

12.14.25 Advent 3

Pastor Ali Rode

Isaiah 35:1-10; James 5:7-10; Matthew 11:2-11

Holy Awakenings: Sight and Sound

“Ask, and you will receive. Search, and you will find. Knock, and the door will be opened to you.”

Matthew 7:7 CEB

Good morning Beloved Children of God.

I’m Pastor Ali Rode and it is a true honor to be called to serve here at St. Mark’. I just completed my first week and I look forward to getting to know you all and work together in growing disciples and making Christ known as your Associate Pastor for Family Ministry.

This morning’s sermon title is Holy Awakenings: Sight & Sound We’ll reflect on Sight and Sound, their place in the gospel texts for this morning and in our own faith journeys.

As the days pass on we find ourselves closer and closer to the holy night when we celebrate the birth of our Savior Jesus Christ the Messiah. As many other religious and cultural traditions overlap this time, we find ourselves delighted and sometimes a bit overwhelmed by all the senses of the season. Certainly the commodification of Christmas brings a slew of advertisements and distractions, but there are still more peaceful, simpler sights and sounds.

Considering sight—our eyes marvel in the evening as night after night more homes and apartment balconies are covered in strands of lights every color imaginable. The most recent debate: warm white or cool white? There are inflatables and garlands among other festive décor.

Then sounds—Holiday music fills the air in almost every public shopping plaza, layered with laughter and conversations of friends and families who have met for a meal out. If we’re lucky we might experience live music either here in worship, perhaps caroling, enjoy a local school pageant or even a concert here this afternoon.

These sights and sounds, alongside our other senses welcome us into this expectant season which is Advent, a time for Holy Awakening... waking up spiritually to the dwelling of God in flesh in a manger and expectantly as Christ returns.

In the two gospel texts there are sights and sounds which play roles in witnessing to God’s Spirit at work.

First, John the Baptist finds himself unable to witness Jesus’ ministry as he is unjustly jailed and wondering if this Jesus he had told everyone about really was the Messiah they were waiting for all along. Being in prison, it is entirely understandable that he might be questioning everything, he couldn’t see what was going on! He sends the disciples to ask Jesus, *“Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”*

Jesus responds in a letter by sharing this vision—folks can see, walk, and hear when they couldn’t previous. Fellows who are on their way to death find new life. Crowds whom have waited for a long time receive, “good news”. Jesus uses the verb, to “look at” where the root of the original word from the Greek is the same root of the word for “theater” or a “show or a demonstration.” Jesus doesn’t need to

put on a show rather the reality, the sights speak for themselves. "Look all around you," I imagine Jesus saying, "See salvation."

In the second gospel text this morning we go back chronologically before the birth of Jesus. In Matthew, Mary the mother of Jesus responds to the angel Gabriel's message, with a song called by tradition, the "Magnificat" because Mary says in the text, "my soul magnifies the Lord," which Taylor and Amy canted so beautifully this morning.

This song text is quoted by the writer, they are likely not his orchestration, but rather words from an earlier Jewish source. Some early manuscripts actually attribute this song to Elizabeth, her cousin, mother of John the Baptist. In its origin it is a song of praise and thanksgiving where the singer says, "I will extol him (the Lord God)." Being that these words are timeless, it is fitting they would be in the mouth of Mary as she celebrates the mighty work of God in her life—a text which has been given musical voice in countless renditions. On Hymnary.org, an online database of hymns, there are at least 333 texts labeled "Magnificat". I imagine the cacophony of them being sung this morning as today is the traditional Sunday when we recall Mary on Gaudete Sunday in Advent. I like to imagine over the world, so many people on this Sunday Gaudette Sunday. In some traditions a pink or rose-colored candle is used in the Advent wreath, a joyful respite compared to the searching blue or purple which is used for the rest of the season. The Magnificat is an audible sign of celebration and exultation.

John the Baptist receives visions of healing happening around Jesus.

Mary and Elizabeth echo song of hope and rejoicing.

