

Hidden in Plain Sight

Readings from Luke 1:26-38, 46-55 and Romans 16:25-27

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Introduction

When I was a young boy, my mother would often send me on an errand to fetch something for her. Rarely did I return with what she wanted, for in spite of her explicit instructions I could never see the item she wanted, in the place that she sent me, at the height I was supposed to look for it! Though she might describe the item at length, I saw absolutely nothing that matched her description. I don't know if it was my poor eyesight that prevented me from seeing what in her mind's eye was as plain as day, or if it was my inability to take instructions -- something that afflicts me to this day -- but try as I may, I rarely found the item I was sent to fetch!

You'd think my mother would have learned after a while; she often mentioned how hopeless it was to send me on errands, but she persevered, and consequently my cluster of neuroses includes a deep-seated sense of failure when I am asked to see something that isn't readily apparent to me. It was a neurosis that was triggered just this week, when Chip watched me begin a game of Scrabble, and on my opening move he informed me that I had the choice of two seven-letter words. Try as I may, I could not see either one of them, and it annoyed me no end! I like to think that even though I am a failure as a "fetcher," I do enjoy relative success with puzzles!

Hiding things in plain sight is an amusement for some. The Walt Disney corporation employs people they call Imagineers. I don't know if these are engineers with imagination, or imaginative people with a fancy name, but somewhere along the line they decided, as an inside joke, to conceal an image of Mickey Mouse somewhere in the design of every Disney attraction. It soon became a tradition, in adding the final touches to a Disney attraction, for Imagineers to subtly "hide" Mickey Mouse silhouettes in plain sight. Apparently Mickey Mouse fans search avidly for these in every Disney movie and theme park. No one has kept track of where these images were placed, which only adds to the mystery and fuels the search, as does the fact that they are hidden in plain sight!

Mary's Magnified Experience

There is a sense in which Jesus' advent into our world was "hidden in plain sight". Nothing could be plainer than having him born to a simple peasant family in Nazareth. Of the two women in Luke's Christmas story, Mary's cousin, Elizabeth, would have been a more striking choice as mother of the Messiah. If Mary was the country cousin, Elizabeth was the city cousin. Elizabeth was the more sophisticated. She came from a patrician family, the "Aarons," a family that traced their ancestry clear back to Moses' brother. She was of the priestly class, and had married into the priestly class -- married a priest who had sufficient status to preside at the Temple altar in Jerusalem. They were an older couple, and it would have been most poetic if, in the tradition of Abraham and Sarah, their child would be the Chosen One!

Instead, God chose non-priestly, non-patrician, unsophisticated Mary, from the poor part of Israel, living in the most unprepossessing place one could find in all of Israel! The choice of Mary as the Messiah's mother is a surprising choice, an unexpected choice. Luke's Gospel is full of surprises. For example, in the opening scene of Luke's Gospel, the priestly person from whom one might expect an oracle or announcement about a great birth is struck dumb! And instead, in a startling move for a writer of that day, it is two women who introduce the gospel's themes. God's casting choices for the Incarnation Drama was destined to dumbfound those who were accustomed to looking for God's revelation among the priestly class, among males, among the elites in capital cities!

The dumbfounded-ness of the professional messiah-watchers was hinted at last week, already, when the religious authorities and other powers-that-be went out to present John the Baptist with a pop quiz. "Are you Elijah?" they asked him, implying "Elijah had a way of stirring things up when he was with us." No. "A prophet?" they asked, implying that prophets have always had a nasty disrespect for propriety, boundaries, and rules. No. "Then who are you?" The breathtaking irony of this interrogation is that the people who are supposed to be "in the know" -- the keepers of law and order, the managers of the media, and so on -- don't know who John is! If they can't figure out who John is, how in the world will they recognize the One whose advent John announces?

The unexpected choices made by God for His Incarnation Plan baffled the authorities, but equally astounding is their inability to see God, though signs of Him were right in front of them! They saw him do great things, yet remained dumbfounded. Even after tabulating all the Messiah-like things he did, they could still ask, in disbelief, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46)

It's a little like the student taking a course in Renaissance Art who told his professor that he loved the course, but that it made him sad. "Sad?" asked the professor. "Yes, sad." replied the student. "You see, I spent nearly a year in Italy with my parents who were...stationed there. We went to all the great art galleries in Italy, saw all the great paintings, and yet, because I didn't know what to look for, I didn't see a thing."

Most people in Jesus' day were looking for a political Messiah, someone who would liberate them -- free them from centuries of having to bow submissively to every tin horn emperor that happened to sweep through Israel. As for the religious authorities, they got severely agitated whenever anyone even slightly messianic appeared, for it caused no end of trouble for them. It seemed safer for them to just assume that anyone with messianic dimensions was not the Messiah.

