

Open Your Eyes to Our Nature

II Peter 3:8-15a

by the Rev. Dr. E. Scott Jones

First Central Congregational UCC

4 December 2011

One thing I like to do every year with the Advent worship theme is search on-line for any poems that include the words of the theme. So, this year I searched for poems with the phrase "open your eyes" or those just with "eyes."

One I found really fit the apocalyptic images of these first Sundays of Advent and even contained some of the penitential themes of the season. It is a poem from John Donne:

At the round earth's imagined corners, blow
Your trumpets, angels, and arise, arise
From death, you numberless infinities
Of souls, and to your scattered bodies go,
All whom the flood did, and fire shall, o'erthrow,
All whom war, dearth, age, agues, tyrannies,
Despair, law, chance, hath slain, and you whose eyes,
Shall behold God, and never taste death's woe.
But let them sleep, Lord, and me mourn a space;
For, if above all these, my sins abound,
'Tis late to ask abundance of thy grace,
When we are there. Here on this lowly ground,
Teach me how to repent; for that's as good
As if thou'hadst seal'd my pardon with thy blood.

Pretty good fit, don't you think? However, most of the poems with eyes in them were odes to a beloved, such as this one from Ben Johnson:

Drink to me only with thine eyes,
And I will pledge with mine;
Or leave a kiss but in the cup,
And I'll not look for wine.
The thirst that from the soul doth rise
Doth ask a drink divine;
But might I of Jove's nectar sup,
I would not change for thine.

One of Shakespeare's sonnets, a love poem itself, takes a little different position on the role of eyes in loving the beloved:

In faith, I do not love thee with mine eyes,
For they in thee a thousand errors note;
But 'tis my heart that loves what they despise,
Who, in despite of view, is pleased to dote;

If you are looking for something to write on a card to your beloved, I suggest the Johnson and not this line from Shakespeare.

Typically, Emily Dickinson had a much darker approach to eyes:

Before I got my eye put out –
I liked as well to see
As other creatures, that have eyes –
And know no other way –

But I got most excited when one of my very favourite poems appeared in the search. It is a poem I have shared with you before and will again – “As Kingfishers Catch Fire” by Gerard Manley Hopkins:

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies dráw fláme;
As tumbled over rim in roundy wells
Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell's
Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;
Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves—goes itself; myself it speaks and spells,
Crying What I do is me: for that I came.

Í say móre: the just man justices;
Kéeps gráce: thát keeps all his goings graces;
Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is—
Christ—for Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men's faces.

The part of that poem which keeps bringing me back to it again and again is that ending – “for Christ plays in ten thousand places, lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his.” In God's eye each of us is, or at least has the potential to be, Christ. As members of the church, we are to be the body of Christ, the continued physical presence of Christ upon the earth. What Jesus revealed is that each and every one of us has the capacity to live the same way he did. That is what it means to be a disciple -- to follow, to imitate, to participate in the life of Jesus. Each and every one of us has the capacity to live as Jesus did, we need only to open our eyes to our nature.

Today's epistle reading reinforces this notion. It comes from II Peter, which one

commentator I read this week called one of the most marginal books in the New Testament. Maybe Jude is more marginal. II Peter is controversial. Modern scholarship rejects that it was written by Peter himself, but was written by a pseudonymous author claiming Peter's name, title, and authority.

The received understanding in biblical circles is that pseudonymous writing was common in the ancient world and was not judged as immoral or inappropriate by that society. I've said that myself, even from this pulpit. It is what I was taught. But this year Bart Ehrmann published his book *Forged* which argued against this received understanding. Pretty convincingly he reveals that even in the ancient near east, writing claiming that you were someone you weren't was condemned as immoral and was called lying and forgery. According to Ehrmann, a book like II Peter is a forgery and that should raise ethical questions for us.

Clearly the scholarly debates around these matters are not settled, but I felt that to preach from II Peter again with any integrity, I must at least raise the issue.

Whatever moral judgments one might make about the author of this letter, I like today's reading and believe it contains spiritual wisdom that can assist us, particularly with our theme of how we as progressive, contemporary people prepare for an encounter with God.

In this passage God is inviting all of us to repent so that we might participate in the new heavens and the new earth where righteousness is at home. Since our current, troubled world – the one full of violence and injustice and oppression and poverty – will come to an end. Since this world and its powers do not possess ultimate sovereignty. Since this world is not the dream and hope for the future. Why would you live as if this world were all there is? Why would you obey its failed authority? Why would you place your hope in something that will not last? Instead, trust in God and in the reign of God. Begin to live here and now waiting and even hastening that coming. It is not enough to wait passively, one must hasten. One must be part of creating and building God's future for this world.

Okay, we are pretty used to these themes in the New Testament, but this II Peter passage reminds us that a first question for us is "what sort of persons ought you to be." "What sort of person ought you to be?"

II Peter reminds us that the transformation of the world begins with us – with our repentance, our transformation. So, last week I invited you to go outside and look up to the stars and to the cosmic gifts of God. This week I invite you to look inside, at yourself, at who you really are. This week I invite you to introspect and to see inside yourself the gifts of God.

Ask yourself, who are you, who do you want to be, who should you be, who don't you want to be, who shouldn't you be. And then make the decisions to become who you ought to be. Take the actions to become that person. Back when I taught college ethics courses I always instructed my students, when we were covering virtue ethics, to choose the person they wanted to become and to begin now developing the habits and the skills that make that kind of person. One way we do that is by finding mentors and heroes, people who have embodied the kind of life we'd like to live, and then learning from them how to do it.

That's one purpose of the Christian church. This should be a place where together we learn the skills that help to build the kingdom. Something like forgiveness, say, does not come naturally for most people. We have to witness it being practiced by others. We have to engage in some trial and error, much like learning to ride a bike, before forgiveness becomes more

natural for us. And we must be supported by a community that understands forgiveness and will be there for us, particularly in those times when forgiveness is the most difficult.

When we truly open ourselves to who we are and who we can become, we might get frightened by our own potential. There is a comforting beauty in the Hopkins poem, that Christ plays inside each one of you. But that is also a challenge. Christ plays in you. You have the ability to radiate the power and the glory of God.

Contemporary writer Marianne Williamson has eloquently conveyed this idea:

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.

This Advent, as we prepare for an encounter with God, I invite you to open your eyes to your own self, to your potential. Ask yourself the question, "What sort of person ought I to be?" And the answer that will come back is that you are the sort of person who can manifest the glory of God. May it be so.