Sermon for The Feast of the Presentation (transferred)

Delivered at Christ Church Los Altos on Sunday, February 3, 2019
Title: Seen

Just days after wrapping up my junior year of High School, I took a train from Cleveland to Portland, Oregon, where I met up with my sister, then an undergrad at Stanford, and some friends living in the area. We spent a couple weeks exploring the city and then planned a long, meandering journey east. Our itinerary was loose, summer stretching out before us like a vast expanse of possibility. We would camp and hike. We would be one with the earth. We would live on LunaBars and wild berries and drink water from flowing streams.

Our only definite stop was at the Rainbow Gathering, where Lauren had arranged to meet up with her roommate, Ava, and some other friends from school. For lack of a better description, the Gathering is a big hippy festival held each summer in a national park, and that particular year in northern Idaho. So, as June wound itself down, we set off. Only we didn’t have a car. Or much money. And our parents didn’t exactly know what we were up to, so we didn’t call them for help. How we actually got to Idaho is a long, complicated tale involving beautiful places; camping mishaps; every possible form of transportation; sprained ankles; loosing the bag that contained all our values and all our money; depending literally on the kindness of strangers; running out of LunaBars; and the kind of laughing, crying, and fighting only sisters can survive.

All of which is to say, by the time we made it to Bear Valley, I had reached the limits of my patience with this whole summer of love thing we’d been going for. I missed toilets and shampoo. I missed familiar faces. I was tired of not knowing where we were going to sleep each night. I was tired of living off canned fruit and peanut butter. I was, simply, tired. And while the Gathering was not going to offer many creature comforts – no toilets or shampoo were there to be found, from what I could tell – it at least represented a place we intended to be, a place we would stay a few days.

Now the only problem was that the Gathering gathered about 40,000 people, and we had to find Lauren’s friends somewhere in that sea of souls. In the days before cell phones, this was complicated. It was complicated further by the fact that her notes on where her friends were camping were tucked safely away in the bag we’d lost somewhere in Washington. Figuring I could be of no help with this, we found one of the many communal kitchens where vats of lentils
and rice were being prepared for dinner that night, set our bags down, and agreed that I’d help cook while she went looking for Ava.

I asked a friendly guy in flowing pants and dreadlocks how I could help, and he set me at a makeshift table with a cutting board, knife, and mountain of carrots. A few minutes later, another young woman – blond and bright eyed – joined me. She was soft-spoken and calm in a long flowing dress, long flowing hair, and bare feet. With her nose rings and tattoos she looked much more at home in this place than I felt, but she was just so kind that she made me feel more at home, too. And then, as we deposited our mound of carrots into a monstrous pot, she giggled, “This is going to sound strange, but you look so much like my friend, Lauren.” I gave her one of those “say what?” looks, before it clicked and she cried, “Claire?!?” Out of 40,000 possible companions, I’d been dicing carrots for the last hour with Ava. It took me a solid five minutes to stop my frantic laughing, which is about how long it took Lauren to stop hers when she returned a few hours later, discouraged and disheartened, and found us sharing a piping hot bowl of daal.

Now, practically speaking, I was glad to have found the one person we’d been looking for, but my relief was about more than that. It went deeper. I was only 16 that summer. I’d never spent much time outside of my hometown. And then for weeks I found myself in another world – a world of activists and artists; vegans and poets; college students who stayed up late drinking wine and talking about how to change the world and woke up early to do yoga and tend the basil. It was a world that inspired and excited me, a world that made me think my life could be infinitely more interesting than anything I’d yet imagined, but it was also a world that disoriented and confounded me. A world that felt out of reach. A world that was foreign to me. And then Ava did something incredible – accidentally and awkwardly, sure – but it was still incredible: she recognized me. She had been looking for me, too – this person from this strange world - and, against all odds, we had found each other.

Today, we celebrate the Feast of the Presentation, when Jesus’ parents take him out his familiar environment, his hometown, on a meandering journey to Jerusalem, where he is to be presented to the Lord according to the customs of Jewish law. Mary and Joseph were doing the responsible, traditional thing, something hundreds and thousands of Jews had done for hundreds or thousands of years without issue or interruption, only for some reason nothing goes according to plan. At the very same time Mary, Joseph, and Jesus were winding their way to the temple, a righteous and devout man was tracing a similar path, guided by the Spirit, and when Jesus was
brought into the holy site, Simeon saw him, and he *recognized* him – this child he had never seen before – and he took him in his arms and began praising God, singing a song that has become one of the most beloved in the Church, declaring that this boy from Nazareth was, in the flesh, the very salvation of God, offered for all people, a light of revelation and the glory of Israel.

