

Observations on Our New Beginning

John 1:1-18

First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, IL
January 5th 2020, Second Sunday after Christmas
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How can we follow Jesus if we don't see him? Where have you seen Jesus, lately? These observations come from these last few weeks.

This Christmas we gathered in Washington with Cousin Dave and his family, and we went to the movies. In each of them I saw Jesus.

In the movie *Richard Jewell*, I see Jesus in the lawyer who stands faithfully beside his guilty-looking client. I see Jesus in Richard Jewell's mother at a press conference asking people to be reasonable and to be kind. I see Jesus in the eyes of the star reporter who has a change of heart.

In *Star Wars* I do NOT see Jesus in the cheesy acting and the uneven script. However, Jesus takes center stage in the myriad examples of sacrificial love. X-wing fighter pilots are hurling to their destruction in order to keep others safe. Kylo Renn (who also goes by the name Ben Solo—and, no, I don't know why he has two names) gives his life up for Ray Skywalker by touching her mortal wounds with his magical hands; his life fades away while she is revived. She awakens in his lifeless arms.

In the movie *Little Women*, Meg is dying, weakened by scarlett fever. Her strong willed sister Jo has taken Meg to the seashore to nurse her back to health where Meg tells Jo that she's dying, she knows it, and that's okay. Jo isn't going for it. Meg gently insists.

You can't change it, Meg tells Jo. "It's like the tide. It's going out. You can't stop the tide from going out."

Jo snaps back. "*I* can stop the tide." Jo will not be swayed. I see Jesus in these sisters' friendship, and in a willingness for one sister to fight for another. I see Jesus in this sisterly love.

Where have you seen Jesus lately?

I see Jesus in the hands of my Cousin Dave who—walking the walk—fed hungry people out of the back of his pick-up truck last Sunday morning before dawn. The ministry he supports finds hungry people in the parking lots of Home Depot, a local run-down motel, and a Lutheran Church. They were happy to get the breakfast burritos, Sunny D, and the bagels that Dave paid for out of his own pocket. (Dave had house guests, and he could have taken a pass, but he didn't. It was also Dave's birthday, but that didn't stop him, either.) I see Jesus in my dear cousin Dave who doesn't say a word: *It is easier to preach ten sermons than to live just one.*

Where do you see Jesus?

In a house on Prospect Avenue near where I live, there is a lit manger scene on top of a house. This family can't miss Jesus every time they walk into their front door. And there's no doubt about what this family would say is the reason for the season.

You can't miss Jesus in Marc Chagal's painting *The White Crucifixion* at the Chicago Institute of Art. Jesus hangs upon the cross, while a lone woman at his feet clings to an infant, and Jewish neighborhoods to

his right have been set on fire. A crowded boat of refugees make their way across cold water; the patriarchs in heaven circle above his head lamenting what they see below. Chagall painted this picture in 1938 in response to Krystallnacht —the Night of Broken Glass. This painting, I am told, is Pope Francis' favorite, and how it ended up in Chicago I don't know but am verily glad.

Where have you seen Jesus lately? How can we follow him if we cannot find him?

Non-profit organizations and other institutions sent me dozens of end-of-the-year pleas for financial help. I see Jesus in their work, and I hear Jesus's voice in their advocacy.

I saw Jesus on Christmas Eve in this sanctuary as you passed the light of God's peace around this darkened place. Peace on earth, indeed.

I see Jesus on the news walking with troops deploying from Fort Bragg, North Carolina, to Iraq. I see Jesus grieving at the funerals of those killed by drone strikes. I see Jesus in the unrest, in the refugees running like hell across the landscape of every continent, in the people digging wells for clean water, in the woman who has swept her house and who welcomes the traveler, in the pastor who spreads the table with bread and wine, in the face of the sweaty cook in the kitchen who's made a double batch of collard greens and black eyed peas to welcome in this fledgling, brand new year.

Violence and despair are the way of the world. Everything's going downhill. There's nothing we can do to change it. It's like the tide—it's going out and we cannot stop it. I hear Jesus when the young woman speaks up bravely, idealistically, faithfully and says with resolution, "I can stop the tide."

I see Jesus whenever people gather and say, *By the grace of God, there is nothing I cannot do.*

It's hard to follow a Lord you cannot see.

Where have you seen Jesus lately?

John the gospel writer proclaims that Jesus is at the beginning of all creation, standing above creation, through it, around it, outside of it, and decidedly in its middle redeeming it all with holy love. John says Jesus brings life and life abundantly. John says Jesus is the light of the world.

Can't find Jesus? Don't recognize him? He's the life that pounds through your veins. He is the flicker of light that shines in every darkness.

Jesus is the face of love, of gentle laughter, of kindness. Jesus is in the outrage, in the song. Jesus is in the dark with us, making his way with us, lighting our way to the dawn of this brand new, blessed year.

Praise God, praise God, praise God.

Holy God, worthy of all praise, we come to you in this new year seeking your guidance. Many things vie for our attention, affection, and allegiance. If we aren't careful, we end up worshipping idols instead of you. We follow ideas and ideologies that contradict your Gospel. We care only for "our own" instead of the whole world. Forgive us. Help us fix our sights on your son, Jesus, who knows the way and, by your Holy Spirit, guides our steps. AMEN.