

“Seeking the Sacred Unseen Through Contemplation”

Series: *Seeking the Sacred*

Scripture: Acts 9:3-18a; Acts 17:22-28a

Rev. Mary Henderson Bowman

January 26, 2025



First Presbyterian
Church of Charlotte

Today we are considering how we seek and see the sacred unseen through contemplation. Contemplation is perhaps best understood as a state of deep awareness. When we are contemplating something, we are fully aware of it. We are open to it and its possibilities.

Adele Calhoun describes contemplation this way — “contemplation invites us to enter into the moment with a heart alive to whatever might happen. [Contemplation] is not just thinking about or analyzing an event or person. . . . A contemplative person recognizes that every experience offers more than meets the eye. They know that ‘bidden or unbidden, God is present.’ Consequently, contemplatives are open to seeing the unseen world.”¹

This, of course, is not easy. We are describing a kind of awareness, a kind of deep seeing, that is counter-cultural.

Seeing deeply in today’s world is a challenge.
We live in a world with infinite distractions.
Some of those distractions fit neatly in our pocket or purse. [Hold up cell phone.]
We live in a world that moves at breakneck speed.
It is hard to keep our focus.
We do not know how pre-occupied we are.

Perhaps we should not be surprised that the topic of blindness — which we heard in our First Scripture reading² — is a consistent theme in the Bible.
It is all too easy to be blind and hard to be aware.

In the Bible, there are stories of people who are physically blind.
And there are stories of people who are spiritually blind.
And there are stories of people who are emotionally blind.

Through these stories, God creates an opportunity for us to look in the mirror and to check our own vision. It is as though we are suddenly transported to the DMV for our vision screening or to an eye clinic, and we are confronted with the question of how well are we actually seeing.

Have you ever been in a hurry to get somewhere?
You are running late — and yet you really can’t be late — and so you jump in your car and speed off and when you arrive at where you need to be — ideally on time — you suddenly realize that you do not remember a single, solitary detail about your drive.
The only detail that you paid attention to was trying not to be late.

And so you missed your neighbor’s child waving at you.
And you missed the way the sunrise was painting the clouds pink.
And you missed the opportunity to experience the beauty of the fall leaves.
And you missed the opportunity for gratitude — our love language to God.

¹ Adele Alhberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Discipline Handbook*, 55.

² Acts 9:3-18a

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It's true that we might feel grateful if we land on time to our destination, but that is only because we have come back to the present to appreciate that.

Whenever we rush and lose touch with the present.
Whenever we are preoccupied and slip out of the present.
Whenever we lose our awareness of the present
We miss what David Whyte calls the “harvest of presence.”
There is so much in front of us that is treasure if we can but see it.
We do not know how preoccupied we are.

One of the reasons awareness is so important is because God is in the present and because God is always, lovingly reaching out to us to get our attention.
God wants to be in communion with us as we live each day and each moment.
I can't remember who it was who said that God uses anything and everything possible to connect with us and speak to us and heal us and bring us into wholeness.
God is always at work to bring us into the reality of living and moving and having our being in God.
But if we are not paying attention, we might miss it.

In our First Scripture reading, we hear of Paul's conversion and the blinding that comes with it.
Ironically, it is the physical blindness of the bright light that brings an awareness of the spiritual blindness.

I have always been drawn to and mesmerized by the phrase “and something like scales fell from his eyes.”

You see, I can't help but wonder what scales are covering my eyes.

What unexamined judgments or stereotypes do I unknowingly have?
What blindspots?
What preconceptions or expectations are blocking my vision?
What cultural norms have I accepted that prevent my seeing well?
What self-absorptions are keeping me from being truly present?

Often we do not see the scales.
We do not see the filters that block our awareness.
We are not aware of the lenses we are looking through that are blocking our awareness.

The idea of blocked lenses reminds me of a family vacation we took. We were out for a hike and everyone in my family started raving about the beauty of a rainbow that they were seeing. I started looking around and saw no rainbow. I finally asked our youngest son where the rainbow was. He looked at me incredulously and said, “Mom, it's right in front of you.” But I saw nothing . . . nothing until I took off my lenses . . . literally, my sunglasses . . . and there was one of the most beautiful rainbows I have seen.
My lenses — that were polarized — literally kept me from seeing what was right in front of me.

So how do we become more contemplative?

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The psychologist David Benner wisely suggests that “any increase in awareness must start with our awareness of our lack of awareness.”³

Let me say that again - we begin to become aware by being aware of how unaware we are.

Benner suggests that in order to develop our awareness, we begin to practice seeing as though through the eyes of a child.

We try to see things as if for the first time.

We allow ourselves to be “led by curiosity and wonder.”

We suspend the habits of quickly judging, naming, or analyzing what is in front of us.

We might ask God what God would like us to see.

Spiritual practices or disciplines are also helpful in developing awareness and returning our focus to God. The world can distract us and steal our focus. Spiritual disciplines return our focus to what matters to us. If spiritual practices are new to you, please do not hesitate to ask me about them.

We are invited to walk our lives with God.

God is in every present moment.

And that is where we are invited to live.

Can we allow the scales to fall from our eyes so we can live and move and have our being in God?

³ David Benner, *Awakening Series*, <https://www.cascadialivingwisdom.com/>