

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham

“The Force is Awakening: Look”

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Jeremiah 33:14-16

Luke 21:25-36

He was the golden boy. He was the person whose story earned him the attention of the world. The grandson of Jewish immigrants he had started his business with \$5,000 made from lifeguarding and installing sprinklers, well and also \$50,000 loan from his father-in-law and had turned it into two of the most well respected investment houses in the nation, if not the world. His annual returns were always around 12% and because of that everyone from foundations, to the ultra-wealthy wanted him to invest their money for them. Part of the allure was that he had pioneered new computer technology which became the basis for the NASDAQ, of which he ultimately became the non-executive chairman. Even though he had a reputation as someone who lived a lavish life-style he also contributed liberally to worthwhile causes and to politicians. My guess is that by now you know of whom I speak, Bernard Madoff, the perpetrator of the largest Ponzi scheme in American history, totaling losses to investors of almost \$65 billion. The question so many people have asked since was, how could smart people not have seen what he was doing?

The answer is very simple. They did not look. In fact they refused to look. No one wanted to pull back the curtain and discover that the wizard was not real. For you see that there were people in the SEC who had speaking out about the impossibility of the returns he was offering but the higher ups refused to look. And this is what human beings do. We create a narrative in our heads, about relationships, business partners, politicians and current events and then we refuse to look and see who they really are or what is really going on. We don't want to look behind the curtain. This was true of 911, when we came to discover that local FBI agents were concerned about men linked to Osama Ben Laden getting flight training, and were told not to dig deeper. This was true of the Paris attacks. Both Turkish and Iraqi intelligence had warned the French about the possibility of attacks and no one really checked into it. Human nature is to refuse to look. It is in fact our nature to ignore those who are wandering the wilderness trying to get us to look and see what is happening.

This was the role that Jesus was playing in the story we read this morning. What Jesus saw is the pending destruction of Jerusalem. For his listeners this seemed to be absurd. After all if the Day of the Lord was approaching and the messiah was already here in the form of Jesus, then Jerusalem was safe. God would defeat Rome and all others who tried to take the land. And besides, how could God possibly abandon God's people when they had been faithful year in and year out. But Jesus saw it differently. He saw the power of Rome. He saw the growing rebellion moving in the countryside and in the cities. He sensed that the people would not be satisfied until they were either free or dead. And so he warned his followers. He warned people to stay away from Jerusalem and flee to the country. He warned them that there will be death and destruction. What Jesus wanted them to do is to look. He wanted them to look so that they would have the strength and courage to escape. He wanted them to look so that they would be ready. It was a frightening and depressing message, which few wanted to hear.

On the surface anyway, this would not appear to be the kind of message most people would want to hear. It is the sort of thing we hear on the evening news, where everything is bad...everything is a crisis...everything should make us afraid. And if that is the case, why ought we to look? The answer for Jesus was that there was not only death and destruction coming...but there was also hope. Jesus wanted his listeners to not only see the political realities that are ahead but he also wanted them to look and see that God was still at work. He reminded them that when they are in the midst of the fall of Jerusalem to look and they will see that their redemption is drawing near. He reminds them that when the signs all point to the end of the world to remember that the Kingdom of God is drawing near and they will be saved. He reminds them that even if all appears to be lost that they will be able to find the strength that they need to live and to survive. But these things, he says, can only be seen if we are willing to look; to pull back the curtain and see what is really going on. We can only see them if we are willing to look at what God is still doing in the world.

For you see, this is how God works in the world. God does not always intervene and save God's people from themselves, from their own mistakes, but God's message is that if we are willing to look we will see God at work. We will see that there is hope. And this is not simply a Jesus' message, this is the message of the entire Bible. It was the message of Jeremiah. The Jeremiah story is that Jerusalem is surrounded by the Babylonian Army; an army of power beyond the comprehension of the Jewish people. Though the people are hoping and praying for a miraculous divine intervention (does all of this sound familiar?) Jeremiah has been telling them that there will be no such intervention. There will not be one because the people have refused to listen to God and have chosen the way of violence, greed and injustice, rather than the way of caring and compassion. There will not be one because the people refused to see the reality of what God was doing and chose rebellion over cooperation. Yet even then Jeremiah says, all is not lost. There will come a time when God will bring forth a new leader who will bring justice and righteousness to the land. Look and see, Jeremiah says, God is not done.

You and I live in a moment in history when everything around is painted as being in the broad brush strokes of crisis. The news narrative offered to us is that our lives are in constant danger; from ISIS, from strangers, from...well you fill in the blank. That is all that we are supposed to see when we look. We are supposed to be those who faint with fear and foreboding. But if we listen to Jeremiah. If we listen to Jesus. We will look and see something different. We will look and see God still at work in world. We will look and see Jesus Christ changing hearts and minds. We will look and see acts of great compassion and world transforming love. We will look and see that the force of God's love in Jesus Christ is awakening once again. We will look and see that God has great plans for the world into which we have baptized three more children of God.

The challenge I offer you then is to look, to look and see where God is still at work transforming the world and then allow what you see to create a narrative of hope in your life. Then, when you see those things, take a picture of them and send them to us that we might share them with others.