

“Knowing What To Look For”

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²⁹The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! ³⁰This is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.’ ³¹I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel.” ³²And John testified, “I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. ³³I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ ³⁴And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God.”

³⁵The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, ³⁶and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, “Look, here is the Lamb of God!” ³⁷The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. ³⁸When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, “What are you looking for?” They said to him, “Rabbi” (which translated means Teacher), “where are you staying?” ³⁹He said to them, “Come and see.” They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o’clock in the afternoon. ⁴⁰One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother. ⁴¹He first found his brother Simon and said to him, “We have found the Messiah” (which is translated Anointed). ⁴²He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, “You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas” (which is translated Peter).

(John 1:29-42)

“Right now, you are missing the vast majority of what is happening around you. You are missing the events unfolding in your body, in the distance, and right in front of you.”¹

These are the first words of a book by Alexandra Horowitz, who at some point began to notice how much she was failing to notice. Even sitting here this morning, she says, we are “ignoring an unthinkably large amount of information” that is bombarding our five senses: the ambient noise in the room... the rumble of a passing car... the hum of the heating system... the places where the wooden pew presses against your leg or back... “your tongue touching the roof of your mouth, the tension you are holding in your shoulders or jaw, the map of the cool and warm places on your body” ... “the blurred view of your own shoulders and torso in your peripheral vision.”²

Some of this, Horowitz admits, is helpful. Over time we learn to concentrate on certain stimuli and filter out the rest. But then we tend to do this in everything we do. So the time we spend “going to and fro,” as she says – “walking down the street, traveling to work, heading to the store or... school –is unremembered.” “It is forgotten,” she says, “not because nothing of interest happens. It is forgotten because we failed to pay attention to the journey to begin with.”³

So, Alexandra Horowitz decided that she would try and “knock herself awake,” as she put it. She started taking intentional walks – walks around her New York neighborhood. On

¹ Alexandra Horowitz, *On Looking: Eleven Walks with Expert Eyes*, Large Print Edition (Thorndike: Scribner, 2013), p. 9.

² *Id.*

³ *Id.* at 9-10.



each one, she would bring someone with particular expertise – a particular way of seeing the world. With the geologist, she started to see the differing stones and minerals in everything around her. With an entomologist she found bug habitats she never knew existed. She knew that the city had smells, but through her dog Pumpernickel she realized that dogs are rarely interested in a quick walk around the block – there is a world of scents waiting at every stoop, every tree, every patch of grass or dirt.

Her research and writing convinced her of a truth that most of us know deep down – that we have all become numb to the physical world around us. She tells a story about one of her walks, this one with “one of the world’s foremost researchers on the science of paying attention.” She literally stepped over sixty dollars in cash, lying directly in her path on the sidewalk. Walking a half step behind her, Horowitz couldn’t believe the woman missed it. Pumpernickel found it with her nose. But the expert walked right over it. As we walk through life it is amazing what we miss.

Just think of what could be missed on that hot day in the desert. A huge crowd had gathered. There was a long line at the river bank. So many people wanting to talk to John, to learn from John, to be baptized by John. But John saw Jesus coming from a distance. Something broke through all the other sights, sounds, smells, and sensations to grab his attention. And when Jesus came up out of the Jordan River, and something like a dove descended upon him, John knew instantly what it meant, because he knew what he was looking for. God had told him, somehow, in one of the many ways God has to tell us things, “At some point you will see the Spirit descend and remain on someone. That will be the One. That will be the One who comes to baptize not with water, but with the Holy Spirit.” Many saw it, but John knew what it meant, because he knew what to look for.

It was a little different for the two followers of John. When they saw John pointing to Jesus, calling him “the Lamb of God” and the “Son of God,” they started paying attention. But, unlike John, they didn’t really know what they were looking for. They might have had some vague ideas from the Hebrew prophets about what the Messiah would be like, or could be like.” But they didn’t really know what they were looking for. We know this because Jesus literally asked them point blank. “What are you looking for? You guys have been following me around all day. What are you looking for?”

And they couldn’t answer the question. They completely froze up. They responded by deflecting with a question.

“What are you looking for?” Jesus asks.

“So, where are you staying while you’re in town?”

In their defense, it could be that they didn’t want to say too much at that point. Maybe they were the kind of people that needed to hear more, needed to see more for themselves, before they committed. They were intrigued, but cautious about jumping in too quickly. I think that describes a lot of people, even people in the church.

Either way, it is clear that they didn’t have a good answer. They didn’t know what they were looking for. And again, I think that is true for many of us. We don’t either.

It is, however, a question we would do well to think about. With some things, we have a pretty good idea of what we are looking for. Over the years I have developed a good sense of what I am looking for in a cup of coffee... a nice pair of socks... a comfortable pair of pants. I expect you can talk intelligently about what you are looking for in a doctor or a lawyer... a job, a friend, a spouse. But what are you looking for when it comes to faith? What

are you looking for in your relationship with the living God? And just as important, what do you think God is looking for from you?

These can be uncomfortable questions, and when they are posed to us, we might get a little fidgety, a little sweaty. We might even freeze up and deflect with a question of our own. So, God, where are you calling home these days? Where do you live?

But it is a question that we cannot avoid forever. As author and leadership expert Stephen Covey has written, "What you see often depends on what you are looking for." If in our living we are mostly on the lookout for slights or insults, we will see those things. In the same way, if we are looking for evidence of love or faith or goodness in the world, we will find that, too. In the last few days, many of my friends in my home state of North Carolina are aglow and awash with new hope, simply because they took time to go out, stand on the curb of a street, and bow humbly to a group of Buddhist monks, whose quiet but convicted "Walk for Peace" is showing the world a different way. What we see depends on what we are looking for.

A corollary is also true. If we do not know what we are looking for, we will never find it. We could even walk right over it, like \$60 lying on the sidewalk. Pass right by, and never even know it was there.

I think Alexandra Horowitz's thoughts about a walk around the block hold just as true for our walks of faith. If we are not paying close attention to what is happening around us, we will miss those places where God's goodness can actually be seen, places just outside of our scope of vision where God's light is shining. The truth of the matter is that we tend to see things we are actively looking for. We are on the lookout for the things we really want. We give the majority of our attention to certain things, often without even thinking about whether those are the things that really matter.

In the heat of the desert, in a crowd with a million distractions, John the Baptist spotted Jesus from a great distance. He saw him (1) because he was actively looking for God's presence in the world, and (2) because God had told him what to look for.

And God has told us what to look for. God has told us what is right... what is decent... what is good. But the question Jesus asked to those two unnamed guys is the same question that is asked of every would-be disciple. John could answer it. The other guys could not.

So, where do you stand? How would you answer?

What are you looking for?