What sights and sounds remind you of God's presence this season? When I think of Sight- I think of the antique German glass ornaments I inherited from my beloved Aunt who died in February 2020. The Christmas prior she shared that when they barely had enough from the military while they were stationed in Germany for food, they splurged on a few dozen hand painted mid century brightly colored glass ornaments, painted and adorned with silver glitter. Last year in our home, we only used these old ornaments which have survived 50 years of Christmases. They are not just pretty baubles for a tree, but a witness to trusting in times of scarcity that God provides, to be assured that there is plenty enough no matter what is underneath the tree.

When I consider sounds, I recall a silver bell contained in the red velvet flocked picture book gift set with audio cassette edition of the Polar Express written by Chris Van Allsburg and narrated by William Hurt Santa left under the tree one year. My mother and I would cuddle close as she held the book and I turned the pages. The story tells the importance of believing in thing we cannot see, and the evidence is demonstrated by a small sleighbell included with the set, which of course rings true a promise of things unseen—which is the gift of faith.

God speaks to us through sights and sounds all the time—uses our human experience to display the depth of our spiritual reality. The Gospel of John finds Jesus saying to his followers, "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me." I always found these words to be assuring, that God know show to speak though to us. My friends in the United Church of Christ have a great slogan I've also always held dear, "God is still speaking." This always gave me such courage. I find the more we rely on the Grace of God (that is God's love and power) we find ourselves able to see and hear. We become present

to these Holy Awakenings. We let go, by the power of the Holy Spirit, of the things which detour and distract us.

Just this week, I noticed as I parked in the church parking lot this week there is a quite mature holly bush. In the home we sold before we moved from Dayton Ohio, we had a holly bush which delighted me, although it was much smaller than a standard hedge it reminded me of the traditional symbolism of Holly which is protection, eternal life, and resilience. Some say its significance is the shape of the leaf reminding us of the crown of thorns, the berries, of the blood of Christ from his crucifixion. For a brief moment, I parked my car, turned it off, and my eyes saw the red berries. I am reminded of home. This is a Holy Spirit moment—a reminder I am home.

A couple most significant sights and sounds presented themselves this summer as I found myself returning from London to Charlotte as I had the honor of taking a pilgrimage to England following the history of John Wesley a fellow from the 18<sup>th</sup> century in Oxford who created a revivalist movement in the Church of England which later became Methodism. And as I am an ordained Elder in the United Methodist Church, I found myself delighted being surrounded by 65 colleagues and their spouses, all of us roughly under 40 and “Emerging Clergy” as they found us. It was the best trip of my life, and I’ve travelled a lot.

Knowing we were in the last stages of the call process at St. Mark’s, as I returned home I found myself on the long stretch of hallway with unending moving walkways in the airport. And as it is, with a long distance to walk, and the hallways being rather empty and sadly beige due to ongoing renovations, I had some time for reflection after my feet grew tired and I stood, letting the walkway drag me and my luggage to the gate. A deep question stirred within my being, “Are you sure God?” I have been planning and being very diligent in considering this opportunity in the ELCA, yet I was just shaped and formed, and built fantastic relationships with these other UMC clergy... am I heading in the right path?

I looked up from the metal grate to the left, and what would you imagine there but a Christus Victor printed on an advertisement for a travel company... the infamous statue from Rio de Janeiro Christ the Redeemer. Immediately upon seeing it I knew. It was complete confirmation. It was not that the Lord God sent an advertising firm in advance of my trek out to the furthest gate in Heathrow (honestly) but that God knew how to speak to me, and that image which is a similar style to the stone facade on our own building, which now is feet away from my office window immediately calmed my fears. I had complete and utter dependence (when even at the time things were not yet finalized) that I was heading in the right direction. That feeling lasted about an hour. Then I get to thinking. I’m sure I’m not the only one who gets to thinking sometimes. I go through customs, I head on the plane I greeted the Flight Attendant (I try to treat them with the most respect, my husband works for an airline, so I understand how much of a challenge they can have.) I realized I had someone training in my section, rather young I ask him his name. His name was Mark. Thank you God—the reassurance from the hallway reignited, it has not left my spirit.

I rejoice this 3<sup>rd</sup> week of advent for these holy awakenings which happen because God knows us, and knows how we understand the world, and uses ways we understand to speak to us. We receive confirmation by what we see, just like the disciples and John the Baptist. We hear of a hope with future like Mary and Elizabeth. We trust that God is leading us, we can trust in the Holy Spirit to Guide us. This advent season, and forever. Amen.