

Altering Our Vision

“A Christian leader is not a leader because he announces a new idea and tries to convince others of its worth; he is a leader because he faces the world with eyes full of expectation, with the expertise to take away the veil that covers its hidden potential.”

—Henri Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer*

I have had a fascination with Superman for as long as I can remember. When I was little—maybe five or six—my mother made me a Superman cape. Superman was my hero. So I wore that Superman cape wherever I traveled. I watched all of the Superman movies. I had all of the Superman action figures. I had one of those old-school Superman punching dummies. I ate Superman ice cream. I wore Superman underwear. As if that wasn't enough, I carried my Superman obsession out of my adolescence and into the nineties. I, like most people, had become addicted to *Seinfeld*. It didn't take long to realize that the writers of *Seinfeld* loved Superman as much as I did. (Did you know that there isn't a *Seinfeld* episode where you do not see the man of steel?)

The simple fact is this: I loved Superman and still do, but for the life of me I could not and cannot understand why nobody at the *Daily Planet*, the newspaper where Clark Kent worked, ever recognized that Clark Kent was Superman.

It was so obvious to me. So what was it about everyone working there (or everybody living in Metropolis for that matter) that they couldn't see Clark Kent for who he really was?

Were his glasses really that distracting? Was his haircut that different?

I don't think so.

Over the past few years, I've realized that there was something wrong with the people at the *Daily Planet*, and there's something wrong with many of us. Together we struggle to see things for what they really are. The missional life first and foremost is about looking at things differently. It's about seeing things for what they really are. It's about looking, seeing, and searching for the presence of God wherever we are and wherever we go.

And this is difficult to do. It always has been, and it always will be. We are too easily distracted by our work, by our own experience, and by our need to be in control.

In Mark 6, Jesus was about thirty years old. He had just returned home to Nazareth for the first time since he began healing the masses, exorcising demons, calming storms, and foretelling the coming kingdom. He had been doing amazing things that only God could do. After a series of miracles and life-changing ministry, Jesus returned to his hometown hoping to find some comfort, familiar faces, and maybe a few pats on the back.

Instead he discovered that nobody cared about his ability to perform miracles. They didn't notice anything different about him at all. They couldn't see him for who he really was.

All of these amazing things had been happening in and around Galilee. Jesus had been changing the world, healing the sick, and feeding the hungry, but nobody took notice. Until Jesus began to preach. Once he started to speak, the people in Nazareth took offense at Jesus' bold claims of power and authority. Mark writes,

Jesus left there and went to his hometown, accompanied by his disciples. When the Sabbath came, he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were amazed. "Where did this man get these things?" they asked. "What's this wisdom that has been given him? What are these remarkable miracles he is performing? Isn't this the carpenter? Isn't this Mary's son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren't his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him. (6:1-3)

These people were working at the *Daily Planet*. They could not see Superman even though he was right there: they

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could see only Clark Kent. Jesus is the Son of God, and he was standing before them, but all they saw was the son of a carpenter. They saw the guy who had built doors, crafted tables, made chairs, and repaired furniture. He was the guy who visited their homes, called on their businesses, and worked for a price. He was anything but extraordinary. He was just Jesus from Nazareth, Mary's boy, nothing more. What's worse was that these townspeople had heard about the healings. They knew of his growing popularity and had even witnessed a few of Jesus' miracles, but they still didn't believe.

This is what happens when we are unwilling to see past our own experience. This is what happens when we stop searching for deeper meaning and purpose. This is what happens when we stop searching for God or, worse yet, never start.

The townspeople of Nazareth didn't recognize Jesus for who he really was because they weren't looking for God. To think that Jesus might be who he said he was was unfathomable. It was heresy. In their minds, carpenters couldn't change the world. Woodworkers didn't possess lifesaving or life-giving power. In their world, the regular people didn't possess the power to heal people, perform miracles, or do God's work. Even though the Son of God was standing before them, they couldn't see him for who he was. They couldn't see Superman.

Vision Problems

In Luke 10 we meet up with a pair of sisters, Mary and Martha, one of whom has trouble seeing. Mary and Martha's story begins in verse 38:

Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at

the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her." (vv. 38-42, NRSV)

In this story Mary and Martha both welcome Jesus into their home, but things change once he enters. The moment Jesus crosses the threshold, Mary and Martha respond to his presence differently. Mary spends all of her time sitting at Jesus' feet listening to every word he has to say. Martha, on the other hand, spends all of her time working frantically. Scripture describes her as being "distracted by her many tasks."

