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# CHAPTER ONE

## DO YOU SEE WHAT I SEE?

*In those days Caesar Augustus declared that everyone throughout the empire should be enrolled in the tax lists.*

*(Luke 2:1)*

What is your fondest Advent or Christmas memory? Does this memory have something to do with decorating a tree full of ornaments, each holding a memory of its own? Maybe it doesn't quite feel like Christmas until the choir sings *The Messiah* or that

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special song that only your congregation sings year after year. Sometimes there's a special dish a loved one whips up for the family gathering that you only have around the holidays. Maybe it's the smell of gingerbread or even wrapping paper and tape that immediately transports you to your childhood home on the night before Christmas. Or maybe it's the warmth of a mug of cocoa in your hand, or the brush of your fingers against pine needles?

These moments, taken separately or together as a season of senses, are what it means to experience Christmas. The sights, sounds, smells, and tastes are just different during the holidays. Talking about resurrection and singing "Christ the Lord Is Risen Today" feels fine almost any time of year, but sing "Silent Night" in July, or don't sing "Silent Night" on December 24th, and you just might start a riot. It's not our liturgical senses that are offended. Our actual senses are. Having a Christmas tree in your living room in March feels about as sensical as eating soup in the summer or wearing shorts to a snowball fight. Christmas is so tied to our collective memory because it is so intimately connected to our senses. These holiday experiences are hard to forget, for good or ill.

Luke's Nativity story begins with the words, "In those days Caesar Augustus declared that everyone throughout the empire should be enrolled in the tax lists." *In those days* there was a proclamation from the one who held the most power. That declaration went out to the corners of the Roman Empire. Luke's story begins in the past, but how far back in the past? Just how far back is the period in question, "in those days"?

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In the beginning, when God began creating the heavens and the earth, God said, “Let there be light.” In *those* days the one who held all power spoke, and that declaration *shaped* the four corners of the world. As far as introductions go, John’s Gospel usually gets top billing as the narrative that calls the reader to remember creation. John’s “In the beginning was the Word,” certainly tunes our ears to remember “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth” (Genesis 1:1 KJV); but by bringing to mind that the one who holds the power proclaims a word that is to spread throughout the world, Luke’s Gospel, in its own way, is also calling us to remember the beginning.

God said, “Let there be light: and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good” (Genesis 1:3-4 KJV). God spoke, and then saw. God saw the light and saw that it was good. God then separated the waters from the waters and saw that it was good. God made the dry land and saw that it was good. The sun, moon, and stars, the vegetation, the creeping things, and then humanity . . . and saw that it was good. The creation unfolds through the repetition of those two actions: “God said . . .” and “God saw . . .” I can almost imagine that God’s eyes were closed in that first utterance of “let there be,” and maybe there really wasn’t much to see anyway. With eyes closed God speaks, and then when God’s voice ceases to reverberate through the cosmos, God opens divine eyes and sees that the light is good.

When we are born, we cry with eyes closed, then we open our eyes to look up at the one who gave us birth. For a moment, everything is good. At our beginning we remember *the* beginning. God spoke and then saw. We speak and then see. I wonder if God

offers this reminder of creation at our creation just to say that we are already loved from the beginning of our story.

God spoke and then saw, though God saw creation from the perspective of creator. Try as we might, we cannot comprehend the chasm between creator and creation. We cannot perceive what it means for anything to exist outside of creation. God knows we can't. This is what Christmas is about. God entered into creation with eyes of God's own, so that we might see God's love clearly. Christmas is the beginning of heaven and earth becoming one, where the dividing line between Creator and Creation, and the dividing line between you and me, is dissolved. When time was "full," God began to experience humanity like never before.

What does it mean for God now to have eyes? Did God in Jesus have perfect vision? We ponder, "Do you see what I see," knowing now that God just might ask us the same question.

## A DISTANT GLOW

When you see a box of Christmas lights, what do you see? Do you see the potential for an amazing display, artfully adorning your home signifying the changing of the season from Thanksgiving to Advent and Christmas? Maybe these small filaments wrapped in plastic represent a winter wonderland or the first attempt at "lawn of the year." Maybe this role of wire and bulbs will soon be an illuminated scene depicting Christ's birth. Or do you see what I see: a fifty-foot ladder, clips that don't adhere to your roof, an afternoon of cursing the day you were born, and second-guessing your life choices? We may be looking at the same box of Christmas lights,

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but what we see might be two very different things. What we can agree on is that Christmas just isn't Christmas without light.

Lights are one of the first signs that Christmas is near. Maybe more accurately, a lack of light begins to signal the changing season. At least for those of us north of the equator, the days begin to grow short. You start prepping for family dinner and by the time you set the table, the sun has set. For many, these short days offer an anxious anticipation for the next sunrise. There's almost a gnawing sensation when you know the day isn't over but the sun set hours ago. For others the darkness is no problem. The early evenings mean more time for campfires, more time to enjoy the lights around the neighborhood homes and businesses. Do you see what I see after the sun sets? Are you filled with anxiety? Do you experience excitement? (Maybe you see what I see . . . bedtime. I know it's only 8:00, but it's been dark for hours. Why spoil an opportunity for sleep?) Whether you experience anxiety or you are filled with excitement, we all tend to land in the same place. We all seem to agree that when it gets dark, we need more light. Either the light brings peace to the anxious heart or light offers beauty to those looking for some Christmas cheer. The light signals to us that something is different.

