

## You Can See a Lot Just by Looking

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Yogi Berra is said to have said, “You can see a lot just by looking.” That seems true enough; but it is also true that you can miss a lot by just looking. I had a couple of very busy days this week, with Christmas Eve on Thursday, and then on Friday, when I found myself at a Christmas Breakfast at 6:00 a.m. in the Canton Masonic Temple. Jim Fidler had invited me to give the Christmas Breakfast address; and I was happy to go – well, maybe *happy* isn’t quite the right word; but I was awake, and I was there with four hundred and fifty others who were getting Christmas started early with prayer, fellowship, a nice breakfast, and a Christmas message. I decided to share a poem with them that I had shared with you the first Christmas Eve we were together back in 2002. It is a poem by Emma Lent entitled *Unawares*, a poem that helps us to think about the difference between just looking and really seeing. To paraphrase Yogi, “You can miss a lot by just looking and never really seeing what’s right there in front of you.”

They say the Master’s coming to honor the town today,  
and no one can tell at whose house or home the Master will choose to stay.

But I thought as my heart beat wildly, what if He would come to mine?

How I would strive to entertain and honor this Guest Divine.

So, straight I turned to toiling to make my home more neat –

I swept, and vacuumed, and dusted, and dressed it with flowers sweet.

I was troubled for fear that the Master might come ‘fore my work was done;

So I hustled and worked the faster, and watched the hurrying sun.

But right in the midst of my duties a woman came to my door.

She came to tell me her troubles, my comfort and aid to implore.

But I said, “I am sorry, but I cannot help today;

I’ve got greater things to tend to.” And the woman turned away.

But soon there came another, a cripple, thin, pale and gray,

and said, “Let me stop and rest a while in your home, I humbly pray.

I’ve traveled far since morning; I’m hungry, faint and weak;

My heart is full of misery, comfort and help I seek.”

I said, “I’m truly sorry, but I cannot help today;

I look for a great and noble Guest.” So the cripple went on his way.

The day moved onward swiftly, and my tasks were nearly done;

A prayer was ever in my heart that the Master to me might come.

In my mind, I sprang to meet him, to serve him with utmost care,

when a little child stood by my side, with a face so sweet and fair –

Sweet, with the marks of tear-drops; his clothes were tattered and old;  
a finger was bruised and bleeding, his poor little feet so cold.  
I said, "I am sorry for you. You are surely in need of care;  
but I can't stop to give it. You must hasten on elsewhere."  
At my words a shadow crept over his blue-veined brow,  
"Someone will feed and clothe you, son; I'm just too busy now."

At last the day was ended. My work was over and done.  
My home was swept and vacuumed; and I watched in the dark alone –  
Watched – but no footsteps sounded. No one passed by my gate.  
No one entered my cottage door. I could only pray and wait.  
I watched 'til the night had deepened, and the Master had not yet come.  
He had entered another's door, and gladdened some other home.  
My labor had been for nothing. I bowed my head and wept.  
My heart was sore with longing; but in spite of it all, I slept.

Then the Master stood before me, his face was grave but fair;  
"Three times today I came to your door, and craved your pity and care;  
Three times today you turned me away, unhelped and uncomforted;  
the blessing you sought is now lost, and your chance to serve has fled.  
"Oh, Lord, dear Lord, forgive me. How could I know it was Thee?"  
My saddened soul was so ashamed, as I began that wretched plea.  
He spoke again, "The sin I pardon, but the blessing is lost to thee;  
For in comforting not the least of these, you have failed to comfort Me."

When you look to see what's happening in this poem, you can see that someone was looking but not seeing. There is a huge difference between having sight and vision. It's a point that's been made in a popular radio spot about Erik Weihenmayer, the blind man who has climbed Mt. Everest, along with the seven tallest peaks on our world's seven continents. Imagine that – completely blind since the age of thirteen, yet one of only a handful of climbers to have reached the summit of Mt. Everest! The radio spot does a great job of telling us that it's not so much sight as it is vision that makes all the difference in life. Emma Lent is getting us to look at this same dynamic. In a sense, her poem is asking us to revise our view of what God wants us to see.

That's what Martin Luther is doing in a book that I've often referred to, a compilation of sermons about the nativity stories entitled *The Martin Luther Christmas Book* (hereafter referred to as *TMLCB*, translated, arranged, and edited by Roland H. Bainton, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1958). His words paint a compelling picture that makes it impossible to miss the obvious in scenes that we can easily overlook because of their utter familiarity. For instance, I love the way Luther invites us to join the Wise Men in their long journey in search of the king whose star they saw and followed. Listen as Luther

describes what they saw when they finally arrived at their journey's end. Naturally, following their own assumptions about what the world takes as obvious, "the Wise Men supposed the child would be born in Jerusalem. That's where they went, and that's when the star left them." They thought they knew where to look and what to look for – the capitol city, the holy temple, the highest courts, a princely palace. But that's not what God had in mind.

The star led them to Bethlehem. "When they were come to the house" – when they finally arrived at the end of their long journey, here's what they saw – "a tumbled down shack, with a poor young mother and her poor little babe, not like a king at all." (*TMLCB*, pp 62-63) This supposed king had nothing more in his possession or circumstance than would attend what their own servants had. And yet, Luther writes that they didn't shrink from the moment. They might have rolled their eyes, extended their voices, and raised their fists heavenward. "This is it? Two years of travelling, walking and waiting, riding and resting, following that yonder star to places unknown, hoping and praying and hoping some more. And this is it – a tumbled down shack with a poor teenage mother and her poor little baby?!" But the Wise Men were able to look beyond the obvious to see what God wanted them to see.

"The worldly-wise would not have done so. The world makes presents for those who already have enough." (*TMLCB*, p. 64). To provide for those whose influence we seek, we take from those who have too little to give to those who already have too much. "If we Christians would join the Wise Men, we must close our eyes to all that glitters before the world, and look rather on the meager estate of those with less, offering help to the hungry, comfort to those in distress, aid to neighbors in need. Do not boast that you have built churches and furnished them lavishly. For God will say, 'What to me are your altars and masses? Do I take pleasure in stone or wood? Is not heaven my throne and the earth my footstool? Who told you to build impressive cathedrals? I have set before you spiritual temples. These you should build ... and feed ... and help.'" (*TMLCB*, p. 64)

Luther is inviting us to consider how the Wise Men took no offense at the meager estate of the Babe and his parents so that we, too, might revise our view of where Christ can be found, so that we, too, might learn to see Christ in our neighbor, and to find God's kingdom among the meek, the lowly, those who are overlooked and undervalued. As Luther says, "Those who seek Christ anywhere else find him not. The Wise Men discovered him not at Herod's Court, not with the high priests, not in the great city of Jerusalem, but in Bethlehem, in a stable, with lowly folk, with Mary and Joseph. In a word, they found him where one would have least expected." (*TMLCB*, p. 64) In other words, the Wise Men had both sight and vision. Their faith provided them with the vision to see what God wants us to see, to see God in our opportunities to serve, learning to see God's presence in our neighbor, and to respond to the needs we see with help extended and comfort given. These are the things that help us to see the meaning of Christmas with eyes that are guided by faith and with vision that comes from the gift to see with Christ's eyes and the desire to live ... in Jesus' name. Amen