Having so much to do with so little help, Martha approaches Jesus and in effect asks him, "Why aren't you commanding Mary to help me out?"

Jesus replies by saying, "Mary has chosen the better part."

The *New Living Translation* puts it this way, Jesus says, "There is only one thing worth being concerned about. Mary has discovered it, and it will not be taken away from her" (vv. 41-42, NLT).

In this story Jesus tells Martha that Mary was able to see something that she couldn't. Mary could see Superman, while Martha was simply working at the *Daily Planet*. Mary could see the Son of God, while Martha could only see the work before her. It is interesting to note that Mary's vision enabled her to eventually be the one who anoints Jesus as Messiah with

the costly perfume and then wipes his feet with her hair before Jesus heads into Holy Week.

In order to live fully, in order to catch a glimpse of the glory of the coming of the Lord, we must be willing, like Mary, to strip it all away—to stop our work in order that we might see and pursue God everywhere we go.

Whether it's Metropolis and Superman, the Jews and Jesus, or Mary and Martha, we have trouble seeing things for what they really are. We have a vision problem.

How's your eyesight doing these days?

The missional life is about refocusing our eyes. It's about altering the way we see things. It's about searching for glimpses of God, even in the most unexpected places and unlikely faces. It's looking for God's presence everywhere we go.

Generally speaking, we see people, places, and pathways according to what we want to see. High school reunions are perfect examples of this. What would happen if you were to go back to your high school reunion today? What would you see?

Regardless of your answer, my guess is that there are former classmates who would gasp upon seeing you now, five, ten, or fifteen years later. They would say things like, "You're doing what? Really?" They'd launch into those wonderful "I remember when" stories. They'd see you, not as the person you are now, but as the person you were then.

We do these kinds of things because we have a hard time seeing the world around us as anything other than what we know, and based on that limited worldview we say things like, "People don't change. You are who you are, and nothing will ever change that." In the same way, the folks in Nazareth cried out, "Jesus isn't the son of God; he's a carpenter." Lois Lane

said, “Clark Kent can’t be Superman because he works at the *Daily Planet*.”

We struggle to see the big picture. We struggle to find God’s life-giving presence and power even though it is all around us. We say, “Our high school friends can’t be doctors, lawyers, or bankers because they’ll always be our high school friends!” We believe that we cannot do anything of worth if we stay at this company, in this position, or in this city. We struggle to remember that the world isn’t ours. “The earth is [God’s], and everything in it,” sings the psalmist (Psalm 24:1).

Our vision problem, our shortsightedness, and our inability to see everything around us as a gift and an opportunity for transformation prevents us from seeing and meeting the living God, Creator of the universe. It prevents us from experiencing and sharing God’s life-giving and lifesaving work. It prevents us from living fully, but it doesn’t have to.

In John 11, we meet a guy named Lazarus. We quickly discover that Lazarus is very sick. In fact, Lazarus is dying. At first glance, you might not know who Lazarus is, but I’m certain you remember his sisters, Mary and Martha. In John 11 we discover that Mary and Martha are grieving his illness and impending death. So Mary and Martha take action and call for Jesus, and Jesus comes running.

When Jesus arrives, he discovers that Lazarus has already been in the tomb for four days. When Martha hears that Jesus is coming, she goes to meet him, while Mary stays home. Upon meeting Jesus on the road to Bethany, Martha says to Jesus, “Lord, . . . if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask” (vv. 21-22).

What I love about this story is that Martha finally sees. She is redeemed. In this story, it's Martha, not Mary, who approaches Jesus. It is Martha, not Mary, who sees Jesus as the one who has the power over death. The woman who had previously been too busy to see Superman finally begins to see Jesus for who he really is, and what happens as a result is absolutely remarkable.

In the midst of her grief she says, "Lord, if you had been here earlier, my brother would not have died. But even now (even though he's been dead for four days already) I know that you have the power to heal him."

In the face of Lazarus's death, Martha's confidence is undiminished. In fact, her confidence is increased; and that is exactly what it means to live fully. That is the definition of faith. That is the conviction of things unseen, the assurance of things hoped for (see Hebrews 11:1). This is what happens next.

Upon hearing Martha's confession and being moved by her faith, Jesus replies by assuring her of all the things she hoped for, her unseen convictions. He tells her, "Your brother will rise again. . . . I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world" (John 11:23, 25-27, NRSV).

