

**Do You Want to be Seen?
John 1:43-51
Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18**

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A little over a year ago Anita and I took a delayed birthday trip to London. I had had one of those 0 birthdays and had been bumped from a flight and had a voucher that was going to expire, so off we went!

For me it was a trip down memory lane. I had studied there during my time at Wake Forest, and so not only did we go up and see our house in Hampstead, we went to the museums I had fallen in love with back when—the National Gallery, the Tate Britain, the Tate—which wasn't there when I was a student. We also spent our children's inheritance and went to see *Come From Away* and *Hamilton*. (I might be bragging a bit!)

We also took a couple days to go visit our dear friends in Hitchin, about 100 km north of London. We had met during a sabbatical in Prague, our families had visited each other, and this was our turn! So off we went!

To get from London to Hitchin you take the train—from Kings Cross Station. We went to store some luggage that we weren't going to need for the few days in Hitchin, and as we left, there it was! Right there!

Platform 9 3/4!

Now unless you have been living under a rock for the past 20 years you know that Platform 9 3/4 is where you board the train from London to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, but we had tickets to Hitchin, and being it was November we had missed our entry into Hogwarts.

But the best next thing is right there is a store where you can get all of your Harry Potter stuff! You can get your robes, your wands, your cauldron, a scarf, even a sorting hat. You can get Bertie Botts Every Flavor Beans and Chocolate Frogs and Butter Beer to wash it all down. You can even get a Time Turner. But what you can't get, and I looked, is a Cloak of Invisibility.

From the first time I read about that item in the Harry Potter books, I wanted one. And who wouldn't? Isn't that like everyone's childhood dream? Just think of all the things you could do if you couldn't be seen! You wouldn't have to bother with pesky things like tickets—to movies, or air flights! Just put on your invisibility cloak and walk in! You could avoid that person at the party that always drones on and on about absolutely nothing, keeping you from droning on and on to other people! You could listen in on those conversations that you aren't supposed to hear. You could just be invisible!

Wouldn't that be just wonderful?!

We live in a world where that is the desire of so many hearts. Are you ever not seen? Can you ever be invisible?

Not really. Not is you have a cell phone, an email address, a Facebook, Twitter, Instagram account. If you are online, if you have a Optima card, a credit card, an Airmiles card—you are being watched!

If you want down the street in any large city, go though an airport or train station, someone is watching! In fact, you never really know as you wander down the street if there isn't some random person filming you with their phone, just in case you put your knee on the neck of someone, have someone's knee put on your neck, or just slip and almost fall on the ice but don't, and yet end up giving a saving routine that is put to music on Tik Tok and goes viral.

Oh, there are times when we wish could be invisible. And there is concern how this pandemic is causing us to be more visible than ever. Just this week a court in France "banned the use of drone cameras to enforce coronavirus restrictions and for other law enforcement purposes."¹ I didn't even know that was a thing!

There is a law in the European Union that gives individuals the right to be forgotten, to have posts and pictures and data removed from the internet. We don't have that in Canada without a court injunction. We are just left with the wish to be invisible, checking in the corner of the Harry Potter Store at Kings Cross station in case someone has misplaced an invisibility cloak.

I would have given anything for one growing up. My hometown was not unlike the valley—with the exception of snow. It was a place where you couldn't be invisible! Everyone knew everyone and everything! My first, second, third grade teachers has taught my mother, as well as my grade 12 English teacher. (But truth be told, we suspected that she had taught Shakespeare to Shakespeare!). It was the kind of place where you couldn't get away. If you got in trouble at school you were in trouble before you got home! I remember sitting in the principal's office one day when he called my father—long distance! "Mr. Henry, won't you just shoot me now??"

So is it any wonder that many times when we come to our text this morning we are just terrified?

*Lord, you have searched me and known me.
You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.
You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.
Even before a word is on my tongue,
O Lord, you know it completely.
You hem me in, behind and before,*

¹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/in-victory-for-privacy-activists-france-is-banned-from-using-drones-to-enforce-covid-rules/2021/01/14/b384eb40-5658-11eb-acc5-92d2819a1ccb_story.html

*and lay your hand upon me.*²

Which raises the question, who is this God that knows me, that sees me?

