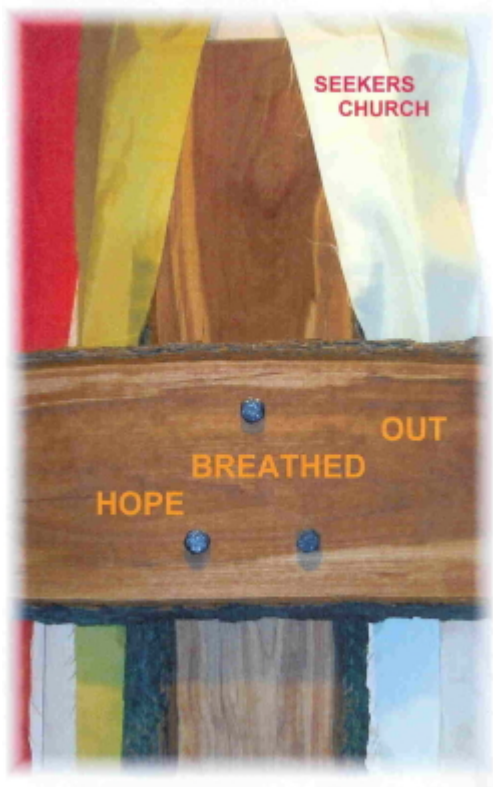


"We walk by faith and not by sight" by Jill Joseph

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Today's lectionary challenges us again and again to see, and therefore live, in some new way: by faith and not by sight.

I, for one want to complain. Sight is easy. Sight makes me confident, permits me to step and even run boldly, keeps me from stumbling. The "seeing by faith" stuff is harder, potentially much harder.

Having joined Seekers only a few weeks ago, it is a special gift to be preaching this morning, preaching as a beginner and as a learner, but preaching. I was, of course, a bit

disappointed after having joined Seekers to find out that as a member I was not now entitled to a secret decoder ring that revealed the meaning of my life. Nor did I gain access to a transponder chamber that lifts one into the heart of God. It seems that for all this community offers, and that is indeed a great deal, I will remain without a decoder ring or transponder.

These comments are, therefore, offered by one who is simply seeking.

Let me also say, for those of you who know that my partner and I have just returned from two weeks of work in Eritrea, that this homily will not be concerned with that trip. We went assured of your prayers, we carried the green ribbons given to me on our luggage and later on our door knob.

But these comments are simply the thoughts of a woman wrestling with the fundamentals of faith and not a narrative of our trip which is too new and undigested to share in this context.

"We walk by faith and not by sight"

What does this mean, to not see, or to be challenged to see in some new way?

Below, I propose three admittedly personal answers to this important question.

First, it means that we are dependent, contingent, tentative, and incomplete.

And let's be clear that this is not a comfortable state. Developmentally, I've watched our now five year old granddaughter insist for many years "I can do it!" I wipe up the spills, surreptitiously remove the egg shells from the batter, and work frantically to assure that the numerous hazards of emerging independence inflict as few cuts, and

scrapes, and burns as possible. She needs to be independent.

I listen to my father's rage and denial and coping as he struggles slowly, uncomfortably to enter the passenger's side of a car were once he strode to the driver's side.

Politically, it is so much easier to chant "yes we can!" than to work long hours wondering if we can, or awaken at 2 a.m. pretty certain that we probably can't.

Without sight we are dependent, contingent, tentative, and incomplete. Again and again today, the lectionary tells us that the reality is that we cannot see, at least not as God sees. We are distracted by the external and trivial. We are, frankly, wrong when we believe we do see.

We exist in the midst of social and commercial pressures that reinforce the myth of independence. They teach us that our sight of the new toy, the new reward is not only clear, but orienting.

To be needful, whether economically or psychologically or physically, is to be marginalized and de-valued. Our depression and rage as we take ill or as we age is not a private and individual one, but shaped by powerfully tectonic cultural forces, compelled by deeply held values about the importance of independence.

Profound psychological consequences ensue for those who sit begging outside the gates of our cities in which competence, and strength, and youthful beauty are worshiped. These facts are neither subtle nor unappreciated by this community.

For myself, it is far more painful to recognize the ways in which religion and religiosity have denied the hard truth brought in today's readings.

A particularly volatile and toxic brew can occur when we replace authentically tentative and contingent dependency with

militant religious certainty. You do not need me to re-tell the horror tales of crusade, inquisition, and Holocaust all of which emerged from "Christian" Europe. Or recapitulate the venom of those who use terms like "family" and "tradition" to wound and scar.

Knowing the enemy, knowing what we are to do, knowing our place and (perhaps more importantly) the place of others, is to insist that we can see and that we therefore know.

And yet...

and yet...

we are summoned to the discomfort of doubting our own sight. To being schooled by this dependency.