Then Jesus goes to the tomb where Lazarus was buried. He rolls away the stone and cries with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" (v. 43).

Lazarus comes out. He is unbound, resurrected, and set free. What once was lost has now been found. What has once

been dead, buried, and abandoned for four whole days has been brought back to life. And it all happens after Martha—the one who had previously been unable to see God, the one who hasn't ever stopped to recognize Jesus—finally sees Jesus for who he really is. She slows down long enough to peer beneath the surface, and when she does she sees Superman. She sees Jesus, the Resurrection and the Life.

Are you seeing things clearly these days? Or are you working at the *Daily Planet*?

Are you slowing down to search for and pursue God? Or are you distracted by your many tasks?

In John 11, Jesus raises to the newness of life a man who had been dead for four days. This is what can happen when we focus our eyes on the things that are not broadly seen. Life abounds when we're willing to strip away the veneer and see things for what they really are. When we search for and pursue God, our lives are undoubtedly changed, as finally we are able to experience the fullness of God's presence and power.

The missional life is about altering our vision. It demands that we adjust our vision to the divine rhythms of the God in whom and through whom we “live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). It's about shifting the way we see things. Pursuing God requires that we look for evidence of God's presence wherever we are and wherever we go, and let me assure you that God is working everywhere. God's presence, God's surprising and transforming power, even lives in you.

God is in all things and through all things. God's love “bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things” (1 Corinthians 13:7, NRSV). What's more is that God calls us through all kinds of mediums (vocations, locations, personalities, and talents) to join in God's mission

of perfect love of God and neighbor—or holy communion. Living missionally allows us to encounter and experience the transformative power and presence of the living God in a way that draws us (and those around us) into loving relationship or perfect communion.

Let's Start with Confession

Living fully requires that we recognize our “fleshy” propensity to see Clark Kent when we're really looking at Superman. We must get past our tendency to write off, rebuke, and rebuff others when they speak words, hold beliefs, or live in ways that we disagree with or cannot imagine. We must acknowledge and confess that we don't see things such as our jobs, normal encounters, or daily interactions for what they really are—opportunities to participate in the lifesaving and world-changing work of God—but rather as ways to outperform our neighbors, friends, competitors, and coworkers.

Living fully begins with confession. The missional life requires that we acknowledge or confess our shortsightedness (our problem) in order that we might live into and enjoy God's world. It demands that we open our eyes in a way that unclasps the unexpected power and presence of the living God in order to live fully with meaning, purpose, and hope. This begins with confession and takes shape through God's forgiveness or through the grace of Jesus Christ.

I don't normally sing, but I enjoy good music. In the early church, and especially in the earliest days of the Methodist movement, hymns were a primary avenue for teaching people about who God is and how God works in the world. Some hymns were also sung as prayers. As we sing, so we pray. In 1895, Clara Scott wrote the words to a traditional hymn.

These words seem to convey the heart of the missional life better than any book or lecture might.

The missional life is rooted in our ability to live lives that pray and hope for the following:

*Open my eyes, that I may see
Glimpses of truth Thou hast for me;
Place in my hands the wonderful key
That shall unclasp and set me free.*

*Silently now I wait for Thee,
Ready, my God, Thy will to see.
Open my eyes, illumine me,
Spirit divine.*

Although I've admittedly always had a fascination with Superman, somewhere along the way I came to the realization that I am not a superhero. I am just Scott. I always have been and always will be. I am Sue and Dave's son. I am Karin and Jill's brother. I am Wendy's husband. I am a former investment analyst, a graduate of Duke Divinity School. I am a guy who gets overly competitive playing on the soccer field, a guy who loves baseball, and a guy who likes to laugh out loud a lot. I'm not all that impressive on the outside. Inside, however, I know that God has plans for me. My mission is to simply live in a way that searches for the glimpses of truth that God has for me in every encounter, in everything I see and do, to the end that I meet God and join in his life-giving and lifesaving mission of holy communion (the perfect love of God and neighbor). If I do this, then I might find abundant life.

My prayer is that somehow by the grace of God you might realize that God has plans for you as well. No matter where you are or what you are doing, where you have come

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from or where you are going in the future, my prayer is that you might discover that you have the ability to live fully here and now. My hope is that you will discover that the image of God is alive in you and that you too are meant to have life and have it abundantly.

My hope is that this book will help you in your own personal pursuit of meaning and purpose. I pray that it will help you commit to a new way of life that sees all things as opportunities to become entangled in God's mission in the world.