

THE SEE-SAW OF FAITH

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Do you remember running onto the school playground during recess and experiencing that feeling of freedom? Boy, I sure do! Which apparatus did you like the best? It was fun to pump your legs and swing as high as you possibly could and, if you were brave enough (or dumb enough!), jump out of the swing at the highest point. And what about the monkey bars? It was fun to climb through those bars and finally make it to the top where you could survey the entire playground. What a sense of accomplishment! Then there was the tetherball game. It was always fun to play, especially if you had hit your growth spurt and were taller than the other kids. That gave you a distinct advantage. But I loved the see-saw (we never called it a “teeter-totter”). Of course, you could only go so high on the see-saw, but it sure was fun to try to bounce the other kid off his seat (and it was kind of fun to get bounced off your seat, especially if the kid on the other end was bigger than you).

Apparently, there aren’t very many see-saws on playgrounds these days. That’s primarily due to safety precautions and concerns about being sued, although some playground equipment companies are working on designing safer versions. I don’t remember singing any songs when we used to bounce up and down, but in the 1765 Mother Goose’s Melody collection in London, this little see-saw ditty was first published:

*See Saw Margery Daw,
Jacky shall have a new master;
Jacky shall earn but a penny a day,
Because he can’t work any faster.*

One hundred twenty years earlier, there was a reference to that song and others like it that sawyers would sing as they pulled their saws back and forth.¹ You can hear the rhythm in the words: See Saw Margery Daw...

. . . which may be the origin of how we describe someone who “see-saws” back and forth when she changes her opinion from one position to another. Maybe it’s because circumstances change. Or maybe the person is undecided and just can’t make up his mind. To “see-saw” back and forth is often a negative description.

When Philip invited Nathanael to “come and see” if anything good could come out of Nazareth, Nathanael had a “see-saw” experience. Jesus literally “saw” Nathanael coming toward him and said, “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!” (John 1:47) Nathanael was already skeptical about Philip’s report that he and others had found the Messiah in Jesus of Nazareth. Nathanael sounds even more leery when

he asks Jesus, “Where did you get to know me?” (John 1:48) But then Nathanael got to “see” Jesus.

I don’t know why Nathanael wasn’t saddled with the nickname “Doubting Nathanael,” like his fellow disciple Thomas. Their experiences are almost exactly the same. At the beginning of the gospel, Nathanael makes the basic profession of faith in Jesus: “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” At the end of the gospel, when Thomas gets what he asked for when Jesus shows Thomas the wounds in his hands and his side, Thomas cries out, “My Lord and my God!” (John 20:28)

What’s so interesting and so meaningful for you and me as believers in and followers of Jesus Christ is what he says to Nathanael and Thomas. Jesus doesn’t rebuke Nathanael. Instead, he promises even more to come: “Do you believe because I told you that I **saw** you under the fig tree? You will **see** greater things than these.” (John 1:50) In the same way, Jesus doesn’t rebuke Thomas, but he makes a promise that describes where we find ourselves today: “Have you believed because you have **seen** me? Blessed are those who have not **seen** and yet have come to believe.” (John 20:29)

We say that “seeing is believing” and I suppose that’s true – although, in this day and age of PhotoShop, you can’t even be sure that what you’re seeing is real. Anyway, one description of “seeing is believing” says that “actually seeing or witnessing something, as opposed to simply being told about it, allows or will allow one to believe that it is true or has occurred.”²

Nathanael **saw** Jesus and believed. But he also was **seen** by Jesus. It was in that back-and-forth, that see-saw of faith, that Nathanael came to know Jesus and came to know that Jesus knew him. And it’s all because Philip went looking for Nathanael and, when he found him and heard his skepticism, simply said, “Come and see.”

Just three weeks ago, we began our Christmas Eve worship service as we do every year, by singing “O come, all ye faithful, Joyful and triumphant! O come ye, O come ye to Bethlehem; Come and behold him Born the King of Angels: O come, let us adore Him, Christ the Lord.” It’s an invitation to “come and see” for yourselves who Jesus is and what Jesus is doing in your life, in my life, and in the world. Jesus said to John’s two disciples, “Come and see,” and Philip extended the same offer to Nathanael, and their lives were never the same again.

The initial call can be life-changing, but “come and see” is not a one-and-done experience. That’s because, no matter how faithful we are or want to be, if we’re honest with ourselves and with God, we know that we see-saw in our faith. In his sermon called “Come and See,” Frederick Buechner talks about this invitation that is constantly being offered to us and what awaits us when we respond:

“Adeste fidelis. That is the only answer I know for people who want to find out whether or not this is true. Come all ye faithful, and all ye who would like to be faithful if only you could, all ye who walk in darkness and hunger for light. Have faith enough, hope enough, despair enough, foolishness enough at least to draw near to see for

yourselves. He says to ask and it will be given you, to seek and you will find. In other words, he says that if you pray for him, he will come to you, and as far as I know, there is only one way to find out whether that is true, and that is to try it. Pray for him and see if he comes, in ways that only you will recognize. He says to follow him, to walk as he did into the world's darkness, to throw yourself away as he threw himself away for love of the dark world. And he says that if you follow him, you will end up on some kind of cross, but that beyond your cross and even on your cross you will also find your heart's desire, the peace that passes all understanding. And again, as far as know there is only one way to find out whether that is true, and that is to try it. Follow him and see. And if the going gets too tough, you can always back out. Maybe you can always back out.

Adeste fidelis. Come and behold him, born the king of angels. Speak to him or be silent before him. In whatever way seems right to you and at whatever time, come to him with your empty hands. The great promise is that to come to him who was born at Bethlehem is to find coming to birth within ourselves something stronger and braver, gladder and kinder and holier, than ever we knew before or than ever we could have known without him.”³

It's kind of hard right now to offer that invitation, “Come and see,” because of the COVID-19 pandemic – at least in terms of an invitation to any sort of physical gathering. But we can still point to Jesus Christ, just as John and his disciples did, by offering the invitation Jesus offers – “Come and see.” We don’t have to argue someone into believing. We don’t have to browbeat someone into the faith. We don’t have to threaten people to know Jesus. We can say, as Philip did to Nathanael, “Come and see.”

St. Augustine, the 4th/5th century A.D. bishop of Hippo in Northern Africa, wrote, “Faith is to believe what we do not see, and the reward of this faith is to see what we believe.” Augustine’s thought is echoed in a more contemporary comment: “‘Come and see’ is a deeply biblical model of evangelism, a model that flows from our trust in God, a model that relies on God’s activity.”⁴

Once we see who Jesus is and what Jesus does, we can tell people what we saw. And **that** “see-saw” of faith can make all the difference in the world.

*Open the eyes of my heart, Lord
Open the eyes of my heart,
I want to see You,
I want to see You.*

Let us pray: Eternal God, our beginning and our end, accompany us in this day’s journey. Dawn on our darkness, open our eyes to praise you for your creation and to see the work you set before us today. Take us and use us to bring to others the new life you give in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

NOTES

¹ “See Saw Margery Daw,” at www.allnurseryrhymes.com.

² “seeing is believing,” at www idioms.thefreedictionary.com.

³ “Weekly Sermon Illustration: Come and See, January 8, 2018,” at www.frederickbuechner.com/blog/2018-1-8/weekly-sermon-illustration-come-and-see.

⁴ “‘Come and See’ in the Gospel of John,” at www.yosteve.blogspot.com/2012/03/come-and-see-in-gospel-of-john.html.