Sermon, January 14, 2024
The Second Sunday after the Epiphany
A Sermon by Rev. John Balicki
St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Wilton, Maine

"Seeing is believing, but sometimes the most real things the world are the things we can't see."
The Conductor on the Polar Express

But is seeing even believing?

In a famous psychological experiment at Harvard University, subjects are shown a video of a basketball game, and are asked to count the number of passes that happen during a game sequence. During play, a person dressed in a gorilla costume crosses the court. When asked to report on what they saw, a study showed subjects could report the number of passes observed, yet, incredibly did not report seeing the gorilla if asked whether they noticed anything unusual about the video. In fact, people appear flummoxed when they are told there was a gorilla in the video, and are astounded when they watch the video back, knowing that it will appear.

These mental gymnastics take place when we avoid looking at our bank account after paying the bills or with regard to our political affiliation and beliefs. If we're confronted with news or information that challenges us or hear something we don't want to believe, we'll often ignore it. So hey threee years later who did win that 2020 presidential election?

A psychology professor at Emory University ran a study which showed that, given weak evidence confirming their view or strong evidence refuting it, most people will give greater weight to the former. I see what I want to see.

Our readings for the Second Sunday after the Epiphany are all about *seeing.* In the book of 1st Samuel, we encounter the priest, Eli, whose physical and spiritual eyesight has grown so dim, he cannot see what's right in front of him. The Psalmist describes a God who searches and sees *us;* a God who probes our secret thoughts, words, and ways; a God who beholds us when we're still unformed "in the depths of the earth." And in our Gospel reading, Jesus *sees* Nathanael — sees into his heart, sees who he is and what he needs — under a fig tree, prompting Nathanael, the skeptic, to look past his stereotypes, and see Jesus for who *he* really is: the Son of God. Let's review the story.

Jesus goes to Galilee and invites Philip to follow him. Philip, not a skeptic, enthusiastically runs and tells his friend Nathaniel they've hit the mother lode; they've found the Messiah. Nathaniel – not impressed because his religious assumptions won't allow him to see anything fresh or surprising in a simple carpenter from the wrong side of the tracks. But Philip drags him along to come and see. When Nathanael does so, he receives the shock of his life. As soon as he and Jesus see each other, before they exchange a single word, Jesus says, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" And, "I saw you under the fig tree." Immediately, Nathanael moves from doubt to faith, from ignorance to knowledge. He experiences an epiphany.

But this story at its core is not about what Nathanael sees; it's about what Jesus sees. It's a story about Jesus's way of looking and seeing, and about what becomes possible when we dare to experience his gaze. In this story, what makes salvation possible is not what Nathanael sees in Jesus, but what Jesus sees in Nathanael.

Debie Thomas puts it this way, *Seeing, of course, is always selective. We have choices when it comes to what we see, what we prioritize, what we name, and what we call out in each other. The selves we present to the world are layered and messy, and it takes both love and patience to sift through those layers and find what lies at the core of who we each are. But there is great power in that sifting, too. Something healing, something holy, something life-changing happens to us when we are deeply seen, known, named, and accepted.*

Jesus had a choice when it came to seeing Nathanael. What would have happened if, instead of calling out Nathanael's inner goodness, Jesus had said, "Nathanael – that cynic stunted by doubt" or "That Nathanael is really prejudiced," or, "Here is a man who is blunt and careless in his words," or, "Here is a man who sits around, passive and noncommittal, waiting for life to happen to him."

Any one of those things might have been true of Nathanael. But Jesus looked past them all to see an honesty, a guilelessness, a purity of thought and intention that made up the true core of Nathanael's character. Maybe the other qualities were there as well, but would Nathanael's heart have melted in wonder and joy if Jesus saw and named those first? Or would Nathanael have withdrawn in shame, fear, despair, and embarrassment? Jesus named the quality he wanted to bless and cultivate in his would-be follower, the quality that made Nathanael a person of beauty, an image-bearer of God.

Would we dare to allow God to see us in this way? To get past our very first put-downs of ourselves. Would we dare to try to see others, not just selectively, but looking deeper into their soul? Let me conclude with a poem by Jan Richardson.

Known
A Blessing

First
we will need grace.

Then
we will need courage.

Also, we will need
some strength.

We will need to die a little to what we have always thought,
what we have allowed ourselves to see of ourselves,
what we have built our beliefs upon.

We will need this and more.

Then we will need to let it all go
to leave room enough for the astonishment
that will come should we be given a glimpse
of what the Holy One sees in seeing us,
knows in knowing us,
intricate and unhidden

no part of us
foreign
no piece of us
fashioned from other
than love

desired
discerned
beheld entirely
all our days.