Last weekend Anita and I decided to do a Lord of the Rings Marathon. I had mentioned that series in a sermon recently and so we decided to watch all three movies.

Do you remember that terrifying image of the all-seeing eye on Mordor? Tolkien described it this way. *“One moment only it stared out, but as from some great window immeasurably high there stabbed northward a flame of red, the flicker of a piercing Eye; and then the shadows were furled again and the terrible vision was removed.”* Throughout their journey Frodo and Sam do everything possible to not be seen by that eye, because they knew that Sauron sought their defeat, or death.

I wonder how often that is how we feel about God. Maybe it is from that children’s song, *“Be careful little feet where you go, cause the Father up above is looking down with love, be careful little feet where you go.”* The Father might be looking down with love, but there is that implicit threat, isn’t there? Be careful, cause if you go there.....

This is a case where our world, so shaped by Greek philosophy, has done a disservice to our theology. By conceiving God as a superlative, as all the omni’s, our image of God has been one of those far removed from the cares and affair of us mere humans. The psalmist offers us a different view, one of a God who is intimately involved and profoundly concerned with our well being.³

Our ideas, our assumptions shape our perceptions. They did for Nathaniel. When Phillip came and told him that he had met the Messiah, and he was from Nazareth, Nathaniel knew everything he needed to know! He knew about people from Nazareth. So he asked, “Can anything good come from Nazareth?”

How often is that our mindset? We have heard the stories, we have known people who have known people and so we just know. We just know what they are like. Those people from Nazareth.

In the fall of 1987 I was sitting in my office at First Baptist Church Greenville, SC where I was the Minister of Youth. My phone rang and it was Bill Thomas, our Minister of Music telling me that on Thursday morning we were having breakfast with our new pastor. “Who is it?” I asked.

“Hardy Clemons from Second Baptist Lubbock, Texas,” he said.

Lubbock, Texas I thought? I had only been there a few months. Maybe if I apologize the people in Lenoir will let me come back! Lubbock Texas??? Can anything good come from Lubbock Texas?

See, I had my assumptions, my prejudices about people from West Texas. Over the next 9 years I watched them all be converted.

² Psalm 139:1-5. NRSV

³ Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration (Feasting on the Word: Year B volume) by David L. Bartlett, Barbara Brown Taylor. <https://a.co/1zBkdN6>

How many of us need to have our views of God converted? From that authoritarian, all seeing, menacing deity to the one who is pure compassion, to the one who knows us intimately and wants us to know ourselves? How might that change our lives, our faith, our world?

There's a rabbinic story about a child who refused to study the Talmud. His parents, in desperation, called in the rabbi.

The day the rabbi was to come, the child cowered in terror. He heard the heavy boots on the stairs. When the parents opened the door, a voice roared, "Where is the boy who refuses to study Talmud?" The parents, a little intimidated themselves, shrank back. The rabbi ordered them out of the apartment.

The huge, bearded man loomed over the shivering child. Then, he picked the boy up, sat down in a chair, and gently folded the child to his chest. The boy's terror gave way to a feeling of peace. In time, the child's own heartbeat matched the rabbi's.

After about an hour -- one of the most peaceful hours the boy had ever known -- the parents hesitantly knocked on the door of their own apartment. The rabbi set the child down, looked into his eyes, and winked. Then, he stomped over to the door. Violently, he pulled the door open and yelled, "Now the child will study Talmud!"

And he did. In time, he became a famous rabbi himself. One day, his own students asked him how he had come to love the Talmud so much. It was then that he told them of the day when the rabbi had picked him up and held him close to his heart.

Growing up I hated the confining, restrictive world that saw everything, and knew everything. I couldn't wait to get away. But as the years have passed, I understand that the gift they gave me was that I was never able to get in too much trouble. There was always someone who cared enough about me to pull me back from the edge, and hold me close until I could feel the beat of their heart.

Maybe, maybe that is who God is. That one who sees us, and will hold us close so we can feel the beat of God's love, the love that knows us intimately and wishes the best for us. And isn't that where we won't to be?

Isn't that how we want to be seen?