

Leah Fredrickson  
Boston Seminar  
Sight Sermon + Hinduism

One common theme among our several scripture lessons is sight. Light and Darkness are pervasive motifs. God's right sight, Samuel's mistaken sight, the Psalmist's comforted sight, the Blind's restored sight.

Our lessons today also have another theme in common. And that is the unexpected. Samuel expects one king, God delivers another. We expect fear in the Valley of Death, but are instead comforted. The blind man is not expected to see and as a Jew, Christ is not expected to perform work on the Sabbath.

And while both themes are valuable in their own right, and merit their own sermons, I think it is when the two themes work in cooperation that our scriptures reveal a profound message regarding the Lenten spirit and our identity as Christians.

The Lenten season is about contemplation, and an attempt to purify ourselves to get closer to God. It is the Christian season that encourages spiritual awakening and refreshment. Many times we recognize this attempt at self-improvement by abstaining from a particular vice. My grandmother always gave up 5 deadly desserts: cake, pie, candy, cookies and ice cream. And while there is great value and much to be learned from fasting, today I want to challenge us to reimagine our Lenten goals. Instead of only giving things up, let's take something on.

In our first lesson, God reminds Samuel of the complexity of sight while Samuel is poised to anoint Israel's new king. Samuel is tempted to anoint one of Jesse's elder sons, but God rejects them saying, "Pay no attention to his appearance or stature... for not as a man sees does the Lord see; man sees only that which is visible, but the Lord sees into the heart."

We are told that God has vision which is not influenced by the handsome or the tidy or the sensible. God sees with a kind light whose amplitude and wavelength is measured by worthiness. His optical window reads righteousness and obedience and longing and love. He perceives the potential of a soul, the purpose of a person. His vision leads us to unexpected conclusions about what is, as Paul so eloquently puts it, good and right and true.

As I am sure many of you know, blindness doesn't mean only the blanket disability of entirely no sight. Instead, there are variations of the disability. A "specific deficit is called prosopagnosia. In these cases, a lesion in a specific brain region impairs the ability to recognize faces. People afflicted with this deficit are able to see faces but cannot identify them, and in fact will deny knowing even their wife or husband." They have the ability to see faces but cannot reason that face's significance.

"More interesting still, prosopagnosia patients do experience an emotional recognition when they are presented with a familiar person even though they are unable to recognize that person as someone they know." They, and therefore we too, have the innate ability to see emotionally, to see to the heart.

We have the capability to see like God sees. Even though our physical sight might only recognize an image by its superficial worth, by its handsome or tidy or sensible features, God has granted us a more profound mode of vision that allows us to see something as good and right and true. We can, we have the choice, to put our rationality aside and engage our emotional, our spiritual sense of sight.

But do we use that sense of sight?

So much of the time we rely upon comfortable and mundane signs to identify what something might be. We rely too heavily on reason and shut out the possibility of noticing, of participating in something even more precious. Our white skinned, blue-eyed Christ is handsome and so it is easy for us to accept him. Our regular Sunday morning worship is tidy and so it is easy for us attend it. And what is sensible about religion?

Nothing is sensible about religion. Rationality does not figure into belief so why don't we apply the same reckless abandon to the rest of our religious life and discover what we might see?

If you are blind, if you are going blind, if you were blind what would you give to see? What lengths would you go to in order to appreciate the world in color and movement and shape? We can relate to the devastation blindness would have on our lives, the loss of it. What would we do to fill the hole of its absence?

And what of our spiritual blindness? God asks us how badly do we want to see the world as He sees the world. Are we ready to discover the little unexpected corners in which God resides and we ignore because they do not fit our notion of religious?

Because we can see spiritually.

He has given us the solution for how to see the world as He does. It is through the absurd. It is through difference. God revels in the unexpected. Our God is the God of breaking tradition. He is the God who picks David, the youngest son of Jesse to rule all of Israel. He is the God who heals blindness with mud on the Sabbath.

And so during the Lenten season especially, we are called to consider how we might too unite with God in one vision. This is our opportunity to follow His example. This is our opportunity to engage in the unexpected, to be God-like and, therefore, living closer to him more in his likeness. The absurd and the different.

First, the absurd. Let's engage the unexpected and the unpredictable. In Christianity, we often refer to our many-faced, multi-faceted God. He is Father, Lord and King. He hardened Pharaoh's heart, but has also accepted and forgiven us regardless of our sins.

But how often in church do we talk about God's multiple personalities? So much of the time we dilute Him down to "God is Love." The depth and richness of His personality goes virtually ignored Sunday to Sunday.

Not Saturday to Saturday, however. In a Hindu temple not far from here every Saturday libations are poured dutifully over Gods before devoted followers. The multi-faced, multi-faceted God is a not frequently ignored metaphor, but a parade of color and visual delight.

