

# THE WITNESS

## Season of Lent



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### LENT - 2022

### OLD and NEW

It happens so often that it has become a sort of refrain for those who dare to engage the Bible regularly. Sometimes we read of the miraculous wonders God has performed in the presence of the faithful. In other times we get to be a proverbial fly on the wall when God delivers a message to those willing to hear it. Perhaps it is a grand miracle like the plagues that delivered the Hebrew people from Egypt, or something smaller in scale but no less powerful like a raven delivering bread to Elijah. Whatever form the miracle may take, when we hear or read of it we are often left with a similar thought: "when did God stop showing up like that?"

The answer is simple. God never stopped. God has always shown up in our lives. God has been sending a message to us, and hoping we would perceive it, since time began. The problem has nothing to do with the message, or the messenger, but during the season of Lent it would be pertinent to ask, "are we reliable receivers?"

The reason we ask why God stopped moving, or speaking, or showing up in our times of desperation is because we no longer look to God. Do not misunderstand, we might look in a God-adjacent direction. We look where we have heard God has been in the past as if we were detectives trying to track down an elusive God who is always - frustratingly - one step ahead. We seek, and miss, a God who wants to be found because we look back in time for a God who is eternal, and we fail to seek God now. Isaiah shows us the error of well meaning believers who find themselves stuck, like broken clocks, in an eternal past.

Isaiah 43:18-19 says "Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?"

The verses end with a question (well, the way I used them they do, I did not recite them to the end, to be fair). "Do you not perceive it?" Short answer, no. We do not perceive it. We do not perceive it because we are not looking for it. We are not looking for it because we have trained ourselves to look back at what God did, and in doing so, miss what God is doing. This is the point of these verses, and it is one that makes Easter come alive. The verses offer us a warning that sounds threatening to our way of practicing faith, so let us begin there.

"Do not remember the former things." If we are to respond faithfully, does this mean throwing out our Bibles? Do they not tell the story of "former things?" Of course they do, but they are not useless, because former things are not useless. Former things offer us glimpses from the past, and color the present and future. Former things show us what God has done to remind us that God is (not was but is) powerful. Former things are absolutely imperative to our lives of faith! The problem comes when we never move beyond former things to current things. If we live in the past, our faith is a relic. The former things remind us that the God who is present and at work *now* is ready to act *today* and if we will shift our gaze from the past to the present, then we can experience it in real time. So in verse 19, the author (who is quoting a message from God in the author's present {our past}) shifts tenses. Watch as we track these tenses.

I am (not only God's name, but also present tense)  
about to do (anticipates future action from a standpoint of the author's present)  
a new thing (not something you have seen in your past, something for today)  
now (not yesterday) it springs forth  
do you (now) not perceive it?

If we are stuck in the past, then the answer will always be, no. That is also my answer to the question we (myself included) often ask: "has God stopped acting like we see God acting when we read the Bible?" NO! We just cannot see it. Lent calls us to start looking.

It must have been frustrating to live through the events of holy week and Easter, and be one of very few people to understand as well as any human could that God had just acted on the earth, and most of the earth's inhabitants chose to ignore it. Victory by crucifixion? Empty tombs? Celebrating the execution of an innocent man? These things were certainly new. They were new for *their* time. What might God be doing in ours that we simply will not perceive?

Your Pastor,  
Dr. Court Greene



## Luke Chapter 15: The Lost Sheep

It's interesting to see how the scene is set up in Luke 15. It starts out with the description of the common folks who have gathered around Jesus as he begins to speak. They are described as being tax collectors and sinners (i.e.) "the lost sheep" by the Pharisees and Scribes who have also gathered with the others to hear what Jesus had to say. The Jewish leaders who held themselves in such high esteem with their devote religious practices of the day obviously were expressing that they did not think these folks were "qualified" to be in this same position and seemed to question why Jesus would even allow Himself to speak and spend time in the presence of this "type" of people. Jesus would be questioned for His actions throughout His ministry because of who he was teaching and hanging around with.

