

Almighty God, in the birth of your Son you have poured on us the new light of your incarnate Word, and shown us the fullness of your love; help us to walk in his light and dwell in his love that we may know the fullness of his joy; who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. AMEN. (Collect for the Second Sunday after Christmas, *Common Worship*)

Anyone who has ever had to write anything will know that surprises sometimes happen. You come into your writing with an idea in mind, a rough sketch of how the composition is going to go and what exactly you want to get across, but then you find yourself going in a completely different direction. This happens to me a lot in sermon writing. In seminary I had friends who would work on sermons two weeks ahead of time, having it written by the Sunday before and then tweaking it throughout the week. Every time I tried this particular method, something would happen during the week before the sermon that would inevitably change everything I was going to say. So, I stopped writing well in advance and instead usually spend the two weeks before a sermon just reading the texts over and over and keeping my eyes open to how the Spirit is moving in the world about me. This particular sermon came out of such a process, but I draw your attention to how I came to this topic because I think it speaks to how we often approach the Bible at Christmas. In Advent, we spend weeks reading the prophets and studying their messages. We also spend a good deal of time thinking about the Gospels, in the case of this year the stories about John the Baptist. Then Christmas comes, and we are wrapped up into the wonderful narratives of Luke and Matthew's birth stories, or in the glorious prologue of John's Gospel. All the while we have readings from the epistles, but I find they're often overshadowed by the Old Testament and Gospel readings.

I'm guilty of this myself. Today's Gospel lesson about the boy Jesus in the temple has been one of my favorites since childhood, and I was already planning to

preach on it. It never occurred to me to think about the epistle for today. Then, as I sat down and dutifully read carefully through each text before I actually began to write, the passage from Ephesians caught my heart and mind, particularly verses 17-19. The author of this letter writes, “I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.” That wonderful phrase “with the eyes of your heart enlightened” immediately caught my attention. What does that even *mean*? It’s something that has great benefits—with enlightened heart-eyes we can see God’s inheritance and the greatness of God’s power, presumably with more clarity than we can usually see them. But *how* do we see with heart-eyes? *How* are they enlightened? *How* does this all work? How how how??? Reading this passage, I felt like my three year old nephew during his “why” phase.

The phrase “eyes of your heart” struck me as odd when I read it, but I couldn’t tell why. I checked 22 different versions of the Bible, including the original Greek, to see how it was translated elsewhere. 8 of the translations had the exact phrase that we had today. 10 had similar phrases, while 3 included no mention of the heart at all—they referred only to having your eyes opened, which I found strange as the phrase “eyes of the heart” is in the original Greek. If one had only read one of those three translations, then, you would never have heard the phrase “eyes of your heart” for, as I found by looking into some commentaries on the text, it turns out that this phrase has no biblical antecedents. The heart, according to one commentary (New Interpreter’s Bible), is often the “seat of human understanding” in the Old Testament, and “darkened or clouded eyes” may

speak to depravity, but the idea of the *heart* having eyes is unique to this text. We can take something from the Old Testament idea of darkened or clouded eyes and depravity, however. The author of Ephesians prays that our heart-eyes might be enlightened. The New Interpreter's Bible commentary on Ephesians points out that this "darkness-to-light" imagery refers to a moral conversion that happens when we turn to God. When our heart eyes are opened, something changes.

I think it's important that this particular text comes to us during the Christmas season. As I mentioned before, the prayer from Ephesians asks for light to come to our presumably cloudy or darkened eyes. Just last week we heard from the Gospel of John that "the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it" (John 1:5). For those of us in the northern hemisphere, Christmas is a time when we think about light coming in the darkness—specifically the light of the Incarnation coming into the darkness of our world. One of my favorite childhood church memories occurred every year at the midnight service on Christmas Eve. After communion, someone would turn out the lights and everyone would hold a candle while we sang "Silent Night." It was an experience that woke all of my senses up (literally and figuratively) to the light coming into the darkness.

