

January 15, 2012 2nd Sunday after the Epiphany SPIRITUAL ILLUSION
 Human Relations Day Psalm 139 John 1:43-51
 Stewardship of Service 1

CHILDREN—my first appointment Sussex County driving home from late night pastoral emergency. Stopped at stop sign, looked both ways, saw 4 headlights--2 cars far away on my left. Pulled out, next thing I new 4 bright lights immediately behind me! What happened? I was tired, wanted to get home. My perception was off. I made it home safely but much more aware of how susceptible I am to optical illusion at night—hope I've learned to give it up and pay more attention. Nathaniel suffered from spiritual illusion—“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

Have you ever noticed that the moon looks bigger on horizon when it is actually same size as it appears high in the sky? We know that but how do we still get it wrong? The brain gets fooled by the trees and the landscape in the line of sight on the horizon into a perception that the moon is farther away. It is an optical illusion. Now we may not have known exactly why this happens but we have been aware that we suffer from optical illusion. It's good to know because when you know you suffer from optical illusion from time to time you can learn to give it up and see what is really true.

Now we are the most intelligent creatures on earth; we are the species of the highest order and yet our perceptions can be so far off, our brains are so easily fooled. You see, as intelligent creatures, as species of the highest order eventually you just have to learn that your perception is off—that your brain is susceptible to illusion. In certain circumstances you have to learn to give up illusion, no matter how it appears, and find more trustworthy ways to make sure you get it right.

But this is not the only kind of illusion from which our species suffers. As you hear the Word of God today you encounter a stark reminder of another illusion from which you suffer. You need to learn to give this one up too. In the face of this illusion you need to find more trustworthy ways to make sure you get it right because if you don't get this one right it's not your brain that gets fooled—it's your heart. You see, the Bible says you suffer from spiritual illusion—spiritual illusion—that's when your heart gets fooled and your perception of truth is so far off that you get God wrong, you get Jesus wrong, you get life wrong.

In the Gospel of John this morning Nathaniel got it wrong. When his friend Philip comes up to him so full of excitement and joy and tells him, “We’ve found the One Moses wrote of in the Law, the One preached by the prophets. It’s Jesus, Joseph’s son, the One from Nazareth. Nathaniel, he’s the One!!” Philip believes Jesus to be the Messiah, the one who would finally fulfill all the promises of God for God’s people—the savior of the world. What is Nathaniel’s response? “pssh! Can anything good come out of Nazareth! Humf! Nazareth! You’ve got to be kidding!” Nazareth was a small, insignificant village about half-way between the Mediterranean and the Sea of Galilee well off the beaten path from which not much good had come at all. No, the Messiah could not come from there. Philip’s got it wrong. He can’t be the one.

Now Nathaniel hasn’t even met Jesus and doesn’t know an awful lot about him—he just knows he’s come from Nazareth. But he already suffers from spiritual illusion. His heart is fooled into expecting something entirely different in the Messiah and that spiritual illusion prevents him from recognizing the truth and knowing his Lord.

You see, our hearts get fooled, just like Nathanael’s, because we expect God to

- always be in all the high places when in Jesus Christ God is actually in all the low places
- always be in the proper, socially acceptable places when in Jesus Christ God is especially in the out-of-place, unusual, and ordinary places
- always be only the bestower of wealth and blessing upon the well-to-do of this world when in Jesus Christ God actually suffers with the poor
- always be the one who makes sure you get everything you need when all along God in Jesus Christ calls you to give that others may have enough
- always and only be right here in the church when in Jesus Christ God is actually out there right in the midst of the muck and the mire and the struggles of peoples lives
- always do just what you expect God to do when all along God will always do what God does.

Unfortunately the Church has always suffered from spiritual illusion like this.

- the early church 1st thought that the new Christian movement was only open to Jews who followed all the Jewish ritual and practices and excluded the Gentiles, the non-Jewish population
- the medieval church felt God called them to Crusade which led the church to a terrible era of violence where all who would not follow Jesus were killed in war
- in our day some of the most bitter and violent conflicts among people have their roots in differences between religious faith

It is all, every bit of it, an illusion, it's a lie. This is not what God calls us to do and be. But tragically, just as we are susceptible to optical illusion so we are painfully susceptible to spiritual illusion. And, unfortunately, even as you cannot help suffering from optical illusion because that's just the way your brain works, so you cannot help suffering from spiritual illusion because your heart is shaped by the culture in which you live. When you learn all your life that what is really valuable is found in high places, in proper places, in wealth, in being first, and that God is only in the church, your perceptions are off. Your heart gets fooled. You don't recognize the truth, you get God wrong, you get Jesus wrong, you get life wrong.

