

“Seeing is Not (Necessarily) Believing”
by Greg Smith-Young (Elora-Bethany Pastoral Charge)
Fourth in a Lent series on John 12

John 12:35-43

March 31, 2019

Coming soon . . . the annual broadcast of *The Ten Commandments!* An hour for each one! (At least, that’s what it seems like.) Charlton Heston is okay as Moses. Yul Brynner makes Pharaoh! He plays the king proud and stubborn, just like in the Bible. God hit him with blood, frogs, lice, flies, pestilence, boils, hail, locusts, darkness and death. He would not let God’s People go. His was hard.¹

The Bible says God hardened him! What do we make of that?

Skip ahead many years. God commanded frightened Isaiah to speak God’s word to God’s people.

Go and say to this people:

“Listen intently, but do not understand.
Look carefully, but do not comprehend.”

*Make the minds of this people dull.
Make their ears deaf and their eyes blind,
so they cannot see with their eyes
or hear with their ears,
or understand with their minds,
and turn,
and be healed.²*

God sent Isaiah to speak, and God guaranteed that no one would listen. What do we make of that?

Let’s hear this account of Jesus.

Please read the Scripture by clicking [here](#).

¹ I’ve replaced the word “mind” for the biblical word “heart” (*leb* in Hebrew, *kardia* in Greek). In the ancient understanding of the human person, the heart was the centre of the person and the location of their decision-making and thinking. Since we associate these functions with the “mind,” it is a less-misleading (if also less-literal) translation. See John Goldingay, Old Testament Theology volume I: Israel’s Gospel (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 351.

² Isaiah 6:9-10 (Common English Bible)

II

This is John's Gospel. John's Gospel splits into two main parts.³ The first summarizes what Jesus did and what he said over a three-year span. It tells of his powerful actions. It calls these "signs." Signs, because they point to who Jesus is. So scholars call this first part "The Book of Signs."

The reading we just heard read ends the Book of Signs. By now in Jesus' story, people have seen him:

- 1) Change water into wine;
- 2) Heal a man's child;
- 3) Heal someone paralyzed;
- 4) Feed an enormous crowd;
- 5) Heal someone born blind; and
- 6) Raise Lazarus from the dead.⁴

These are the six John highlights.⁵ They have seen many other signs too!

How has Jesus' travelling campaign worked out? Have these signs successfully pointed people to Jesus? Who has believed through Jesus' message?⁶

Hardly anyone.

Many have seen. Only a few have believed (and they are keeping quiet about it.)⁷

³ Prologue (1:1-18), Book of Signs (1:19-12:50), Book of Glory (13:1-20:31), Ending (21:1-25)

⁴ Told respectively in John 2:11; 4:46-54; 5:1-15; 6:5-14; 9:1-7 and 11:1-45. Though the Gospel doesn't explicitly identify all these as signs, these are the six signs traditionally agreed to by scholars. All agree that there are seven signs, since seven is a number signifying completeness and perfection. The question is, what about the seventh sign? Many say it's when Jesus walked on the water (6:16-24). Others believe it is the sign of Jesus' crucifixion (and maybe his resurrection). I tend toward the latter view, as all these were "public" signs. (Jesus walking on water was only seen by the disciples in the boat with him).

⁵ The last verse in the Gospel says, "*Now there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.*" (21:25). Chapter 21 seems to have been added on to the Gospel later, since chapter 20 seems to already have been a conclusion: "*Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.*" (vv. 31-32)

⁶ John cites Isaiah 51:1, from the Greek Septuagint translation of the Hebrew Bible that was done in the 3rd and 2nd centuries before Jesus. It was the translation used by Greek-speaking Jews, including the authors of the New Testament books.

⁷ John 12:42f.

III

Why so few?

The answer we get, the troubling answer, is that they could not believe. God did not give them belief.

Remember the prophet Isaiah? The Gospel does:

*Their eyes are blinded,
their minds are hardened,
so that they would not see with their eyes
and perceive with their mind,
and turn to me, God,
so I could heal them.*⁸

I am not sure what to do with this.⁹

Think back to Pharaoh. Would he have been thrilled to free those slaves, if only God had let him? Or, was Pharaoh stubborn, arrogant and tyrannical? Did God choose to leave him that way? The point of the Exodus was to free the slaves *and* destroy the myth of Pharaoh's power (and all tyrants). That would not have happened if God had let Pharaoh cut a deal. So God left him as he already was, hardened. God let Pharaoh do what he would have done anyway.

Back to Jesus. . . . Is it that they would have believed in Jesus, but God stopped them? Or, is it that we are not naturally inclined to believe in Jesus? Trusting Jesus, following him, giving our lives into his hands is really hard. Impossible even. Faith in Jesus is not a natural ability. We cannot have it, unless God changes us. When God does, belief blossoms!

After all those signs he'd done, most people were still not understanding Jesus. They were

⁸ John 12:40 (The Message). I substituted the word "mind" for "heart"; see John Goldingay, Old Testament Theology volume I: Israel's Gospel (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 351.