Luke tells us that Jesus’ parents were *amazed* at what was being said about him, but I wonder if this isn’t slightly redacted. Amazed? Sure. But maybe also, I don’t know, alarmed? Anxious? And not just about what was being said, but about the overly-familiar behavior of this strange stranger, this perky prophet. I wonder if Mary and Joseph welcomed this reminder of who their child was and would become. I wonder if it felt like good news, or the beginning of their son slipping away from them into a world they didn’t understand and couldn’t control, a world of people who would be forever overly familiar with their son, always wanting more of him, needing more from him, until they had taken all he had. It’s as if Simeon recognizes this as well - recognizes *them*, too - because he offers them the strangest of blessings: saying simply that their son is indeed destined to change the lives and the fates of many, and that this power will come at great cost not only to him but to them. And it doesn’t end there. Another prophet, Anna - often just kinda left out of the story - recognizes Jesus as well and begins praising God for the gift of this life and his light.

Recognition. It is a powerful thing. It releases energy pent up within. It open possibilities previously unimagined. And, no matter which side of it we are on – the seeing or the beings seen - it changes us. We have all experienced this. A teacher or priest once said you were a good person, and you believed them, a belief that buoyed you through a difficult childhood or a difficult season of life. You apologize to a friend for doing a really crummy thing, and they tell you how much it hurt, but they also look you in the eyes and see you, still you, and accept the apology. You come out to a close family member, not sure how they will take it, and they take clasp your hand, saying, “do you know how much I love you?” Or perhaps you see a spark in a student, a mentee, a grandchild, and it gives you great joy to tell them their art is so complex, their poetry so sophisticated, their courage so ennobling, and to watch them grow in confidence, knowing they are seen – really seen.

For Simeon and Anna, recognizing Jesus opened in them a joy and a delight they had only dared to hope would be fulfilled. But notably missing from this story is what it meant to Jesus. Was he relieved to be recognized? Had he been waiting all those long years, wondering
why he always felt so … different? Why he didn’t quite fit? Why Nazareth disoriented and confounded him, and felt so much like a foreign world? Why he felt so much more keenly and think so much more deeply than the other kids? Did it suddenly all make sense? Or, was he terrified by it? Had he been hoping already, maybe not all the time but in that dark quiet just before sleep, that this cup might pass? Were the words welcome, or overwhelming? Tantalizing, or traumatizing? I don’t know. We can’t know. But I’m willing to guess that, like every life-changing moment, every time we are truly and deeply recognized for exactly who we are, it was a little of both. It was a little like dying, and a little like rising, and on the other side, welcome or not, he would not be quite the same.

Recognition is powerful, and it changes us, and because of that, it can be profoundly dangerous. Take Oscar Romero. He was a comfortably bookish Archbishop in El Salvador when Civil War began tearing the country apart in the 1970s. In his world, as in Jesus’ world, religious leaders occupied a place of prestige and privilege among the elites of the social and political order. He was often invited to fancy dinner parties at the home of officials who, for their day job, organized a thinly veiled campaign of torture, disappearance, and genocide against their fellow citizens. When he was appointed to his post in 1977, Romero was seen as a social conservative, too concerned with heady things to notice the plight of the people around him. Until in March of that same year, one of his friends, a Jesuit priest named Rutilio Grande, who had been organizing self-reliance groups among the poor, was assassinated.

Grande’s death shook Romero so deeply that he decided to look at the issues more closely, no longer content to stay ignorant or deny the crisis unfolding around him, and when he looked he not only saw farming communities being exploited, women being abused by soldiers, and children living in constant fear. He saw something even more alarming. He saw that, these, too – these marginalized, forgotten human beings - were also children of God. And once he saw that, once he recognized them for exactly who they were, beings beautiful and blessed in the belovedness, he could no longer stand idly by. Recognizing the common people around him as fully and truly human changed Romero into a reluctant but powerful prophet, one who stood always with the marginalized and forsaken, just like his savior, Jesus, and this change would cost Romero his life, just like it cost Jesus his.

Today, we remember the boy who was recognized as the savior of not only his people but all people. The boy who gave hope to two devout, would be prophets in Jerusalem, and then
grew in strength and wisdom to become the hope of a whole wild assortment of outsiders: tax collectors, gentiles, and women; minorities, fundamentalists, and children; those with mental illness, adulterers, lepers: all of whom he saw for who they really were, first and foremost: children of God. And in that seeing he loved, liberated, and enlivened them for a future they had not previously allowed themselves to imagine. And this same boy, well, he sees us, too, precisely as we are, and recognizes us entirely. May we be willingness to be changed by our encounters with him. May we be willing to see ourselves and those around us in a new light. And perhaps, someday, by the grace of God, we will see the world precisely as he sees it, and never be the same. **Amen.**