everything, to see all that is around us, to behold what is both seen and unseen, to see with our mind and heart as well as our eyes.—can be a gateway to many ways of contributing in Christian faith. “Try to be the one on whom nothing is lost” and, just maybe, also try to be one who then acts accordingly. Much of what I will mention this morning is run by scriptural imperatives—words like Behold, Look, See. Let’s keep Matthew 6 close by today: “BEHOLD The Fowls of the air; for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns yet your heavenly father feedeth them.” This passage, which continues with the imperative to “consider” the lilies of the field, how they grow, how they neither toil nor spin, but are beautiful, is usually quoted to remind us that God is looking out for us and therefore we should not worry so much but instead gratefully to trust that God will provide. But my focus today is on the way these words of Matthew also underscore the need for us always to be looking, observing, and considering. The wonderful story Sara read us last week centers on a grandmother encouraging her granddaughter to see, to find beauty, to observe as they drive together. To be observant, to be the one on whom nothing is lost, is not as easy as it sounds. “To behold” incidentally derives from Old English “bihaldan” “to give regard to, to hold in view” and the phrase “lo and behold represents Lo as a shortening of “look” and goes back a thousand years, appearing in Beowulf!

I am always struck by how often the commanding imperative verb “Behold” appears in the Bible and in hymns. Behold the Christ Child is of course central and to me it means Behold the Christian path or what might be as easily called a Christian style of living. As Christians, we are urged to remember that we have no greater gift from God than the example of Jesus. Another well-known imperative from Matthew is the directive to see, essentially again to behold, the needs of the poor, of the unclothed, of the hungry, of the sick the imprisoned, ALL those less fortunate. The passage is driven fundamentally by sight. We cannot take morally right actions unless we see clearly. But seeing is not always comfortable. We sometimes choose,consciously or not, to “look the other way.”

About eight years ago I travelled to Mumbai, India. I was one of several officers of The Peabody Essex Museum and we, along with our board president, were hosted in India by another new board member. We had come to India to build further on the museum’s relationship with India’s contemporary arts community. One evening in Mumbai, our group stepped out of a restaurant and there just a few feet away was a very young mother sitting on the edge of the gutter washing her infant in the shallow trickling muddy water at the curb. She was a very, very young woman and seemed as vulnerable and frail as her child. Neither I nor my colleagues nor our hosts said anything aloud. But after encountering this achingly human mother doing her best to cleanse her child, I wondered then and still do to this day why I just walked by without comment or action. I know I had thoughts at first of the contrasts of wealth

and poverty in Mumbai society but I quickly pivoted mentally to recognize that there is as startling and painful inequality in our own country and indeed world-wide. We cannot fix everything we see, but we can be more intentionally trying to see as much as we can and to follow Christ more nearly. The image that I have of that moment in Mumbai is always with me as if it had occurred yesterday. Why couldn't I have been more like the Good Samaritan at that moment in my life? Why couldn't I have asked my friends if there were way we could assist this woman? It is, I think, a good thing that some moments like this DO stay with us. They help inform our present and future awareness of injustice. Poverty should never be invisible. I wonder how many times I have just kept walking rather than seeing clearly. Seeing as a Christian takes work. I know I can do better.

“Try to be the one whom nothing is lost.” How do we do that? It is a tough challenge to observe everything. But rather than jump to the conclusion that it is impossible or would require so much discipline that it would make us miserable, I think we can at the minimum intentionally create a mind-set, a way of living, a theology of sight which can guide us to love our neighbor.

Let's consider the concept of observation. It is the foundation of science and of empirical thought. We prove things by observing that there are causes and effects that reliably repeat themselves. Seeing, we say, is believing even though we know that our eyes can deceive us. What a conundrum! Consider Shakespeare's Othello when he asks the scheming Iago for “ocular proof” that his wife Desdemona is unfaithful, and the ocular proof indeed is presented, an ill-placed handkerchief of hers. The powers of observation drive many personalities familiar to us in actual and fictional worlds from Einstein to Sherlock Holmes, from Benjamin Franklin to forensic crime shows on TV. Ocular proof, Seeing is believing. Microscopes, magnifying glasses, telescopes, even new cataracts --they all drive enhanced observation. But science does not have a franchise on observation. , The Bible doesn't hand us magnifying instruments. But we have the gift of sight As Reebee recently noted, the description of the transfiguration of Jesus is placed, in all three synoptic gospels, between two stories of Jesus restoring sight to the blind. The gift of sight could not be made more powerful.

Think with me about “seeing as believing” not as the key to a system of validation, of establishing scientific proof but as the key to a personalized and demanding theology of sight. When we see as Christians do not we strive to see not “ocular proof” but to see as Jesus would see ? To do what Christ would have us do, do we not need a mindset of seeing through his eyes?