The three parables work in concert with each other to show how Jesus draws down to take His message from many to reach just one or two, starting with the parable of the shepherd with 100 sheep leaving the 99 sheep just to find the one lost sheep. I don't think that any sheep actually goes out to the pasture with the desired intent or intentionally tries to get lost. It just happens, mostly due the nature of sheep to wander off in search of "greener pastures". Perhaps even the Shepherd was distracted by his many duties of being a good shepherd and was not fully paying attention to every sheep at that particular time. Nevertheless the Shepherd fulfilled his obligation by retrieving the lost sheep. Coins do not wander off but instead are misplaced by their owner. When the owner notices that the 10 coins they had saved and counted is now down to 9 coins, they must search for the one missing coin. Upon finding each lost item the people rejoice and share their happiness in finding the lost item with others. In the same manner of the father who had two sons; one of his son's was lost due to the son's rebellion, dissatisfaction and unhappiness in how his life seems to be going and leaves the safety and sanctity of the family home. The waiting father rejoices when the prodigal son returns back home and shares his happiness and joy of the son's return by hosting a large banquet. So too is Jesus happy when just one of his lost sheep is found and returns into the fold.

We are all like sheep that are prone to wander away from God, but just like the shepherd it is the lost sheep that Jesus is truly looking for and searching to find. I am so thankful for the approach that Jesus has toward His people. It is comforting to know that when I lose my way and get out of the will of God that Jesus sets out to find me and bring me back to the fold.

Isaiah 53:6 says: We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

The little sheep went about their way  
Just another beautiful day to graze  
sometimes out on the pasture they lay  
soaking up the sun for another day

The little sheep went out each day  
going a little further they seemed to stray  
looking for a greener pasture I would say  
until they realized they had lost their way

The Little sheep could hear the shepherd say  
"hey little sheep have you gone astray?"  
I have come to help you find your way  
That you may live to see another day

By: Rev. Ray Shepard

May God continue to bless and keep you!

—by *Rev. Ray Shepard*



Harlem  
Langston Hughes (1951)

What happens to a dream deferred?  
Does it dry up  
like a raisin in the sun?  
Or fester like a sore—  
And then run?  
Does it stink like rotten meat?  
Or crust and sugar over—  
like a syrupy sweet?  
Maybe it just sags  
like a heavy load.

*Or does it explode?*

*Abrams covenant delayed—by Rev. James Markey*

Recently, I was introducing a group of students to the music of Gustav Holst, an English composer and music teacher most renowned for his composition of “The Planets.” The discussion centered around Holst’s use of personification to imagine personality traits of otherwise indifferent celestial bodies. In case you didn’t know, or have forgotten, middle school students love talking about space. Even the most indifferent, disconnected students will inevitably perk up and raise their hand to share a fact they know, whether true or imagined, about space. Space is fascinating, mysterious, and boy-howdy is it ever big.

It’s estimated (by science people, and thanks to google) that just in our neighborhood alone (the Milky Way Galaxy), there are likely over 100 billion stars. The universe? Golly. The universe is just so big. It’s estimated that there are between 100-200 Billion galaxies containing a total of Two-Hundred-

Billion-Trillion stars in the universe. That’s a 2 with *twenty-three zeroes*. *What I find most mind boggling aside from numbers so large you might as well just stop and call it a “gabillion” and be done, is the massive margin of what could be out there.*

Consider this, too! Light travels at 186,282 mps - that’s miles per second. *Thus, a light year is the way space distances are measured. Why? Because the universe is estimated to be 14-Billion years from end to end (which, again, is dependent on which rabbit hole you’re going down). For perspective: if Earth is our house, our solar system is our neighborhood, our galaxy is our town, etc, and we wanted to take a cosmic ride (traveling at the speed of light of course), it would take us over 25,000 years to reach the edge of town. I hope you remembered to pack snacks. And I wouldn’t plan on going on the longer, 14-Billion year-long-at-the-speed-of-light bus trip across the universe, so don’t even ask. Space is pretty groovy, even if it makes our heads swim to try and think about it.*

John 1:1-5

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. 4 In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. 5 And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.