At Christmas, we are reminded that our ability to love one another has been strengthened by the coming of this Light. Thomas Merton writes, "If I am to love my brother, I must somehow enter deep into the mystery of God's love for him. I must be moved not only by human sympathy but by that divine sympathy which is revealed to us in Jesus and which enriched our own lives by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in our hearts" (*No Man is an Island*, 5). The Incarnation was God's divine sympathy for us—God became human and showed us how to love one another. If there was ever a time when our heart eyes could be opened, it is at this moment of Incarnation. To put it another way, we can love because God first

loved us (1 John 4:19), a Love that became like us at Christmas in the birth of Jesus.

The opening of our heart eyes can be a tough first step. In order to love others, we have to believe in a deep and profound way that God loves us. This doesn't mean that our knowledge of God's love for us can't come through working with other people—because for many this is exactly how we learn about the love of God—but our heart-eyes are opened when each of us knows that God loves us individually. To put it another way, the eyes of our hearts are enlightened by faith.

But once our heart eyes are opened, what does it mean to see with them? I believe it means that we try to see others in the ways that God sees us—we must try to love others in the ways that God loves us. Christmas is a time when this is at the forefront of many people's minds and consciences. We see appeals to “make Christmas happen” for those in need—bringing gifts to those who can't afford them, giving change to organizations who work with the less fortunate, serving meals to those who have no food. These are all great things—after all, Jesus reminds us that when we feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and visit the imprisoned, we do all of these things for Him. But we need to remember that we can't make Christmas happen. Christmas happens anyway—the miracle of the Incarnation is not controlled by our generosity or lack thereof. What we *can* do, though, and what happens when we see with the eyes of our hearts, is make Christmas known—make the absolute miracle and joy of the Word made Flesh known to other people.

God made God's love for us known not in a way anyone might expect—the Messiah did not come in royal splendor, but in a cave as a small, helpless infant. God's love for us was not made known in a violent political or military coup over the reigning Roman powers, but through the brutal murder of His son—a murder that led to the defeat of death. God's love for us involved a fundamental twist in

the human condition—no longer do we need to fear death, for it no longer has a hold on us. These kinds of upside down views are how we see with our heart eyes. We begin to see in the ways that God sees. When we see with the eyes of our hearts, our perspectives shift.

Jesus was all about changing perspectives—he continually challenges us in the Gospels to think about one another in the same ways God thinks about us. We can see such a shift in perspectives in today’s Gospel lesson. Mary is upset when she finds her twelve-year old son has gone missing and she and Joseph have to return to Jerusalem to search for him. It takes three days to figure out where he is. When I was 7 my little brother went missing on a family trip to Disney World. I remember my parents being frantic—my mom was convinced that she would never see her son again. We found him fairly soon after he had slipped away, but it felt like an eternity (more so to my parents, I’m sure, than to my sister and I who were a little too young to understand exactly what was going on). I can’t imagine what Mary must have been feeling when days passed without seeing Jesus and without having a clue to his whereabouts. When they finally get to him, Jesus shifts the perspective. Mary asks the expected question “Where have you been?! Your father and I have been looking for you for days!!!” Jesus replies rather matter-of-factly that there was no need to look for him, he was in his Father’s house. He here is reminding Mary that he has been sent not only to her, but to everyone. This reminder is given to Mary over and over again—Solomon tells her in the temple when they present Jesus, Jesus reminds her again when he’s older that all are his brother and sister, and from the cross he tells her that the Beloved disciple is her son, and she is his mother. This is a pretty radical shift in perspective for Mary—and a painful one for her I’m sure. Yet it is through stories like these that Jesus calls us to remember that we are all brothers and sisters in Christ.

But why would we want to do any of this in the first place? Shifting our perspectives is hard. Opening our hearts eyes can feel blinding. Daring to love others in the ways that God loves us, or even trying to do so, makes us vulnerable, it sets us apart. Here's the great thing, though, about seeing with our heart eyes—not only do we learn that God loves us and learn to see how God loves others, but with the eyes of our hearts opened “we may know the hope to which God has called us.” A hope that is beyond all hopes. A hope that first came down at Christmas, to show us the depth of God's love for us. A hope that one day we will be in that heavenly country as God's sons and daughters. May the eyes of hearts be opened this Christmas season, and may we seek to know God's love for us and for one another.