Many of my favorite hymns pick up on vision, both ours and God's. For example, we know the Godspell song, Day By Day, which urges us to see Jesus more clearly, love him more dearly, and follow him more clearly. Just last week Max and Elena led us in the hymn, “Won't you let me be thy servant” with the line, “I will hold the Christ-light for you” Think of phrases you know well such as “mine EYES have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord”, “ I was blind and now I SEE” ...” ten thousand ages in thy sight are like an evening gone” “Be thou my vision Lord” ...” I sing because I'm happy, I sing because I'm free, God's eye is on the sparrow, so I know God's eye's on me.” That last line echoes nicely the lines from Matthew 6 telling us to BEHOLD the birds. And the experience I had in Mumbai, reminds me of the

African folk song “He’s got the whole world in his hands....he’s got the little bitty babies in his hands.” I like to think God’s eye was on that baby even if I did not see sufficiently. In his book *The Melody of Theology*, Jaroslav Pelikan, a theologian and Professor of History at Yale University notes “that of all the arts, the one that has had the most continuous positive relation with Christian faith is music: (p.165), We need not need here delve into the history of theology’s long and dynamic partnership with music, but I think we all can joyfully recognize that when we sing together, we often are rejoicing that God watches over us and is always reminding us we know that we live so much better when we ALSO are watching everything we can, trying to see more and more each and every day. Can we not try harder? Try to be the one on whom nothing is lost?

How often we hear phrases such as “that was lost on me,” Perhaps you have played with children at birthday parties the game of seeing in which you prepare a tray with about thirty or so things placed on it, a roll of scotch tape, a dime, a paper clip, a piece of yarn, a bandaid, and so forth covered with a cloth.. Then you uncover it and give all the kids 30 seconds or so to study it, really look hard at it, then cover it up and ask them to write down all the things they remember. There is usually someone who gets a high score and sometimes one with a very low score, but most kids of the same age likely fall in a similar range. The game is about intention, about focused concentration and memory. It also is a good analogy for what I am trying to underscore. We need as Christians to “up our game.”

Let’s be honest, sometimes we do just look the other way or make a point of not seeing, or of seeing but not acting., Some things are just too hard to observe, Their claim on our emotions is just too strong. Or sometimes we see, shrug our shoulders, lift our hands up to our sides, and say “What can I do about it?” This was my failing at that moment in Mumbai which I will never forget.

The Bible talks often about being prepared, as with the command “Prepare for the coming of the Lord” a command that we hear in different ways in song and scripture regularly. To be observant, we need to be prepared, awake to the possibilities and the injustices around us.

Mary K and I both enjoy reading the Lee Child novels with the central character of Reacher, a retired army military police major who now lives free and travels wherever he pleases. He has no possessions, no encumbrances and often wanders in a knightly mode into situations where he sees a way to be helpful to someone being very unfairly treated. In one novel, *Worth Dying For*, Childs writes that Reacher “was an observant man. He had made his living by noticing details, He was LIVING because he noticed details.” As a veteran Reacher himself knows that many battles have been lost because of poor sentries. The army, we are reminded, places great value on good sentries. And we, like sentries, can fall asleep, we are human. We may not be prepared to watching effectively. The 19<sup>th</sup> century English Romantic poet William Wordsworth, was reportedly once asked if he took a notebook on his walks through nature. He said never, that nature did not allow of itself to have an inventory taken. He didn’t mean that one could not be, say, an entomologist or botanist, and record things, but that nature writ large was not to be approached that way. As a Christian, this appeals to me, The world is huge, we cannot see everything or write down everything we see. But still, we can see more if we have a MINDSET to do that. We need not carry sight-enhancing equipment like telescopes to see the stars or

binoculars to see the birds—there is nothing wrong with that obviously—but perhaps we need to realize things are shifting and changing, and we need to be open to any and all sights.

We here at home also like the novels of Anne Perry. In one, *Death In Focus*, two sisters are invited to a dinner dance by some men they have just met for the first time at an academic conference in Amalfi, Italy. After the dinner the sisters are invited to dance and they are BOTH so glad that the men they are dancing with are NOT talking. Anne Perry writes “They hate to talk while dancing, The conversation was the movement, and the music was master of it all.” This seems to me to come very close to the kind of mind-set I am asking us as Christians to have. To see all that we can and take steps to do what is right. Can we not be steadily in this moment? In this dance? This rhythm of Christian awareness?. Once when I was teaching an English literature course a young woman and a creative student asked me , “can I dance my paper instead of write it?”. Foolishly I said no at the time. Now that I have lived longer I would say yes in a heartbeat. Dance it, Don’t talk it. Live it. Let the dance be the act that delivers the response , the expression, the emotion. We don’t need to overthink and over write. Jesus, in modern parlance, didn’t carry a laptop. But he SAW SO VERY WELL. He gave us this example to follow. He restored sight to the blind, making explicit his message to see.

Maybe you have read Wallace Steven’s poem, *The Snow Man*, in which he wrote, “One must have a mind of winter/ To regard the frost and the boughs/Of The pine trees crusted with snow.” The mind of winter is needed to be in winter, to see it fully. The mind of a Christian, The heart of a Christian The sentry on the watch. Be thou M vision Lord. Help us see thee more clearly and love thee more dearly. Let us see our many blessings blessings and let us each see our own way to do what we can to make the world a better place. As a final note listen to these words of an anonymous Eskimo poet:

But only one thing  
Is great.  
Only one. This  
In the hut by the path  
To see the day  
Coming out of its mother  
And the light filling the world.

Carpe DIEM. Seize the Day..but also SEE the day.

“try to be the one on whom nothing is lost.” See the day, every day. Behold! Look! See! Amen