Our Magnified Moments

Someone once asked a rabbi, "Why did God speak to Moses from the thorn bush?" The person naturally thought that God should have spoken in a peal of rolling thunder or from the peak of some majestic mountain. "Why did God speak to Moses from the thorn bush?" The rabbi answered, "To teach you that there is no place on earth where God's glory is not, not even in a humble thorn bush." (Ken Gire, Windows of the Soul)

Perhaps we over-complicate our search for God, a little like the six-year-old child who, after an IQ test, was asked about it by her mother. The little girl admitted that it was pretty easy except for one question, which she found peculiar. "The lady asked me to draw a lion between a chair and a pail in this picture. I knew I could never draw a lion,"

she reported, "so I drew a daisy instead." "I'm sure they wanted you to draw a line," said the mother, to which her six-year-old replied, "Oh, no, Mommy, that would have been too easy!"

Perhaps we look too hard for God in lofty, exotic locales, when the truth may be much closer to home. A fourth-grade teacher new to Nome, Alaska, was preparing her class for a Christmas pageant. Her curriculum, which included professional journals and publications used by teachers in many other states, came with instructions for the pageant. Discussing the suggestions with her class, she read aloud to them: "For the children playing Santa's reindeer, there should be brown outfits, and reindeer horns, which could be constructed of bare branches, trimmed to the proper shapes and painted."

Looking out at the barren, treeless, snow-covered landscape, she sighed, and said, "Well, children, I guess we'll have to do something else. We have no branches!" The children looked disappointed, until one little boy spoke up and said, "We haven't any trees, teacher, but we do have lots of reindeer horns."

I liked listening to Stuart McLean when he had a segment on Peter Gzowski's Morningside radio show. Stuart would uncover fascinating dimensions to some of the most ordinary things, things we take for granted. Stuart would never fail to find hidden in the ordinariness things which evoked his wonder, and our own amazement.

Perhaps God is an Imagineer of sorts, who hides hints of His presence in plain sight, not to confound us, but because He wants us to teach us a way of looking for signs of His presence. Scattered throughout all our experiences are moments that, given the right time, mood and circumstances, are magnified, so that they reveal their eternal dimensions with greater clarity. There are moments when what seems just an ordinary relationship achieves an unspeakable depth and intimacy; moments when otherwise humdrum emotions are capped with an extraordinary ecstasy; moments when everyday scenes take on a luminous beauty. I remember one such moment when I lived in the far north -- a moment alone, when I gazed at what would appear to others to be but an utterly barren landscape, yet its starkness held within it magnified intimations of the Divine.

There are moments when what is merely the setting sun of other evenings becomes on this particular evening the very vestibule of heaven! (Herbert O'Driscoll, *A Certain Life*) There are moments when what is merely an ordinary hymn sung on other Sundays becomes on this Sunday a window into heaven, giving us sufficient glimpse of God's glory to keep us going for some time.

There is a Hindu legend about a time when all human beings were gods, but they so abused their divinity that the chief god decided to take it away from them and hide where they would never find it. Where to hide it became the big question. When the chief god's advisers were called together to consider the question, some suggested burying human divinity deep in the earth, but the chief god said, "No, that will not do, for there will be people who will dig deep down into the earth and find it."

"Well, then, sink human divinity into the deepest ocean," the advisers advised. "No," replied their the chief god, "not there, for people will learn to dive into the deepest waters, and will search the entire ocean bed until they find it."

Then the advisers said, "We will take it to the top of the highest mountain and hide it there." Again the chief god shook his head. "No. People will eventually climb every high mountain on earth, and will be sure to find it."

The advisers could think of no other solutions, whereupon the chief god said, "Here is what we will do with human divinity. We will hide it deep down in every person, for no one will think to look for it there." And ever since then, the legend concludes, men and women have been going up and down the earth, climbing, digging, diving, exploring, searching for something that is already within themselves! (Charles Arcodia, Stories for Sharing)

Recently a friend drew my attention to the gifts of one of my children. As parents, we may develop a certain way of seeing our children which prevents us from seeing them in another way, in another light. I was very thankful for the gift of seeing my child in a different light. Even if I could never see the things my mother sent to me to fetch, I'd like to be able to see my children in such a way that their lives are not limited by my lack of imagination.

God teaches us to look for signs of His presence in our very midst, and if the Incarnation teaches us anything, it teaches us to look for intimations of the Divine in each other. God plants within us gifts, talents, proclivities, propensities, tendencies and passions which unfold into our destiny, and some people -- some communities -- are particularly gifted at spotting these, and calling them forth into reality by nurturing them.

May this Christmas sensitize us to the Divine reality in our midst, for in this season we celebrate that God did come into our midst, and though He may come as one initially unknown, God does not remain unseen. As a wonderful poem in our hymnal reads:

He comes to us as one unknown,
A breath unseen, unheard;
As though within a heart of stone,
Or shrivelled seed in darkness sown,
A pulse of being stirred,
A pulse of being stirred.

He comes when souls in silence lie
And thoughts of day depart;
Half seen upon the inward eye,
A falling star across the sky
Of night within the heart,
Of night within the heart.

He comes in love as once he came
By flesh and blood and birth;
To bear within our mortal frame
A life, a death, a saving Name,
For every child of earth,
For every child of earth.

(Hymnal: A Worship Book, #498, verses 1, 2 & 4; text by Timothy Dudley-Smith)