"We walk by faith and not by sight"

What does this mean, to not see, or to be challenged to see in some new way?

Secondly, I propose that not seeing demands a dialectic or paradoxical consciousness.

"Not as we does God see," we read in 1 Samuel.

Yet the converse is both more powerful and more distressing: "Not as God do we see."

For myself, this is the dialectic, the paradox, the both "here and there" of faith. This is the blindness that must, of necessity, see itself.

I suspect that many, if not most of us, in this room know something of the tender intimacy of the one who calls us. In prayer, in work, in story, or in silence we have felt ourselves cherished and beloved and summoned. We may speak rarely or never of these moments, but at the heart of

experiential faith is this intimacy.

Creedal faith is not, for me, possible. The clear and measured public recitation begins,

"I believe in one God,

the Father,

the almighty,

maker of heaven and earth...."

These creedal assertions leave me slightly queasy, ill at ease, my toes curled in my shoes, and my voice dropping lower and lower.

The fact is, I do not believe all this.

But the intimacy....that I can touch and claim however privately.

And yet....

and yet....

"Not as God do we see."

This is the dialectic and paradoxical reality.

Summoned by love, called to intimacy, graced with sudden joy.

But, "not as God do we see."

For myself, authentic and deep skepticism is equally real.
"Not as God do we see."

Thomas Merton wrote of the God to whom he devoted his life, "I know nothing of you. If I imagine you, I am mistaken. If I understand you, I am deluded. If I am certain I know you, I am crazy."

Faith and uncertainty are good companions.

A group of religious women I came to know in rural Michigan met together regularly. They were all Christian, but came from diverse backgrounds, some Catholic nuns, some women pastors, some religious educators. All had public roles as women of faith. In this context, their meeting provided a "safe place" in which to express themselves. Over a period of multiple meetings, they gave themselves the task of identifying a creed which they could all endorse. I find it profoundly comforting that they agreed joyously on just two words: "I believe." After that, there was only silence.

My life has been characterized by times of faith and yet I know myself "prone to wander, prone to leave the God I love". How is my heart to be "sealed", to use the words of today's hymn?

In my opinion, such fidelity and faithfulness only comes by accepting the unseeable, the unknowable nature of my God.

I, and perhaps you, am called to the still point, the balance between the certainty of love that summons AND what Bonhoeffer calls the "utter otherness" of God.

In times of intimacy, the unknowable is true and real.

In times of unknowing, the intimacy is true and real.

Here's my heart, take and seal it at the still point between these two realities: intimacy and unknowability.

"We walk by faith and not by sight"

What does this mean, to not see, or to be challenged to see in some new way?

Having discussed dependence and dialectic as my first two responses, this brings me to the third.

"It is like a mustard seed" says Jesus, speaking of the kingdom of God (which we remember, of course, is within us.)

Like a mustard seed?

Among some of my companions it was common, around the age of 12, to wear a necklace with a small glass ball that contained a tiny mustard seed. In retrospect, I remain confused about how to think about this

Subtle symbol? Perhaps.

Preadolescent "groupthink"? Probably.

Trivial commercialization of an explosively potent parable? Certainly!

Think of it as a koan, the absurd Zen word puzzle that is meant to perplex, confuse, confound the conscious mind in order to awaken a new and more important consciousness.

The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed? This is simply nuts!

Not only is the size wrong, although I'll certainly grant you that. It's simply too small to do anything.

But the problem is also the "tangibility" of the mustard seed, the "this and not that" of it.

Why a mustard seed?

Why not wheat, falling ever so poetically to the ground, yet rising up as stalks and then as bread?

Why not a grape seed becoming wine or an olive seed nurtured into twisted trees and then yielding holy oils of blessing?

And yet....

and yet.....

Do we not know our own lives this way?

So small, so particular, so frankly limited, and even a little silly? Aspiring to wheat or grape or olive, but just a mustard seed.

It is here that it begins, it is here that we live, it is here that all we do is done. Our incarnational life.

Just a mustard seed.

And does the mustard seed know all it can and will be? Does it hold hope? One suspects not. It is, after all, just a mustard seed.

And, of course, we do not see what can be. It is, after all, just a mustard seed

And contained in that little glass ball on a chain on a neck, there is little threat that the mustard seed will be sewn and abruptly sprout those shocking branches and welcome those unanticipated birds.

Better to seal it away in glass

than to tremble in anticipation of this absurd, luxuriant, convivial blossoming.

But this is the summons,

this is the life of faith,

this is the task of community.

This is the kingdom of our God.

Just a mustard seed.

Find the seed,

be the seed,

cherish the seed...as it is.

Just a mustard seed.

Then work, and pray, and celebrate,

and be willing to be surprised by sudden shade and singing
birds.

We walk by faith and not by sight.