



December 7 – What do you see?

When I graduated from Luther Seminary, I was called to serve Our Savior's and El Renacimiento Lutheran Churches. It was a difficult calling. In fact, my contacts within the Churchwide expression told me they were sending me there to close the congregations peacefully. Well, I am a stubborn German. We worked tirelessly to build up the congregation, established an after-school program, and built community partnerships. The two congregations merged into one congregation, two expressions. We began to grow.

The financial recession in 2008 hit hard. We were relying on realized gains from an endowment to offset offerings. With huge market losses, we were no longer a viable ministry. On Transfiguration Sunday, 2004, we held the final worship service at Our Savior's. It hurt. It was a difficult time. All of us were consumed by grief. Then came depression.

I had put everything I had into this ministry. I was young and out to change the world. The world did not change, and it crushed me in the process. It felt like everything I had done was a waste. Nothing changed. Was it worth it? Had I made any difference at all? Did the Church even care? Many of these questions hurt too much to even say out loud. They took control of my mental state.

I empathize with John in this text. It is not the normal "Voice crying in the wilderness" text we hear in Advent. This is the voice of someone who is down and out, wondering if anything he did has made a difference. "Is Jesus the one?" You can start to hear the desperation in his voice. Has it all been a waste of time. Is he facing death in a futile attempt to navigate change?

As John's disciples talk with Jesus, they get a simple answer, "Tell John what you see and hear." At first glance, it sounds like Jesus is telling them, "I don't know. You tell me." That is not what is happening. Jesus invites them to look at the world around them and see the signs of the Good News. There are people born blind who see, people who are healed of illness. There are signs all around if you are willing to look up and see them.

It doesn't feel like much of an answer at first. Yet, I find myself thinking about John as he receives this message. While in the pit of despair, stuck in prison, he is invited to reflect on what he has seen and heard. Instead of seeing failure because of his imprisonment, he starts to see hope in the signs he has seen.

As I think about John seeing through the eyes of hope at what he has seen, I realize that is what I needed to hear back in 2009. "What do you see?" Instead of being consumed by despair, and being thrown into depression, I may have started to see the good that had been done. There was an after-school program that continued in another building. The community development work we had done developed into a city-wide ministry to those in need. Two communities of faith merged into one, centered around the Table. One congregation, two expressions. We had empowered teenagers into roles of leadership within the community. It was not a failure. The work that we did had made a lasting impact on the community.

The world can be a difficult place. There are times that it feels like fear is winning. Last week, we talked about the need to face our fears and recognize that God is with us, even in perceived darkness. We talked about allowing the eyes of faith to adjust so that we can see through the lens of hope.

This week, we focus on the signs around us. What do you see? IN the times when it feels like you are running out of hope, as the question, "What do I see?" There are signs of goodness in the world, all around us. Sometimes, we need a reminder to look for it. The noise of the world can give us tunnel vision. Never forget to look around for the good, and the signs that God is at work. What do you see? Amen.

Pastor Michael Schmidt