

TEXT: Luke 1:26-38  
THEME: Beholding is holistic receptivity and engagement  
SUBJECT: New life  
TITLE: Behold

Fourth Sunday of Advent  
20 December 2020  
Messiah Moravian  
Jerry Harris

A few years ago, the Bodleian Library published a Christmas card that showed the annunciation to one shepherd, standing on a hillside shielding his eyes from the glory of the herald angel. Beside him, his cheeky dog was doing what good sheepdogs do: barking at the strange intruder. It is not hard to imagine the poor shepherd, in dread and awe of this staggering vision, trying to get the dog to shut up long enough to hear what the angelic messenger is saying.

Maggie Ross wonders if all the fretful, frenetic activity in our lives isn't a human way of barking at angels, of driving away the signs everywhere around us: signs calling us to stop, to wake up, to receive a new and larger perspective, to pay attention to what is important in life, to behold the face of God in every ordinary moment. These signs press on us most insistently at the turning of the year, when earthly light drains from our lives and we are left wondering in the dark.

These are days, Ross believes, when we are pressured on all sides by the noise of twisted minds spinning in closed loops. The babble used to sell crazy agendas is persuasive because most listeners have no experience of silence, and therefore have no intellectual or emotional autonomy through which to critique the insanities and inanities on offer. But this is exactly what politicians and corporations want, because if we stopped to balance our lives with a little transfigurative silence and beholding, we might become aware that we are being played for fools.

Ross believes our salvation lies in *beholding*. "The word behold is arguably the most important word in the Bible and by extension in spiritual life, which it epitomizes, and its significance is transmitted through the early history of Christianity into the Middle Ages. Despite the word's centrality to the biblical text, it has been dropped from most translations of the Bible, changing and draining the essential meaning and theology of many passages."

Ross says the English word *behold* accurately conveys the many psychological and theological nuances of the Hebrew (*hinneh*) and Greek (*idou*) from which it is translated. "Behold" is a word that alerts us to pause, however briefly, to be vigilant, because something new, something startling, is about to be revealed. In beholding the mind is temporarily brought to silence as a new perspective arrives. If we live in beholding, we continually live in new creation.

The word *behold* signals a shift in perception. The very first occurrence of *behold* in the Bible is the very first word of direct speech that God makes to the human beings he has created: "Behold! (Usually translated "See" in most English versions.) I have given you every herb . . . and every tree . . . and every beast . . . and every fowl . . ." (Genesis 1:29). *Behold* serves to create the awed silence in which God's direct speech may be heard.

Beholding was Adam and Eve's lodestar. When they became distracted by the serpent, they lost their sense of direction and became anxious and afraid. The consequences, both symbolic and practical, are that we, the children of Adam and Eve, must struggle through and with distraction until we find our way back to beholding.

Ross believes the entire message of the Bible can be summarized in this one word: *behold*. Beholding is holistic receptivity and engagement. All that God has ever asked of his creation is to *behold*: to behold God, to behold one another and the creation, to behold goodness that is self-outpouring love.

The New Revised Standard Version, the one we read in worship, translates the word "Behold" in Luke 1:31 as "And now, . . ." and in Luke 1:38 as "Here . . ." The New American Bible, a Catholic translation, reads "*Behold*, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus" (Luke 1:31). Mary said, "*Behold*, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done according to your word" (Luke 1:38).

It is in beholding, Ross believes, that Mary conceives, and it is in beholding that we also conceive new life. Virginitly, understood metaphorically, means singleness of heart, the whole person focused on beholding. It is in this self-forgetful beholding, this eternity of love gazing on Love, of Love holding love in being, that all salvation history occurs. It is in the consent to behold that our fear is transmuted into love.

To cultivate beholding and the awe of "silent night, holy night" is not an option. It is absolutely necessary to human well-being, and it becomes a way of being in the world. Ross believes if we are to have any possibility of surviving as a species, much less living optimally, we must have more silence in our lives and especially in our surrounding environment. We cannot be in right relationship with ourselves, other people, other creatures, our environment without beholding.

Fortunately, anyone can undertake the work of silence and receive the gift of beholding. It requires only an openness and receptivity, a relinquishing of the noise of a consumer culture for simplicity, silence, and self-forgetfulness, a turning away from narcissism to welcome the other.

The work of silence is so simple, yet to go against the grain of society and culture is very difficult. But it is worth the effort: the work of silence and the way of being in the world that is beholding provide stability and even joy in a disintegrating world.

People who undertake to live like this become beacons, islands of safety where others can find refuge. The resonances of silence permeate the world around them. A life of silence and beholding knows peace, joy, glory.

On a street in Athens, Anaxagoras the sage, a century before Plato, mulled over what it means to see and to be grasped by the heart of the matter. First question: *Why are you here on earth?* Answer: *To behold*. No excuses called for. Contemplation. Seeing. Fierce and intense.

Rejoice. Rejoice.

To attest the gift of a day.

To saunter and gaze. To own the world.

Michael O'Siadhail

The journey from barking at angels to beholding is measured not in miles or even inches. It begins in a turning from the imperious noise of those who wield power and control by means of fear. It begins in a turning towards the silence capable of beholding the holy in all creation. In that beholding we are healed.

PRAYER:

O God, who holds us in love,  
waken our sleepy senses  
to perceive your marvelous works  
in all that surrounds us.

Grant us the vision  
to behold you in all creation,  
and in the face of each person we meet.

So transform us  
by the power of your Holy Spirit,  
that we might paint the walls  
of life with light.