The God is first foreboding in His dark dry granite grey. Next, He is soft and luminous with a shower of life-giving milk. Then, He is vibrant and inviting during His bath of orange juice. Before our eyes He

transforms His faces. He visually demonstrates His versatility. He reminds us we too can be many ways, but still one. Just like Him.

Now, let's practice difference for a moment and see if we can't get a little closer to God together.

I believe the perfect place to start is by studying connections to God in other traditions. To cast off the expectations that Christianity conditions in us and which restrain our imagination to greater possibilities to a more intimate connection. I am not asking you to give up your religious tradition, but instead inherit the part of Christian tradition which engages in the mystery of the unexpected and seemingly absurd.

First let's practice a little Islam. I have been seriously studying Islam for 5 years now and it is these little practices, like the one I am about to teach you that impact me, not my academic life, but my religious life, the greatest.

In Islam there is a tradition that recognizes the ninety-nine names of God. He is given glorifying after glorifying superlative. But there is also a tradition that recognizes that despite God's great power He humbles Himself by leaving His mark upon all of us, His most beloved creatures.

In the Islamic tradition the word God is translated into Arabic as Allah. And Arabic is a script that is read right to left. Allah, the name, is spelt with the first character being a single downward stroke. The last three characters are all connected like English cursive. Character two is another downward stroke, like a lowercase 'L', and that is connected to the third character which is another downward stroke and the final character which is also connected, looks like a lower case cursive 'A'.

Now hold up your right hand, palm facing you, for a moment. And you can read the name of God in your very body. Your thumb is the first unconnected character, your pointer and middle fingers the two connected 'L's' and the ring and pinky fingers form the final character.

The perfection of God written on our imperfect hands. How unexpected. Maybe I lack imagination, but I certainly have a difficult time reading "G-O-D" anywhere on me.

And how does that make you feel? Is there anything stirring in you? Are you excited by the knowledge that wherever you may roam God won't only symbolically be with you, but tattooed on your right hand? When your faith falters, and you are not in reach of a Bible, and I promise you this will happen at some point in your life, you now have the ability to peer down at the living grace that God has granted each of us because of his unconditional love. And part of your rock-steady faith will be owed to the wisdom of Islam.

You know, yesterday, the Wayland Interfaith Clergy Association hosted a learning open house at Congregation Or Atid. And it was a great day. The Know Your Neighbor program is one I have invested so much time into over the last several weeks. I have skipped classes to send emails and write newspaper articles and all because I think this is perhaps the worthiest cause with which I have had the privilege of association.

The premise is that every house of worship in Wayland will host an open service with educational material and a question and answer session with the clergy following the service. This way you, the

people of Wayland will have a chance to really Know Your Neighbor better, because of an intimate shared experience.

And after several hours of worship and a shared kiddish and an excited Q&A session with Rabbi Finestone, I privately checked in with a couple women who had made the trek to the synagogue that morning in order to participate in the open house.

They expressed their appreciation for the opportunity and mentioned such highlights as the procession of the Torah around the prayer hall, the way devoted congregation members kissed their prayer books and reverentially touched them to the great scrolls as they passed by. And the beautiful stained glass windows that tell a kabalistic creation myth in orange and purple and yellow arcs silhouetted the morning's pristine snow.

And when they eagerly asked me when the next Know Your Neighbor date was, and I informed them that it was to be in April at St. Anne's Catholic Church their excitement waned. They informed me that they weren't likely to go. They knew about Christianity and it was not Catholicism.

And I cannot explain to you the disappointment and sorrow that filled me upon hearing this news. I made the case to them that because they are our brothers and sisters in Christ, because they are the proximate other, they most likely have the most to teach us about our own faith.

The purpose of Know Your Neighbor, of any comparative religious study, to understand other human beings better by comprehending their faith and their customs and their ritual. But it is not with your intellect that you really learn anything. It is by mirroring your religious faith against another's that ushers in a comprehension of unexpected religious growth. You learn your faith and your custom and your ritual better. You learn what strikes at your soul and you learn how to walk in the Light God has chosen for you as a unique individual.

God has granted us diversity so that we might find his perfection in it. So that we might have chance after chance to get to know him in all his various vocations and locations. He is written in Arabic in the palm of your right hand. He is colored in orange and purple and yellow glass. He is in the ability to recognize a familiar face. But He is also lives in a Catholic's faith in the transubstantiation.

And I can tell you where He is not. I promise He is not in the reluctance to try the unexpected. He is not in the fear and the anxiety of encountering another's faith. He is that faith and I am challenging us to greet Him in all His forms.

Before I close I would like to reread you part of the Ephesians lesson. Listen to them in the spirit of this sermon and then go out and heed the word of God as you see fit.

"Live as children of the light—for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true. Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord... Sleeper awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you."

Our Christian God is calling us to greater consciousness of the Divine. Awake during this Lenten season and seek Him out wherever you might not think to look. Because it is in those unexpected places, it is in those places where he resides.