

Gazing
“Look at him.”
Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:14-21
Fourth in the Lenten series, “Open Hearts”

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Zulu Gaze

The Zulus of South Africa have a practice called gazing. Two people look at each other and while one says, “*ndibona*,” “I see you,” while the other says, “*sawubona*,” “yes.” And as they gaze it is not the physical properties of the eyes that are observed but rather, as the eyes move back and forth from one eye to the other or become fixed equidistant between the two, the people become present to each other. Differences become unimportant. Race becomes unimportant. What becomes important is each of the persons, who are children of God, each of ultimate worth.¹

What is it that draws your gaze?

From one couple to another with whom I counsel in preparation for a wedding and marriage, I can tell you what, or who, has captured their eyes. They’re all consumed in each other. It’s expected. If they commit an oversight at work their supervisors and their co-workers excuse it. “Oh well, he’s in love,” they say. “What do you expect? She’s getting married,” they say. Couples in love are expected to have nothing else on their minds than each other.

There’s plenty of good stuff out there on which to gaze.

And there’s plenty of the stuff that can get you angry or worried on which to stare. Back seven-or-so years ago we were all staring at the prospects of another terrorist attack on our nation; and everything was red and orange alerts. Today, do you even know if it’s yellow or orange. It’s yellow, unless you are flying and then it’s still orange. And isn’t it interesting that nowadays you think of an orange threat level and you barely bat an eye. It’s not something many people are gazing at.

What has our attention, of course, is the economy. Our daughter got word that her position will be discontinued in a little more than a week, and that’s as well as her boss’s and nearly all of the people she works with. The shocking thing is that the news wasn’t even shocking. It was a shoe she expected to drop. Each semi-monthly open meeting

our Career Ministry holds sees an increased number of people who come looking for some kind of support and help as they look for a new job. And new jobs out there are scarce. Your job and income, and the poor condition of the marketplace, and the house you count on so much: these are the things that are likely to hold your gaze.

That's what you're probably gazing at, unless it's the outrage of the week. The American International Group (AIG) has a large share of the blame for our financial mess; and yet it received billions of our own tax dollars so it wouldn't collapse. Now it's all outrage and indignation that millions of our dollars are still being given to AIG's executives in bonuses. Citizens and politicians are justifiably livid. It is absolute injustice that rich people be rewarded while the swelling ranks of idled workers lose their homes. It's got our gaze. This has our attention. People are grumbling about it. I'm grumbling.

Shadows and Light

So, perhaps we can have a little sympathy for the hungry Israelites in the desert. They were grumbling, and it's not certain that they gazed on anything except the lack of food or at least how bad the food was. One scholar calls it "incoherent ranting."² You might say that they were gazing at the shadows: they were only seeing the things that were getting them down. They wished they were back in Egypt where their bondage at least offered a little predictability in life. They grumbled against God and they grumbled against their leader, Moses.

And then God sent the serpents. It's hard to see a snake in the shadows. It slithers close and bites at their ankles. And for whatever else the message of the story in Numbers says, it's evident that all the gazing on the problems and all the grumbling that went with it was killing them.

So perhaps there's a lesson in it for us: as long as it's only AIG and the economy that's got our attention, the sad state of our affairs is going to be killing us.

God told Moses to fashion a snake out of bronze and lift it up on a pole and tell the people to gaze on it instead of the shadows that surrounded them. Something had to be done to get them to lift their eyes up to the light, after all. And as long as they lifted their eyes to look on their affliction as the chance to see God, they were healed.

Now, what does that say about these things that are killing us and where we should look for help?

This is one of those stories in the Hebrew Scriptures that have a Christian Testament sequel. Fitting, that Nicodemus, the accomplished Pharisee, member of the Jewish Sanhedrin which was their Supreme Court, should slink to find Jesus in the shadows. There was so much to grumble about in his time. And though Jesus had been a bright spot, there was so much about Jesus that caused trouble. Yes, he healed. Yes, he spoke to the hopes of the people. Yes, he seemed to speak well for God. But he didn't fit into anyone else's political or religious agenda. He challenged the authority of the leaders. He violated the Sabbath laws. So, how could this bright spot not fit in Nicodemus' expectations? Even though he recognizes the bright spot, Nicodemus is grumbling in the shadows.

And Jesus says, "You've got to be born again." In other words, you've got to start over. You've been living in the shadows so long that you think that shadows of the night define life.

Let's say that plainly. If you think today that your physical health is all there is to happiness, you're still living in the shadows. If you think that killing Osama bin Laden is all it takes to make us safe, you're still living in the shadows. If you think that having the stock market soar back to 13,000 or 14,000 points is what it will take for us to be secure, you're still living in the shadows. If you think that having a job is all it takes to enjoy the good life, you're living in the shadows. And living in the shadows is still killing us.

I'm not saying that we should all turn our heads away from justice. I'm saying that turning our heads to gaze at Jesus is what we really need. God's Kingdom, illumined by the cross, is what it takes to be safe and secure, have justice, have health and be spiritually alive.

A lot of energy has been wasted, I think, by making this passage in John a battle ground over the question of who is right and who is wrong, which is usually an argument that takes place in the shadows, anyway.³ The real message here is not about who is lost, but about whether you would gaze at Jesus and find life and hope or stay in the shadows where you're still getting killed.

Turn your eyes upon Jesus,
Look full in his wonderful face,
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim
In the light of his glory and grace.⁴

What is it that will give you life:

job security or Jesus, refusing to withhold God's love even in the face of the cross?

National security, or Jesus?

AIG executives deprived of unearned bonuses, or Jesus?

Living 120 years old without disease, or Jesus?

GM, Chrysler, and Ford on firm footing, or Jesus?

MSU in the final four, or Jesus?

This cross is not just a symbol. Jesus said that this is the pole upon which he would be lifted for all to see the measure of God's love for you. "For God so loved the world": it is in God's love that you are made God's child.

Gazing at the Cross

Look at Jesus and you will, without a doubt find God. But gaze at Jesus and you will also see yourself, created in God's image: a person of incredible worth. "Ndiboni", God says. "I see you."

Say, "Sawubona" to God. "Yes."

May you gaze on Jesus, lifted high. May you spend your time looking into his eyes to see God...and, there, see your hope.

References

- [1] Michael Battle, *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu*. Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press © 1997. pp 45-46.
- [2] Thomas B. Dozeman, "The Book of Numbers," *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*, vol. II. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press © 1998. p 163.
- [3] Gail R. O'Day, "The Gospel of John," *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*, vol. IX. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press © 1995. p 553.