God creates earth, and man, and chickens, and rocks and stuff - and also, by the way, the rest of the universe- we’re like “wow! And He did it in like a week! That sure is impressive...” It’s worth noting that humanity is not even close to comprehending what a crazy amazing feat it was- and still is, as the universe is \*still being created\*. Because our existence as human beings is ephemeral, the concept of how long universal time is by comparison, and larger still, God’s eternal omnipresence...it’s big. So, so, so big. So big, the entirety of human understanding of it can’t even scratch the surface of it. And God snapped it into existence, because He’s infinitely even bigger.

The inverse is true, by the way. As large and “far out” as the universe is, science has also been obsessing over the smallness of things for about as long as man has been around. When our discussion turned toward how amazing it is that there are particles which are smaller than anything we can physically measure, they insisted I should stick to teaching music. I suppose they’re right.

One of the amazing things about the incomprehensible bigness, and smallness, of our universe is how easily we here on earth can often find ways to place ourselves squarely in the center of it. Perhaps the only thing more remarkable than human egocentricity is God’s agreement to a certain extent. God’s love and Grace is as strong and fierce for me today as it is for you, and as it has been and will ever be for any of his people. He shows us in so many ways through His Word, and the experiences being felt and testified to in our world today. And yet, we often take a “yeah, but...” that’s-not-what-I-meant-exactly approach to being the center of our own universes.

Consider Abram and Sarai. Long before God fulfilled His covenant with them, he called Abram to leave his family and people to realize his destiny of fathering a great nation. The journey of faith for these two was long, and likely very discouraging at times. Though it’s a compelling adventure, I can’t imagine the frustration of knowing that in spite of the fact that Abram was promised to be the father of many, his wife was unable to bear children. God answers this frustration by having Abram do some math:

Genesis 15:5

5 He brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your descendants be.”

And everyone lived happily ever after!

Except, no. That’s never how it goes with us humans. I imagine the Bible would probably be more like a 2 page pamphlet if the recurring human nature getting in our own way parts were omitted.

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Of course, Abraham and Sarah did realize their desire of having a child together, and as promised, God did send out many nations from the line of Abraham.

God's Word is continual in it's ebb and flow of people wondering if God's going to keep up His end, often to their own detriment. In fact, God is constantly reminding people "guys, you know I created the universe, right? I've got this," and people are like, "yeah, but..."

Remember Job? Job had it rough. To add insult to literal injury, most everyone around him is like "Job, you should really ask for a refund, because you've definitely gotten a bad deal here." Job does finally get to the end of his rope - in fairness he held out a lot longer than I would have - and lashes out in frustration. God's response? Like, directly, not a text message or strongly worded letter, but full on violent storm cinematic HD I'm-gonna-devote-a-few-pages-of-this-book-to-respond-to-your-complaint biblically epic way. And man, does he ever have the receipts.

- 38 Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind:
  - 2 "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?
  - 3 Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me.
  - 4 "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth. Tell me, if you have understanding.

Whenever I read this "by the way, you know I created literally everything in the entire universe, where were you again?" narrative, I get uncomfortable for crossing the line on Job's behalf. It's a pretty stark reminder that God hears our cries, but he doesn't suffer no fools. Remember, the universe, each star named by God (Isaiah 40:26) is big. And yet in all it's seemingly infinite grandeur, the entire universe, down to the last speck of incomprehensibly small quark is fully under the command of our Almighty God. That same God has told me directly through his Word that He hears me, He loves me, and He'll never abandon me no matter what. The same is true for you; for all of us.

So how can we deal with life's frustrations, when we feel that things just aren't adding up? Should we allow them to dry up and go unrealized, or worse fester and cause us to lash out in hurtful ways? When we endeavor to control our own destiny, to be master's of a universe we can't even fully understand, we do so at our own peril. God's plan for us is often so big, (or moving in so many small ways) that it can be hard for us to process. It can be so frustrating when you feel God is calling you, and you're unsure where or when He will fulfill that call. Sometimes it might be helpful to remember that a God so big that 14-Billion years is infinitesimal and sub-nano-particles immeasurable to us are as easy to see and understand as our fingers and toes are to us. I've got 10 of each, and sometimes that's all I can keep up with.

—by Rev. James Markey

