

Year B First Sunday After Christmas Seeing the Guy in the Gorilla Suit Luke 2:22-40

Perhaps you have experienced the, slightly embarrassing, experience of looking for something, frustratingly declaring it is not to be found, only to have someone else take a quick look and say, “It’s right here,” with the implied words, “I can’t believe you didn’t see it.”

In today’s story we don’t have just any old pair of eyes looking on our behalf and we don’t have any old voice calling things to our attention. We have the Holy Spirit. Sure there are other characters in today’s Gospel story – not the least of which is Jesus, the Messiah – but in this particular episode, the Holy Spirit is the star of the show.

Mary and Joseph arrive at the temple with their small child, Jesus, in Mary’s arms. With hearts full of love for God and the desire to be obedient to God’s will, they are drawn to the temple to worship.

At the same time, Simeon was drawn to the temple as well. The Holy Spirit is at work bringing together the young family from Nazareth and a righteous, devout man. Simeon is looking forward to the “consolation of Israel”. We are told that the Holy Spirit rests on this man and has revealed to him that he will not see death until he has seen the LORD’s Messiah.

Simeon lays eyes on the infant Jesus and instantly knows that he is looking at the Messiah. “My eyes have seen your Salvation,” he declares aloud to God in praise. How astounding. Simeon looks at a helpless child and knows this tiny little creature, who can’t even yet walk or talk, is one day going to redeem and rule all of Israel.

Now, this isn’t a lucky guess on Simeon’s part nor is it because he is super smart that he knows he’s looking at the Messiah. He may be smart but it’s not his intelligence that has revealed this knowledge to him. The Holy Spirit has opened Simeon’s eyes to see something right in front of him that he would have otherwise missed. This ordinary looking little bundle of joy was going to grow up into someone extraordinary – the Messiah.

After meeting Simeon, the Holy Spirit then introduces the small family from Nazareth to a very old, very devout woman named Anna. How do we know the Holy Spirit is involved once again? Because Anna is named a prophet. You don't get the title of "prophet" unless the presence of God – the Holy Spirit – is with you, guiding you to deliver, on God's behalf, the message he has for his people.

Like Simeon, Anna spots the infant Jesus and sees what others do not see. She immediately proclaims the message – to all who were looking for the redemption of Israel – that they were looking at that redemption in the child before their eyes.

I am sure you have noticed that there is an awful lot, in this short passage, about "eyes", and "seeing", about "looking" and "being guided".

It is absolutely no coincidence that Luke writes all of that stuff about eyes, and seeing, and looking, and guiding, in the same passage where the Holy Spirit figures prominently. No coincidence.

In a study published in Smithsonian Magazine, people were asked to watch a short video of two groups of people passing a basketball around. Half wore white shirts, half wore black shirts. Viewers are asked to count how many times a person in a white shirt catches the ball. After intently watching and counting, the end of the video comes and the researcher tells you how many catches you should have counted. But then, the researcher asks, "Did you see the big, black gorilla walk through the circle of basketball players?" What? There was no gorilla – I would have seen a gorilla. The viewer re-watches the video and sure enough, guided by the words of the researcher, the viewer now sees a person in a gorilla suit casually walk into the circle of players, stop and turn to the camera, wave, and then continue walking out the other side of the circle. How on earth did we miss a guy in a gorilla suit doing that? We were looking, we were seeing what was there, weren't we? Nope. Clearly, we do not see what is plainly in front of our eyes. The study calls this "inattention blindness" and says, "the most effective cloaking device is the human mind." To uncloak our minds, help is needed. Luke lets us know that our help comes from the Holy Spirit. If we want to see what God

has placed in front of our eyes, we need the guidance of God's presence – of the Holy Spirit, to help us truly see.

To truly “see” means more than just physical sight. To “see” in the Gospels means to know, to understand. Just as Simeon and Anna saw a baby like everyone else saw a baby, they knew who and what this baby truly was. The Messiah, salvation, redemption. Luke tells us in his gospel that the Holy Spirit is God's greatest gift to us (11:13); the Holy Spirit will teach us what to say when we need to testify about Jesus (12:12), empower us to witness. The Holy Spirit is not simply dwelling in us; the Holy Spirit is active through us. A tour through Luke's Gospel shows us very quickly how active the Spirit is: helping John the Baptist prepare the way for Jesus, conceiving Jesus in Mary's womb, helping Jesus withstand the wilderness temptations, helping the disciples evangelize with boldness, and the list goes on.

And that Spirit – that amazing, active person of the Trinity – dwells in us. That Spirit, who rested on Jesus at his baptism, rests on us through our baptism. That Spirit is our gift from God. What Jesus did for the disciples when he was with them, the Spirit continues to do for us. The Holy Spirit teaches, leads, validates, and empowers. What does the Spirit teach? What does the Spirit empower us to do? Luke gives us the answer to that too.

“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you,” Jesus says. “And you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). The Holy Spirit – whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine – will empower us to do whatever it takes to further God's purpose to reconcile all things to himself through Christ.

It is the Holy Spirit that guides and nourishes the church, giving us the confidence to know God's purpose will be fulfilled. In today's Gospel we heard that Simeon was “looking forward to the consolation of Israel” and Anna proclaimed to those “looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.” In both cases, the word “looking” carries the sense of “expectantly awaiting.” So, not just eager but certain – knowing it will happen.

Mary Jo Leddy writes of the moment she saw the majestic blue herons in the sanctuary near her home. As one giant heron gracefully launched into flight, she felt that she was seeing the Holy Spirit soaring in the skies. Shortly after that, she was in a horrific car accident. A young woman waited with her as the ambulance rushed to the scene and stayed with her in the hospital, not wanting Mary Jo to be alone, until her friends arrived. The woman had bought flowers from the hospital gift shop and left them, along with a note, with Mary Jo's friends. Her friends got her name and number and with immense gratitude thanked this woman for caring for a stranger until friends arrived. When Mary Jo was able, she read the card the woman had left. It was signed Christine Heron. The number she dialed was no longer in service. The phone book had no one by that name. Mary Jo found no sign of this woman in the apartment buildings in the neighbourhood. This mysterious stranger, that Mary Jo wanted so badly to thank, had disappeared without a trace and Mary Jo suddenly knew, this had been God, the Holy Spirit, acting in her life.

God is at work, in us and through us, in the world in the activity of the Holy Spirit. Let us open our eyes and see.