There are other visual signs too. We notice the change often when my family comes home from Thanksgiving. We typically spend a week galivanting across South Louisiana, seeing friends and family over the course of several Thanksgiving meals. When we leave our North Louisiana neighborhood, the houses appear normal, but when we come back everything looks different. There are reindeer in lawns, wreaths on streetlights, pop-up Christmas

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tree stands, inflatable Santas, and Salvation Army kettles in front of grocery stores. You don't have to be a Christian or a person of any faith tradition to recognize that change is in the air. You can see it with your own eyes.

Advent is a season of anticipation. "This is a sign for you," the angels tell the shepherds as they were "guarding their sheep at night." This is something you need to see. This is something to look for. When you see infants pulling up on the edge of the coffee table, you know they are soon to walk. When the fuel light illuminates on your car's dashboard, you know you need to get to a gas station. The inverted yield curve usually means a recession is ahead. We see these signs and anticipate what comes next. We almost seem hardwired for anticipation, to recognize that we live in a world of cause and effect. The relationship between what we see and how we respond is basic to our human condition. Sight is a powerful sense. More than 50 percent of our brain's cortex, the outer layer of our brain, is dedicated to sight.<sup>1</sup>

Seeing something in the distance, recognizing what it is, and responding correctly can be a life-or-death situation. A ship on the horizon can be friend or foe. The subtle movement in the bushes might be a bunny or a bear. Can I tell how far the oncoming headlights are before making this left-hand turn? Life is having the "capacity for anticipation," as John F. Haught puts it in his fantastic book *God After Einstein*. Anticipation is what separates us from God's magnificent work in the beginning of creation.<sup>2</sup> The light, seas, stars, and dry land cannot anticipate. They can offer signs of anticipation like a changing tide, a weathered rock, and a star that guides wise men from the east to find the new Messiah,



but they in and of themselves do not anticipate. The arrival of life, for which the universe had to wait, gives a surprising, dramatic intelligibility for the three great immensities of time, space, and complexity. Only living creatures can anticipate, that is, see a sign and expect what will come next.

Sometimes I like to ponder just how long a “day” is meant to be during the Genesis 1 Creation account. The beautiful rhythm of light, water, and land, then creeping and swarming things, and animals, along with humanity, represents a story that is much grander than maybe we imagine. “Let there be light” may have been an utterance spoken an unfathomably long time ago. On our timeline, this light began to emerge over 13 billion years ago. Maybe the poet was on to something when he wrote: “In [God’s] perspective a thousand years are like yesterday past” (Psalm 90:4). The data of both narrative and nature reveals that our participation in God’s history constitutes just a sliver of time. How long did the universe have to wait until the universe could look back at itself? It took quite a long time—13.6 billion years—to anticipate a first look.

Anticipation can heighten the senses, inspiring either fight or flight. It usually begins with our feet. Either we anticipate standing our ground with feet planted firm, or our legs engage to get us away as quickly as we can. Thinking about feet and anticipation, this past summer I was reminded of a third category. There is fight, there is flight, and there is utter paralysis. I have a love-hate relationship with water. I love looking at water. I love the sound of the waves crashing against the shoreline. Seeing the vastness of the ocean inspires thoughts of the immensity of God’s grace, but

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I hate being in the water. Being on top of the water in a boat or on a pier is absolutely fine, but being in the water causes a cascade of problems for me. First, as a young child I constantly had ear infections during the summer, so eventually if I wanted to swim I had to wear ear plugs and a swim cap. I also wasn't the slimmest of children. Being the chubby child having to wear a swim cap at parties makes for very long grade-school summers. Needless to say, I just didn't enjoy pool parties, and therefore I didn't spend much time at the pool. Secondly, I must have seen *Jaws* at much-too-young an age. If I ever did find myself in the deep end where my feet couldn't touch, all I could think about was how big the shark lurking just under the waves ready to eat me whole was.

This past summer I decided to give it another go. I swam out past the breaking waves and decided to swim past where my feet couldn't touch the sea floor. Then it happened. My body became still and unmoving, like I was playing a game of freeze tag. As soon as my feet couldn't ground me, I almost couldn't move. As soon as my head went under, thankfully flight kicked in and I swam as hard as I could to get back to shallow water. It's embarrassing, and I'm sure I'll tackle this fear at some point along my journey, but I didn't conquer it that day. In this case, anticipation led to anxiety. Do you see what I see when you see the ocean waves? Do you see a playground for surfing, fishing, and fun, or do you see something that must be avoided at all costs?

At the beginning of the Advent season, we dive into the prophetic poetry of the Hebrew Scriptures that our faith tradition has taught are signs for the coming Messiah. Jeremiah writes,

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*The time is coming, declares the LORD, when I will fulfill my gracious promise with the people of Israel and Judah. In those days and at that time, I will raise up a righteous branch from David's line, who will do what is just and right in the land. In those days, Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is what he will be called: The LORD Is Our Righteousness.*

*(Jeremiah 33:14-16)*

I imagine Jeremiah writing his poetry in the evening illuminated by firelight, except Jeremiah isn't sitting near the hearth. He sees Jerusalem burning in the distance. Jeremiah, who was called to be a prophet in 625 BC, lived during the time of Judah's last kings. Sometimes called "The Weeping Prophet," Jeremiah's words were heavy, full of lament and warning. He was a "soul in pain," who "screamed, wept, moaned, and was left with a terror in his soul."<sup>3</sup>

On the one hand, the Lord proclaimed through Jeremiah, "The LORD's fierce anger won't turn back / until God's purposes are entirely accomplished. / In the days to come, / you will understand what this means." (Jeremiah 30:24). On the other hand, at times Jeremiah struggled with the harshness of his people's rejection of God—

*I thought, I'll forget him;  
I'll no longer speak in his name.  
But there's an intense fire in my heart,  
trapped in my bones.*