That's why the church has to hear the Gospel again and again Sunday after Sunday. If we ever stop listening to the Gospel we will fall so far back into our own illusions that we will actually begin to believe that

- God is only in high places;
- we could never even imagine God ever being in out-of-place, unusual, ordinary places;
- you and I are the most wealthy and powerful people on earth because we work the hardest and are the most faithful of all God's people and that God may well love everybody but God loves us most;
- we deserve everything we have because we have earned it and God really didn't give it all to us in the first place;
- God is only known and experienced in the sanctuary, the Sunday School class, where we are insulated, protected, from the inevitable change and difficulties and tragedies of life.

Sisters and brothers, that's all an illusion. And in your heart of hearts you know that to be true.

If you are so susceptible to illusion, if your heart is just as easily fooled by spiritual illusion as your brain by optical illusion, what do you do to make sure you get it right? Well, just as with an optical illusion, so also with a spiritual illusion—you have to learn to give it up. And I know just the one to teach you how. Would you meet Jesus again this morning?

Now of all the Gospel writers, the writer of the Gospel of John makes very clear that this Jesus is divine—the Son of God; one with the Father in the creation of the world; God made flesh. But this Gospel writer also wants to make very clear that this Jesus was very much a human being—that’s what “God became flesh and lived among us” means. For example, can you imagine anyone who got along so well with everybody, especially the least respectable folks around, not having a sense of humor? Sure, Jesus laughed, enjoyed a good joke now and then, he even told a few, right here in the Gospel—subtle ones we find in the curious way he told parables and stories so that the common folks always knew exactly what he was really talking about. Jesus, you see, was a real, flesh and blood human being. If you were a common person, poor, a peasant barely getting by, as most of the people were in Jesus’ time, and you met Jesus at the time Nathaniel did you would have liked him, instantly.

Nathaniel met Jesus. Jesus came up to him with a big smile on his face and I suppose put a hand on his shoulder and said, “Ah, here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!”, and greeted him as if he were a life-long friend. By his manner and his welcome, Jesus shares a familiar, traditional greeting with his Jewish brother. He calls him an Israelite, a man of Israel. Israel, you may remember, was first called Jacob. God changed his name from Jacob to Israel—the name Jacob means “deceiver.” Jesus, I think, shares a kind of inside joke with his new friend, kind of like “How are you you old so-and-so!” just as if Jesus knew him all along. As Nathaniel first meets Jesus, he encounters one whom he had never met, yet who knew him very well. In Jesus he met someone who knew him better than he knew himself. When he met Jesus, Nathaniel begins to learn who he himself really is. In Jesus Christ God knows Nathaniel very well. It was then, right then, that he gave up all his illusions and said in his heart: “Jesus, you know me very well. You know how much my heart gets fooled. You know the truth. Let me follow you because I need to get this right.” You see, in Jesus Christ, Nathaniel met God.

The Psalmist said it, “O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up. You discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways.”

What do you do to make sure you get it right? When do you ever give up on illusion and begin to learn the truth? The Church says

- it began in you long before you were born at God's earliest thoughts of you.
- it continued in you in your baptism when you were entrusted to the God who loves you and knows you better than you do
- it grows in you whenever you share in the community of faith in the prayer, worship, sacrament, and service of the church
- it takes root in you when you follow Jesus into unexpected places, taking a risk, stepping out of your comfort zone and commit to the stewardship of service through the ministries such as PORT, Upward, DUCO, and mission teams.

It happens again and again in your life when Jesus comes up to greet you with a smile on his face, a hand on your shoulder, calls you by name, and says, "How are you, you old so-and-so?" When you meet Jesus, that's when you give up on illusion and begin to learn the truth.

So let the Gospel speak to you this morning. You see, the Gospel writer knows, and Nathaniel learns, that God does not save the world in the ways you expect. It doesn't appear that

- a man of humble Middle Eastern origins, born in a stable with a cattle feeder for a crib would amount to much of anything
- a carpenter who gives up his trade to spend his time with sinners, tax collectors, the unclean, and prostitutes wandering the countryside is a very ambitious sort of fellow at all
- one who lives his life by loving the most the least fortunate in life by giving, by denying himself, by taking the last place at the table would ever get anywhere in life
- a man who defies the religious authorities until he is finally executed by the state can possibly be a man of God at all.

This is not what you expect of a Messiah. God does not save the world in ways you expect.

But this is your Messiah. This is your Lord. This is who he is. This is the One who calls you everyday to follow him. He is calling you today. Don't get it wrong. Unless you listen to him, unless you trust his every word, you better believe your heart will get fooled every single time, lies will begin to look like truth, and your spiritual perception will be so far off that you get God wrong, you get Jesus wrong, you get life wrong.

Give up your illusion and get it right. Meet Jesus again right now, your Messiah and your Lord.

William G. Davidson