

April 28, 2019

Susan Gascho-Cooke at Community Mennonite Church of Lancaster

“Averting Your Eyes to See Jesus Clearly”

Luke 9:18-27 (Matthew 16:13-28, Mark 8:27-38)

*Who do THEY say I am?*

If we could somehow ask the more than two billion Christians in the world Jesus’ question, over the miles and across all denominations, what answers might we hear?

One of the things that drew me to the images on the bulletin cover was that all these images of Jesus, (and the artist, J. Kirk Richards, has painted hundreds of them), all have smudged, indistinct features -- as if the lens just wouldn’t focus.

I think of myself as someone who has very clear ideas of who Jesus was/is. After all, I grew up going to church and Sunday School and Bible School and youth group, I was a Bible major in college, I got my M.Div. in my 20s, and I’ve been a pastor or a chaplain my whole working life. And yet when I’m honest about it, my experience is a lot like the phenomenon of looking at the night sky, seeing a particularly luminous star, and finding that every time I try to look at the star directly, it seems to get blurry or even disappear. But when I shift my eyes slightly to look *beside* it, there it is again -- all twinkles and shine.

I had thought this had some complicated explanation in astronomy or physics, but apparently it’s actually a biological phenomenon. Ophthalmological, to be exact.

“We all have two types of light-sensing cells in our eyes, the rods and the cones. Cones see fine detail and color. Rods see better in dim light. When you look right at something that is small or far away, the image falls on a part of your retina where there are only cones. This means that if you’re in a well-lit environment, you will see this object very well. If however you are in dim light, you’ll see the object better out of your peripheral vision (looking just off to the side of your target), because then the image will fall on the part of your retina that has rods, which can see in dim light.” (1)

“This effect is called ‘averted vision.’ Exactly how far off-center you should look to maximise this effect varies from person to person. For most people, it’s between 5° and 20° away from looking straight ahead.” (2)

In astronomy, “averted vision” is a recommended technique. *Sky At Night Magazine* published a nice little “step-by-step guide” for employing averted vision. To see a far-away astronomical phenomenon: first, you center your telescope on it using calculated coordinates. Then, move your telescope 12° in toward your nose (depending on which eye you’ll be using to look through the telescope). That way, when you look through the telescope, the object will be in the sweet spot of your peripheral, or “averted” vision.

The article also says that a key to seeing faraway objects clearly, is “dark adaptation,” which means giving your eyes plenty of time to adjust and dilate. Forty minutes is ideal, they say, because your body actually releases thousands of times the usual amount of a light-sensitivity chemical called *rhodopsin*, when you’re in the dark, but it takes about forty minutes to build up. (3)

It feels a little counter-intuitive -- that the way to see a far-away thing most clearly, is to look *near* it, but not *at* it. And to purposely stay in the dark to see most clearly.

This task of looking at Jesus, from 2,000 years away, across patched-together scrolls and translations and massive changes in cultures, feels a lot like looking out at a tantalizing and beautiful light in the night sky and wanting so badly to see it clearly, to stare at the luminosity.

While averted vision and dark adaptation might seem extremely counter-intuitive, I begin to think they might be pretty awesome theological suggestions. My attempts to look straight at Jesus, seem to result in portraits like the ones on the bulletin cover. But it seems like many people who encountered Jesus while he was alive and walking among them, also struggled to really see him, or to make sense of what they were seeing. After the resurrection, even his closest friends had to be shown proof that it was really Jesus they were seeing. Mary thought he was a random gardener; the disciples on the road to Emmaus thought he was just a stranger on the road; Thomas had to be shown his wounds.

He actually told them, and by extension us, that after he was gone, that's where they should look for him: in the faces of strangers, particularly the poor and overlooked. Even those who were his contemporaries seemed to recognize him only when they used averted vision, too. And folks whose vision was very dark-adapted, due to their location on the margins of society, were often the first to recognize who Jesus was.

One of the challenges of "looking straight at" Jesus, too, is that the accounts we have of Jesus, through the Gospels, are written by different writers, who represent different communities of believers, and had different agendas for why they portrayed Jesus as they did. The paper that I just passed out is this morning's gospel story, as it is told in Matthew, Mark and Luke (the "synoptic" gospels, because they tell similar stories of Jesus, in a similar order, and with similar wording). The backside of the paper is John's telling of the story, which is to say John doesn't record this story at all.

The color coding shows where similar parts of the story are told. You can see that there are parts of the story that are recorded in all three books, some parts in just Matthew and Mark, some in just Mark and Luke, and some just in Matthew and Luke, and then some tidbits that are only in one of the three (those are in *italics*). (4)

This one story doesn't give a full sense of the differences in the gospels, but it does remind us of the nuances and differences. Having grown up with these stories, I find that 40 some years later, I tend to lump all the Jesus stories together somewhat indiscriminately. This became clear to me as my husband studied it all in seminary and, having not grown up in the church, he easily saw the differences in the various gospels' stories of Jesus.

