

March 3, 2024 Third Sunday in Lent

Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church

John 1:1-9, John 8:12-16

"The Art of Seeing: Jesus Christ"

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She had been waiting on this letter's arrival for months. What it had to say would change the entire course of her life. Her beloved was an ocean's width away and this missive would announce if and when they would ever be reunited. Not wanting to wait a single moment to learn the news she tore the letter open in the darkness of the hallway. But she could not make out the words in the midst of the shadows. It was all just a jumbled mess no matter how hard her eyes strained to see. She strode purposely into the nearest room. Her hands trembled with anticipation as she approached the light streaming in from the window. Every word on the paper before her was illumined. And the words brought the joyful news of her beloved's steadfast devotion and a soon to occur reunion.

The painting on the cover of our bulletin this morning, *Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window*, is emblematic of the artist Johannes Vermeer. He was known as the master of light in all its many forms. His various paintings at one of my favorite museums, the Frick, are described in this manner, "Vermeer's light is by turns clear and turbid, cool and warm, coarse and fine, rough and satiny...his pictures seem to be activated by light emanating from within." Russ Ramsey writes, "Vermeer did not paint a hand, a vase, or a viola: instead he painted forms of light and color as they appeared on those objects." (Ramsey, p.107)

Today is the second in our sermons series on "The art of Seeing." Last week we considered seeing ourselves. Today we are considering seeing Jesus Christ. The gospel of John is clear. Jesus is "the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." Jesus is, "the true light, which enlightens everyone..." Jesus is "the light of the world."

Our wider biblical witness certainly speaks to the importance of light. In Genesis when there is nothing but chaos and formless void, God calls out, "Let there be light." And from there the fine work of creation is set into play. For those of us who can see with our eyes, light is a primary tool for perceiving the world.

Vermeer understood the importance of light. In this painting and in many of his paintings the entire composition is based upon the availability of light and what it allows us to see, what it reveals. And why not? Without light nothing at all can be visually seen. Light reveals the world around us.

So, what does it mean that we use light as a metaphor for Jesus Christ? What does that tell us about who Jesus is? Jesus is a revealer. Last week we considered who we are. We looked at Edward Hopper's painting, *Automat*, and talked about the woman's sense of isolation and our own 3 AM moments when we feel isolated and alone. The hope we found last week is the promise that God is ever present with us in all times and all places. It is a deeply lovely and comforting thought but the promise can feel rather amorphous. Jesus Christ is the flesh and blood embodiment of that promise. Christ transformed a theological precept into a living, breathing reality. Christ transformed a thundering voice from above into the voice of a compassionate teacher sharing stories of seeds and sheep right in the midst of the people. Christ transformed a God who spoke of hearing our suffering into one who shared in our suffering, to the point of being placed on the cross. Christ allowed us to see that indeed God is deeply present with us; deeply invested in the nitty gritty realities of our mortal lives; deeply committed to ensure that we are healed, restored, and reconciled.

In Vermeer's painting, the woman needs the light to receive the news of her reunion with her beloved. In our lives, Jesus Christ offers us the ability to recognize just how completely committed the divine is to being connected to us and journeying beside us. A window is opened and how we see everything is transformed. We are gifted with a radical shift in our perception of the world.

In the Oxford English Dictionary there are multiple definitions for the word perception. The one that strikes me most is under the category of the psychology of perception. It defines it as "The neurophysiological processes, including memory, by which an organism becomes aware of and interprets external stimuli." Now I am not nearly intelligent enough to unpack neurophysiological processes but I do understand how memory, how what we have previously learned, shapes how we view what happens each and every day. The less sophisticated way that I repeatedly express it is, attitude affects experience.

As we make our way through our day if we perceive we are basically on our own to sink or swim it is easy to think that many of our interactions are win/lose propositions. If we perceive that God is not particularly present, the world is a big, scary place. If we perceive we have to earn God's love, life can feel like a series of trials and tests. Just laying out that worldview makes me feel anxious, defensive and protectively selfish. Our personal perceptions, based on our preconceived view of the world, shape every new experience we have.

See what happens when our vision of the world and our perceptions shift. If we perceive our days through the window opened by Jesus Christ, everything is illuminated in a new way.

When we remember that God has revealed God's presence by stepping into the flesh and blood of Jesus Christ, we step into each new moment seeing we are never alone. When we remember that Jesus Christ walked this earth just as we do, we see God is deeply and completely invested in this world. When we remember that Jesus Christ came to teach us and feed us and heal us we see that the divine is always willing us to flourish. When we remember that Jesus Christ cared for the outcast and the most vulnerable we see the immense value of all people. When we remember that Jesus Christ loved us enough to die for us, even and because of our brokenness, we know that we carry God's love with us regardless of our brokenness.

The revelation of Jesus Christ changes not only how we see our God, but how we see our world, and how we see ourselves and others. We see a God who will stop at nothing to be by our side in life, leading us to restoration and wholeness. We see our world as a place both lovingly created by our God and lovingly inhabited by our God, ever seeking to preserve and restore it. We see ourselves and others as ones who are valued beyond measure by the divine which makes us all beloved and precious.

Stepping into each day with these perceptions shapes how we navigate every twist and turn, every joy and sorrow we may experience. The reality that we and others are valuable is illuminated. The reality that every corner of this creation is imbued with the divine is illuminated. The reality that nothing will deter God's love from leading everyone and everything to reconciliation and restoration is illuminated.

When we see the world through the window Jesus Christ has opened for us we see beyond the darkness that often clouds our vision. Having a day when you are feeling incredibly imperfect

and perhaps even unlovable? Jesus Christ shines a light on just how incredibly well-loved and valuable you are. Having a day when you are brought face-to-face with those whom you disagree, and it feels as if the world is full of opponents? Jesus Christ shines a light on how we are, one and all, beloved children of God. Having a day when it feels as if the entire world is coming apart at the seams? Jesus Christ shines a light on the promise that regardless of the very real troubles of this world, God is in our midst leading all of creation beyond the immense brokenness we face in these days.

Yes, we will inevitably have days when we feel bad about ourselves; days when those around us will frustrate us; days when we will fear being overwhelmed by the wars across the globe, the climate crisis, the toxic divisions in our nation, and the latest tragedy of the day. There is more than enough darkness to be found. But we have a direction in which we are invited to turn.

As we come to the table today and are fed by God's hand let us also approach the window Jesus Christ has opened for us that we may see everything illumined the way that he does. We come to the table as valuable and beloved, surrounded by valuable and beloved people, in the midst of a world that God is ever seeking to lead toward restoration for everyone and everything. What a sight to see.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Ramsey, Russ, *Rembrandt Is In The Wind*, Zondervan Reflective, USA, 2022.