

Sermon April 18, 2021
Kristen Albrecht
Episcopal Church at Yale

Reflection

When we think of how we see the physical world around us, we see the eye as an object which is acted upon by the light that enters the eye from our surroundings. This intromission theory of seeing has been generally accepted for the past five centuries. Though some thinkers such as Aristotle disagreed, since at least the time of Plato until the sixteenth century, including the time of Jesus's life and much of Christian history, most people thought about sight differently. With the emission or extramission theory, light leaves the eye and then interacts with the world, a much more active idea of sight. In Matthew, Jesus says "the eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eyes are healthy, your whole body will be full of light. But, if your eyes are unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is the darkness." While we know this is not strictly what happens in scientific terms, we can still appreciate the lesson Jesus is teaching us. How we see or perceive the world affects us deeply, influencing both our internal thoughts and our external actions. Let us take time now to look around and see the rooms we are in, ourselves sitting in front of our screens, the images or names of everyone at this service, the living things outside the nearest window, the evening light, and at vast sky beyond. Take a moment to reflect on how you saw the world around you this week, what you are seeing now, and how you hope to see the world in the upcoming week.

Seeing Is Believing

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be pleasing to you, O God, my strength and my redeemer.

What does it mean to see? To see God? To live so that others see God through you?

When I think of seeing, one memory immediately comes to mind. I walked down the steps carefully carrying the box of glass slides that rattled slightly with each step in the otherwise quiet building. I opened a door off the next landing, passed through one room, entered a small side room, and sat down in front of the microscope while afternoon light shone through the windows behind me. I gently positioned the first glass slide so that the thin slice of tissue on it was in the right place, turned on the light to illuminate the tissue, and put my eyes to the eyepiece. Turning a knob on the microscope's base slowly brought the tissue into focus. I could see tiny outlines of irregular but roughly round shapes, each containing a darker round shape within them. In spite of years of classes and textbooks, I could hardly believe I was actually seeing individual cells and how they nestled together to create structures in tissues in this particular specimen no one else had ever seen. As I scanned across the slide, I felt a thrill of excitement. There was a bright red spot over a few cells. Quickly switching the objectives to increase the magnification, I saw the red blob was really a group of distinct red spots in several neighboring cells. This was not the broad diffuse pattern that indicated non-specific staining, which would mean the protocol had

failed and could not reliably show me what was really there. Instead, as I had hoped, I saw a few bright dots. There were definitely virus particles in this tissue.

This experience occurred during the summer before my senior year in college as I started my senior thesis research in molecular biology. Though it was almost four years ago, I still remember it clearly as a milestone moment in my life. That was the first time I felt that I really saw the biological world I had been studying in three years of classes and that I was part of the community that studies it. There was the thrill of discovery, seeing an answer to a previously unanswered question, a sense of wonder, and a feeling of belonging and purpose. You may wonder what looking through a microscope to find virus particles in various organs has to do with faith. How could the rigid scientific way of thinking based on evidence, observation, and description of visible phenomena and effects relate to the more fluid and abstract faith in God? While the seeing I described and the seeing I will discuss in the scriptures read today may seem very different, the ideas of physical evidence, attention, and desire for understanding tie them together.

First is the reading from Acts. For context, before today's excerpt, Peter and John arrive at a temple during prayer. A man who had been lame since birth was carried to the temple gate every day to beg money from those "going into the temple courts." When he asked Peter and John for money, Peter told the man to look at them. Peter said he could not give the man money, "but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk." Peter helped the man stand, and he went with them into the courts "walking and jumping and praising God." The people in the temple saw the man they knew to be lame, "and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him." As witnesses of this miraculous healing, they could all see clearly the results of faith in God. By allowing ourselves to see God in our lives and allowing that knowledge to direct our actions, we too can experience new life.

Seeing takes a prominent place again in the reading from 1 John with the idea that we will look like Christ. When we look like Christ, others can see Christ through us. The actions of our neighbors, big or small, that illustrate the love of Christ let us see God and God's love for us. Though we will not be perfect examples, seeing and knowing Christ will guide us to do what is right.

Finally, we turn to the Gospel. At this point in Luke's narrative, several women saw the absence of Jesus's body in the tomb, and two men appeared and reminded them that the Son of Man would rise on the third day. The women told the apostles, who did not believe them. Peter inspected the empty tomb for himself, "wondering to himself what had happened." Then two disciples walking to Emmaus saw Jesus but did not recognize him until their eyes were opened as he broke bread with them. Even after these previous sightings by others, the disciples are shocked by what they see – Jesus apparently alive after his death. Jesus knows how important sight and physical evidence are to us as humans. He asks for food, demonstrating that He truly is not a ghost but a fully resurrected human being. Sometimes we need visible evidence to encourage our faith in the unseen. We just need to keep our eyes, minds, and hearts open to notice it each day.

Together, these scriptures remind us that we will make mistakes and lack belief in things for which we cannot see proof. However, they also give us hope. As children of God, we turn our attention to God, believe in Christ, repent, and work toward doing what is right. With the model of Christ-like love, we can fulfill our purpose and show God's love to the world. As I think about how that may look in my life, I keep in mind two quotes from Francis Collins, a physician and geneticist, the director of National Institutes of Health, and an author of several books about science and his Christian faith. First, Collins points out that "it's interesting when you read the life of Christ how much of his time he spent healing the sick. There must have been a reason for that – he was modelling for us what it is we are intended to do by following his path." Secondly, "the God of the Bible is also the God of the genome. He can be worshipped in the cathedral or in the laboratory." In my current and future work as a biomedical researcher in the HIV field and beyond, I want to remind myself every day to find God in what I do, working toward understanding how to heal the sick, and to use what I do in a way that pleases God. Like our chaplain Paul told us so beautifully last week, prayer is not simply done but lived. We need a prayerful frame of mind to see God in the same way we need a microscope to see beyond what our eyes alone are capable of detecting. This isn't always easy. On some days, we don't see God as well as we do on other days, but that's okay. We have the comfort of forgiveness for our sins and mistakes, unending hope for each day through Christ, and the love we show to and are shown by the people God has placed around us.

As we move into breakout rooms, I invite you to think about the following questions. How has or will seeing God in your daily life affect how you live? How can others see God in you?