

My friend Dave at the Urbandale church tells this story about an eccentric, elderly parishioner of his. She had the appearance of a bag lady, always wearing a heavy wool coat and a knit stocking cap. Her thick glasses and lack of attention to fashion or hygiene added to the impression that she probably was sleeping under a bridge somewhere.

After a heart "episode," she was directed to a doctor who was to assist her in making the necessary changes to her diet. He assumed that her comprehension was limited, so when he asked her to make a list of everything she had for each meal, he made what I'm sure he thought was a helpful suggestion: "If that's too hard for you, you can just draw pictures."

Mercedes was well-traveled and well-read. Her house was crammed with books and newspapers in stacks that were higher than my head. Soon after my arrival as interim at her church, I noticed that during worship, she was diligently writing. When I asked her after worship if she had been taking notes, she said, "No, I'm practicing my Hebrew." Indeed, her bulletin was covered with penciled-in Hebrew characters. She later informed me that she also knew German, French, Spanish and several other languages (6 or 7 altogether, if memory serves).

She did not argue with the doctor or correct his assumptions about her. When she came to the follow-up appointment with him, she handed him her list of foods eaten...in German, French, and Spanish! Then she said to him, "If that's too hard for you, I can just draw pictures." Our expectations may limit what we see.

Gord Waldie, a United Church of Canada minister, recalls an assignment in seminary in which they were supposed to look at a variety of texts and determine if

Jesus was the Messiah that was expected. The texts laid out a “job description” of sorts — and Jesus fails. Not only does Jesus fail to free his people from the Roman yoke and set up a new kingdom like that of David and Solomon, he doesn’t even seem to have that task on his to-do list.

In today’s text, John is in prison and **cannot see for sure** whether Jesus is the “one who is to come.” You can appreciate why not. He is in prison, probably going to die there. Herod appears to be securely on his throne, and it’s business as usual for the rich and the poor in Galilee. It sure doesn’t look like the messiah has arrived. John’s question is laced with disappointment: “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” How long, O Lord, must your people suffer?

Jesus’ reply to John’s disciples suggests that John’s disappointment has clouded his vision. “Go and tell John what you have *seen* and *heard*: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, . . . the poor have good news brought to them.” They have seen what he is doing, but have not seen him bringing in the kingdom. And they are not alone in their blindness.

When John’s messengers have left, Jesus talks to the crowd about *their* blindness. “What do you go out into the wilderness to *look at*? A reed shaken by the wind? Someone dressed in soft robes?” He knows that hopeful people had an idea of what a messenger of God should look and sound like, and that they went out to John hoping that he would be that guy. Instead they found an eccentric dressed in animal skins who ate peculiarly, someone you’d edge past uneasily if you saw him on the streets of Nazareth. And they had the same blindness about Jesus. “For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, ‘He has a

demon'; I come eating and drinking and you say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax-collectors and sinners!'" This is clearly a case of expectations limiting vision.

This story raises the question for me about whether I, or we, often fail to recognize the hand of God among us. What should we do when, despite our ardent efforts, we don't see the messianic age, or the kingdom of God, taking shape—when, in fact, it seems quite the reverse? I guess we have to become aware of what we're filtering out.

A recent article in *The Guardian* was headlined, "It may only take 3.5% of the population to topple a dictator – with civil resistance". The author, Erica Chenoweth, named the accomplishments of people who have employed nonviolent resistance: it has "protected farm workers from abuse in California, motivated the recognition of Aids patients as worthy of access to life-saving treatment, protected free speech, put climate reform on the agenda, given reprieve to [Dreamers](#), raised awareness about economic inequality, changed the conversation about systemic racism and black lives and stalled construction of an oil pipeline on indigenous lands in Standing Rock." She said that it's tempting to see more dramatic tactics, like violence, as effective because the changes are so vivid, but that the costs of violence are staggering. I would add that its effectiveness diminishes over time. But we tend not to see the complicated, long-term efforts of organizing as meaningful; we see them as ineffective because slow and painstaking.

But here's what happens when you get into nonviolence as a way of life: You practice seeing the face of Christ in the other or else you will despair. You practice

non-dual consciousness—awareness of the presence of God right here, right now, even when your feet are cold or a negotiation is going south. You become aware of what we might call the Buddha-nature in all things (we might call it that because we're in our Buddhism unit at DMACC right now). This is what Gandhi meant when he said that we must *be* the change we want to see in the world: **the kingdom comes as we live the kingdom**. St. Teresa of Avila said, "The whole way to heaven is heaven itself." This doesn't mean that we get it all fixed, but that we become less harmful and more helpful. We – I hope – become more able to see the hand of God at work among people, and in so doing, *show* the hand of God.

Living non-violently is a spiritual practice, but it's not preparation for an event in the future. It's living mindfully, or sightfully. I think it's our best bet for seeing God at work and joining in.

In our prayers may we pray a real prayer, may we join a real Jesus in a real world. Loving God, God in this world, whose feet are covered in mud and hands calloused this is our prayer, that we may see you with us and not despair.

So be it. Amen.