

## **“Seeing, Watching, Knowing, Loving**

Psalm 139:1-6, 13-14; Luke 1:26-45 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn  
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – December 24, 2023

*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we see and be seen with  
the eyes of your love. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

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I wonder if you've ever had this experience: You have to call the insurance company – or whoever, some bureaucracy with a complicated automated phone system where you know you're going to be on hold or working your way through menus for what feels like forever– and so you grab yourself a snack as you get started, because it's going to be a while. But somehow, it turns out that you picked the one day nobody else is calling in. Just as you take a big bite of that pastry, the recorded assurance that “Your call is important to us” is interrupted and you are suddenly supposed to be able to speak to a real, live human being! Working at a call center is probably not a great job for people who can't stand the sound of others chewing.

I bring this up because our theme for Advent this year has been “Abiding in Anticipation.” Both of those words imply waiting for a long time: abiding suggesting a long-term commitment to living in a particular way, and anticipation reminding us that we're expecting something to happen but it's not here yet. So I want to talk to you about the long weeks that we've been hoping and preparing for Emmanuel. But the truth is that this year the calendar gave us the shortest possible Advent season. We usually think of Advent as four weeks, but this year, with Christmas Eve the same

day as the Fourth Sunday of Advent, it's really only been three. Have you been wondering how Christmas snuck up on you? This is how that happened. We took that extra weekend after Thanksgiving for a little breather, and suddenly, here we are! Two services in one day, separated by hours rather than a week.

And yet, as I said to you three short weeks ago, Christmas Day being tomorrow notwithstanding, we may continue abiding in anticipation, because there are all sorts of reasons why Emmanuel may be delayed or obscured or only partially revealed. And so we continue in our quest to ready our souls to wait and watch.

Throughout this season, we have given attention, primarily in Disciples class, to spiritual practices that help us in times of waiting. The practice that we have connected with this fourth Sunday, the Sunday of Love, is watchfulness. And what I love about our scripture passages today is how many different ways they point to seeing and being seen. Traditionally, Advent is a time of waiting not simply for the coming of the Christ Child, but also for the Second Coming of Christ. So when we speak of watchfulness, we could be talking about watching for signs of the end times. There are numerous and large rabbit holes we could get lost in, if we wanted to focus on that. But what if, instead, we turned watching for signs into watching for signs of Emmanuel – God-with-us? What if we spent the season watching for moments and interactions that remind us that every person we come into contact with can be Jesus? What if we spent the season watching for the ways that Love shines through the hustle and bustle of our holiday preparations? If you want to watch for signs, those

are the kind of signs I would recommend looking for. Because even though Jesus himself talked about signs of the apocalypse, he also assured us that no one would actually know when it was coming, so there isn't much point in getting hung up on it.

Honestly though, there are much more interesting forms of watchfulness for us to explore this morning. Let's talk about all the seeing and being seen that is going on in this story of Mary. First of all, God has clearly seen Mary. God has seen things in Mary she didn't even know were there. One of my favorite things about God to remind you of is that God knows us better than we know ourselves and loves us more deeply than we can even imagine. And that's what is playing out here as Mary is being called into the special role she was given. It didn't make any sense to her; it didn't seem possible, but God saw something in her that she was able to embrace once it was named.

The other kind of watchfulness that was happening in that interaction was that Mary herself was able to see the Angel Gabriel. Perhaps part of the reason she was chosen was precisely because she was the kind of person who would be able to see an angel when it was sent to her. Many of us might be too busy or too cynical or too proud. She was perplexed and perhaps a little frightened, but the message got through loud and clear. I suppose when the follow-up has a physical impact, it's easier to believe the conversation really happened. But isn't part of the point that this could only happen with the collaboration of someone willing to see things she didn't expect to see? This is also part of what it means to wait and watch.

And then, in the second part of Mary's story that we read today, there is a whole other experience of seeing and being seen. When Mary arrives in Elizabeth's house, she is recognized as a person with a whole new role. We might call what Elizabeth was doing here "seeing with the eyes of her heart." Or perhaps she, too, was watching for signs and was able to interpret the leaping of the baby in her belly as a fanfare heralding the entrance of the Queen Mother of Heaven. For Mary, this had to be a comforting affirmation that what God had seen in her was real, for this beloved, trusted cousin was seeing it too.

Have you ever had someone see you that way, all the way into your soul, where lie gifts you hadn't even imagined having, let alone sharing? Have you ever had someone see you and know that your potential was greater than others had led you to believe? Have you ever had someone see you in a way that made you feel more understood than you ever had before? There really are two parts to this holy kind of seeing. God knows us better than we know ourselves and loves us more deeply than we can ever imagine. To be seen with the eyes of God is to be known and loved. It's not when someone scrapes off our defenses, leaving our hearts naked and vulnerable, and then judges and humiliates us for the things we would never have revealed of our own accord. To be seen with the eyes of God is to be known and loved, not despite our quirks and weaknesses, but because of them.

Have you ever known anyone with annoying habits? Or even just quirky habits? Have you ever lost someone with annoying or quirky habits? Because

sometimes it takes loss for us to truly see others with the eyes of God. And then we find ourselves missing even that completely irritating thing they used to do, simply because it was part of who they were and we love them so much. God knows you better than you know yourself and loves you precisely because of who you are. The psalmist gets at this in our first reading today: “O Lord, you have searched me and known me. . . . it was you who . . . knit me together in my mother’s womb.”

The deepest message of Christmas is Emmanuel – God-with-us – but in a closer sense than beside us. God knows us and loves us, from the inside. To proclaim that the Word took on flesh and lived among us is to say that God knows us from the inside and loves us precisely because of our creaturely weaknesses. We are seen face to face – fully known and deeply loved.

The deepest calling of Christmas is for us to see and love the world as God sees and loves us. If we are watching, let us watch for signs of the belovedness of all God’s children. Let us keep our eyes open, the eyes of our heads and the eyes of our hearts. Let us take courage and not turn away when people are suffering, but open our hearts to know them and love them. Let us pay attention to the beautiful, quirky, possibly annoying details that make the people around us who they are. Let us see what people are saying without words. Let us open our eyes to the actions we can take to know and love God’s suffering beloved people better. We are not God, so let us not presume to know what others need better than they know themselves. But if we are aiming to see them with the eyes of God, we will watch and listen, so that we

can love them with the compassion of Christ, caring for their bodies and souls as though they were our own. This is the call of Christmas. And though we are still waiting, we are also already there. Emmanuel is all around us. The people of God are waiting for us to see. It is time for Love. Hallelujah and Amen.