⁹ Bruner's commentary on this passage expresses very well a healthy struggle to understand it. "Jesus himself predicted his Narrow Gate would be found by only a 'few' (Matt. 7:14) and said that though 'many' are called, nevertheless 'few' are chosen (Matt. 19:30). This mathematics are hard to square with the power and love of God. John the Evangelist is wrestling with this very mystery in our passage. This Isaiah inquiry is John's attempt to do the math of God's people." Frederick Dale Bruner, The Gospel of John, A Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 733. He describes how the difficulty of this teaching occupied early Christian thinkers (735). Bruner also cites these helpful words by Lesslie Newbigin: "[W]e must not read these passages through the spectacles of a rigid and deterministic doctrine of predestination. We are forbidden to do so by the sentences which form the immediate sequel to [verses 37-41]. 'They did not believe, . . . but many even of the authorities believed.' 'God has consigned all men to disobedience that he may have mercy on all.' (732; Newbigin is quoting Romans 11:32)

still not “seeing” Jesus. They were still not trusting in Jesus. And for some reason, God was keeping it that way.

Maybe because Jesus’ work was not finished, not yet.

IV

Maybe these days it’s the opposite. Sometimes I’m surprised anyone believes in Jesus.

This time of year, we’ll get *The Ten Commandments* movie. I expect we’ll also get a new documentary or magazine story that goes something like this: “Jesus did not really do X, Y, and Z. The church has covered it up. Now, finally, here’s truth.” This schtick has been going on for years. Not much new ever comes from it. And still, people keep believing in Jesus. Surprising!

We get the sense that smart people don’t believe in God. Education erodes faith. The arguments of atheism have successfully punctured and sunk religion. It doesn’t help when a few of Jesus’ ministers make best-seller lists by going along with this. Again, this schtick has been going on for years. Atheist arguments have been met by thoughtful and informed Christian responses. Clergy who go along with them speak for fewer than they pretend. And still, people keep believing in Jesus. Surprising!

Far more worrisome, of course, is that some of Jesus’ ministers use their power to abuse, and people cover for them. And when folks use Jesus’ name to attack others for their religion, their sexuality, their politics and so on. And the terrible record of Jesus’ followers who held slaves, created colonialism, ran residential schools, cooperated with the Holocaust, and so on.

Still, people keep believing in Jesus. The Jesus movement keeps on resurrecting. In much of the world, it’s booming. Surprising!

V

What do we do with this? When we expect there to be belief — like among those who saw Jesus doing all those things — the field is barren. When we think faith must be dead, it is popping up everywhere.

God does what God does. Who believes and who does not, God knows. We imagine it’s our choice. No. So much stands in the way of choosing the way of God. Starting with ourselves, the hardness in us. Only God can heal the hardness and free us to believe.

And God does. As in many things, though, God is unpredictable. In ways that surprise us: “I never expected he would believe!” In ways that confound us: “Why doesn’t she believe?”

Can you entrust this to God? Can you trust God to give the gift of belief when it needs to be given? If I believe in God, God who we see in Jesus, I think I can.

VI

I see Jesus. When the numbers were not adding up, when it seemed like a good time to cut his losses, when all he had done until then seemed to have yielded so little . . . none of this was surprising to God. The widespread disbelief Jesus was facing, God had already wrapped into God's unfolding story. God's story, which Jesus was now about to faithfully continue, because of his love for those who believe, and his love for those who don't yet believe.

I said John's Gospel has two main parts. The Book of Signs is 12 chapters that tell about three years. Now, 9 chapters will tell us about one weekend: the Last Supper (Maundy Thursday); Jesus' trials, condemnation, crucifixion, and burial (Good Friday); waiting (Silent Saturday); and resurrection (Easter!).¹⁰ They call this "The Book of Glory," because it is the glorious climax of Jesus' work.

We could also call it "The Book of One More Sign." It's the sign of the Messiah of God rejected by everyone, belief in him shattered, a dying man on a cross, saving all the world, and resurrecting to life again. The new Exodus, when the greatest Pharaoh of them all, Death itself, was defeated.¹¹

That's unbelievable!

But God's gift of faith surprises. Many have heard and seen this sign. They know and believe.

Let's ask for more to believe. Let's pray for ourselves to believe again. Amen.

¹⁰ It's actually more than a weekend. John 21:26-29 finish the Thomas story with Jesus' appearance 8 days later.

¹¹ From N. T. Wright: "But John is clear, and we should be clear, that the new creation was indeed going ahead in Jesus. The new Exodus was proceeding faster than anyone realized. The six signs were leading rapidly to a seventh, the moment when all the themes of the gospel would come rushing together and leave history stamped for ever with the image of a dying man on a cross, lifted up for all the world to see, opening blind eyes and softening hard hearts with the love of God. The greatest Pharaoh of them all, the power of death itself, was going to do its worst, and suddenly God would give freedom to the whole world." John for Everyone, Part 2 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 38.