I'm not passing these out in order to do a complicated textual analysis with you today, but to remind us all of just how averted our vision of Jesus already is. We are looking through several telescopes simultaneously, all of which are about 12° off center in different directions, as each Gospel was written probably forty or more

years after Jesus' death, and thus more than likely not actually eyewitness accounts at all. But these are what we have. These stories. The telescopes through which we see the far-off light. And, as unlikely as they are as a collection, the Jesus that's slightly off-center in each one does shine.

*Who do I say Jesus is?*

I don't struggle with the divinity of Jesus. To me, that part of the story is the most beautiful. I think the church has done back flips and contortions all these thousands of years, trying to figure out how to categorize Jesus' humanity vs. divinity in order to not allow our vision of divinity to change. How do we make sense of Jesus being God in flesh, and still hold God up as all the idolatrous human stuff we've projected on him? (and I say "Him" very intentionally)

If Jesus had a body (which western philosophy and religion has typically said is worth less than the soul, and is somehow dirty and limiting) and if Jesus suffered, and grieved, and never made much of himself (by capitalistic standards), and for heaven's sakes, he died!

How do we lay all these truths onto God?

Well, we don't, of course. Like Peter did in today's scripture (the Matthew and Mark versions), who wanted Jesus to be all Messiah, with none of the messy, human, life-death part of incarnation, we come up with elaborate explanations for how Jesus combined the human and divine in mysterious, mathematical, theological ways. This allows us to pick and choose which things of Jesus were divine and which were human, handily maintaining all the things we always thought of as "Godly" in the divine column, and just-as-handily maintaining all the things we always thought of as "worldly" or "fallen" in the human column.

In this theologizing, Jesus is like a soft serve ice cream, with a clearly discernible swirl of vanilla and chocolate, human and divine. In the Jesus story, God became human in a womb, which is a very different way of combining two things:

None of us are a perfect swirl of our parents. We are a new thing -- whole cloth that can't be divided up. For me, the question isn't: was Jesus really divine? but rather, what does the fact of Jesus' divinity say about divinity about God?

I think Jesus shows us that divinity -- i.e. God -- isn't about separation and set-apartness. The God of the Jesus story came to earth to be with us, skin to skin.

Divinity -- i.e. God -- is not about power-as-might, the God of the Jesus story eschewed earthly power over and over again, in the temptations in the wilderness and at the crucifixion

Divinity -- i.e. God -- is not about perfection. If Jesus was God, then God learns things, hesitates, emotes, gets frustrated, needs naps, complains, has to heal twice sometimes, gets challenged by a woman and allows their (God's) own mind to be changed.

Divinity -- i.e. God -- is not about foregone conclusions. If Jesus was God, then God both knows and doesn't know how the story is going to end, because the God of the Jesus story allows every actor in the story to write their own lines.

Divinity -- i.e. God -- is not about being served. If Jesus was God, then God is about serving and listening, and the last being first, and the first being last.

Divinity -- i.e. God -- is about healing and suffering-with. If Jesus was God, then God gets their hands dirty, spitting in mud, wiping eyes, touching and being touched, crying when a friend dies, and crying when in pain and feeling abandoned.

Divinity -- i.e. God -- isn't always on the side of the powerful. If Jesus was God, then God challenges greed. If Jesus was God, then God frankly has no interest in being worshiped on a pedestal. If Jesus was God, then God wants to be joined, in the work of healing and creating and challenging. If Jesus was God, then God doesn't want to be merchandized, or to be used to make a profit.

Divinity -- i.e. God -- can be affected. If Jesus was God, then God wants to know who we think God is. If Jesus was God, then God wants to be remembered, wants us to choose to stay awake with them when the going is tough.

We may need to look at Jesus with averted vision, but looking at Jesus is still one of the clearest views we have of God. I don't understand everything he said or did, or was recorded to have said or done, I should say. But what he said and did made him a very unusual human. And an even more unusual God. Praise be to God!

I don't know if I would answer as Peter did, that Jesus is the Messiah. Messiah is a concept that I didn't grow up with, as Peter would have.

So, to answer Jesus' question myself, here's what I'd venture to say: Jesus, You are the Incarnation, God skin-to-skin. You are the red thread -- the thing that continually makes sense. And the very fact that I believe in you, given all that I do not know or understand, given the distances of every kind, given the fact that I can't see you directly, and my eyes never seem to adapt to the dark: This belief feels like one of your miracles. I believe you are saving us from the gods of our making, by being a God so strange you must be truth, not fiction.

Who do YOU say he is?

(1) Matt Weed, M.D. pediatric ophthalmologist. "Common Eye Questions: Why do stars disappear when I look directly at them?" September 6, 2016

<http://www.mattweedmd.com/ophthalmology/2016/9/6/we93dp4x2s3z15g6t9md4hp69dnzd2>

(2) Christopher Springob, *Ask An Astronomer*. "Why is it easier to see a star if you look slightly to the side?" June 27, 2015.

<http://curious.astro.cornell.edu/physics/81-the-universe/stars-and-star-clusters/stargazing/373-why-is-it-easier-to-see-a-star-if-you-look-slightly-to-the-side-intermediate>

(3) Martin Mobberley. "How to Master the Art of Averted Vision," *Sky At Night*

*Magazine*. <http://www.skyatnightmagazine.com/feature/how-guide/how-master-art-averted-vision>

(4) .pdf attached