

“Declaring Deliverance”
Sermon by Oby Ballinger
Fifth Sunday after Epiphany
Edina Morningside Community Church; February 12, 2017

Luke 7:18-35

The disciples of John reported all these things to him. So John summoned two of his disciples and sent them to the Lord to ask, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” When the men had come to him, they said, “John the Baptist has sent us to you to ask, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?’” Jesus had just then cured many people of diseases, plagues, and evil spirits, and had given sight to many who were blind. And he answered them, “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.” When John’s messengers had gone, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who put on fine clothing and live in luxury are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, ‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.’ I tell you, among those born of women no one is greater than John; yet the least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.” (And all the people who heard this, including the tax collectors, acknowledged the justice of God, because they had been baptized with John’s baptism. But by refusing to be baptized by him, the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected God’s purpose for themselves.) “To what then will I compare the people of this generation, and what are they like? They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another, ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not weep.’ For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, ‘He has a demon’; the Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Nevertheless, wisdom is vindicated by all her children.”

During the one and only psychology class I took in college—before changing my major from psychology—I heard about an intriguing study of human perceptions. There’s a brief video that participants are asked to watch. It shows eight or nine people jumping around in a tight space, passing basketballs to each other. The viewer’s job is to count the number of times those in white t-shirts pass the basketball between them. Over the minute that follows, people jump around and the ball flies back and forth. Then about halfway through, someone in a gorilla costume walks into the frame, and stops right in the middle of the hubbub. The gorilla pounds its chest once, then continues through the scrum to walk out the other side. Even though the gorilla is on screen for nine seconds, when the authors asked viewers at Harvard to watch the video and count passes, [half of them missed the gorilla altogether!](#) Lest we think it’s just a Harvard problem (and believe me I did), the authors find that result to be typical among other sets of viewers as well. They wrote a book about it called *The Invisible Gorilla*, and it’s become a famous psychological study. There are times when we miss what’s right in front of our eyes, especially if we’re looking for something else.

We see that from today’s gospel passage as well. People throughout ancient Jewish society had high expectations for the Messiah to appear at any moment. Widespread prophecies declared that the Messiah would be a righteous and victorious ruler in the form of King David. He would be God’s mighty messenger and God’s own son, sent to oust the imperial Roman occupiers with supernatural power and restore Israel to the glory days of Solomon’s realm. That’s why it caused such excitement at Jesus’ baptism when the heavens opened, the Holy Spirit descended, and a supernatural voice declared “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.” (Luke 3:21-22) Jesus’ ministry began from that moment—he was off and running.

But Jesus has not become the sort of Messiah that was expected. John the Baptist, now imprisoned, sends messengers to ask Jesus what's up. "Where's the revolution, Jesus? When do the fireworks get started with the Romans? When do we Make Israel Great Again?" Jesus says in response, "What do your eyes tell you? God is most certainly here—the blind see, the lame walk, the deaf hear, lepers are healed, dead are raised and the poor have good news." Jesus *is* declaring deliverance, but not in the kingdom-crashing way that John and countless others expected. He shows them a subtler approach than trumpeting his accomplishments from the rafters. Blessed are those who can see the true impact of these smaller, human-to-human salvation stories. They usher in a kingdom more durable than even the righteous prophet John can imagine. Blessed are those not offended by this humbler Messiah, those who can recognize deliverance at hand even when it comes not through regime change but through more modest answers to prayer.

How about us? Are we looking for salvation in the battles of big powers that make the (often disheartening) news? Where might we be so preoccupied in the great to-dos—as Americans, as a busy church, as individuals with full family or work lives—that we miss the subtler manifestations of divine grace? Perhaps God appears to us while we are paying attention elsewhere, so unless we're open to surprise we'll miss what's right before our eyes.

Ten years ago, the Washington Post printed a [fascinating, in-depth article](#) by Gene Weingarten that won a Pulitzer Prize. It described another scenario testing human perceptions, this time out in the real world. Joshua Bell, one of the most famous violinists in the world, who regularly entertains \$100/seat audiences when he plays his Stradivarius violin, would instead play exquisite music on his 300-year-old instrument during the morning commute outside a Washington DC Metro stop. Would people stop and gather? Would they throw wads of cash into his open violin case? Would they recognize him and want to get picture or autographs?

It turns out that almost nobody noticed or stopped their rushed routines. Governmental employees rushed about on their way to meetings. Momentary spectators quickly focused instead on their lottery ticket and magazine purchases. Without the cues that there was something to pay attention to—without a concert hall which designates musical excellence—they just hurried on by. Engaged in the preoccupation of working jobs, social obligations and raising kids, those passersby gave their attention not to world-class beauty but to things far more pedestrian. I'm quite certain I'd have done the same. Haven't we all been in that place of dutiful accomplishments one after another? Some of us spend years there, chasing mirages that keep us from noticing the hidden graces in moments passing by. But, in a line of poetry by W.H. Davies that this article quotes, "*What is this life if, full of care / We have no time to stand and stare*"?

You know who did stand and stare? A worker at the pastry shop whose doors opened nearby. The shoe-shine lady, who for once didn't call the authorities to quell the noise. And the children. Gene Weingarten writes that "Every single time a child walked past, he or she tried to stop and watch. And every single time, a parent scooted the kid away." So who do we think had a truer sense of what was important in that moment?

I share this example because it's a captivating story, and it reveals the Good News of how God is in the world with us. As Jesus demonstrates to John's disciples, divine power is sometimes deployed in smaller, human-scale interventions rather than only in revolutionary, government-toppling acts. To be sure, the Gospel of God's love outlives all nations and powers that humanity has ever conceived. But God does so largely with individual moments of transcendence in human lives. Therefore, when the Holy comes by for a visit in our homes, our places of commerce, our jobs, or in our life as a church, will we be present enough to recognize it? Perhaps children and others who wonder without agenda will show us the way.

Let us pray: *God give us eyes to see, ears to hear, and hearts to respond when your deliverance is declared among us, no matter the form. Grant us glimpses of your glory, that we might have hope when salvation seems far away. Amen.*