

Come and Behold
December 24, 2009
Christmas Eve

Rev. John Burns
University Baptist Church ~ College Park, MD 20740
Website: www.weareubc.org

"Behold" is one of those words we usually only run into when we are reading or hearing the Bible. It is like "verily" or "begat" or "swaddling." The word is so antiquated, it has been removed from all modern translations of Scripture and replaced with the pale and inadequate word "see."

"See" doesn't quite cut it. "Behold" is a much larger word than "see" or "look" or even "watch." A person would not approach the breakfast table and say, "behold, a bowl of oatmeal." We don't open our cell phone bill and shout out to the household, "behold, our bill has increaseth." Regardless of how beautifully you are attired tonight, I doubt if any of you came out of your bedrooms this evening and announced, "behold my new sweater and matching accessories."

"Look," "see," "watch" are words that fit in nicely with everyday life. Behold is a word saved for more exceptional moments like, "Behold, you shall conceive and bring forth a son, and shall call his name, Jesus" and "Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy for all people" and "let us go to Bethlehem and behold this thing that has come to pass."

We can parse the word, take it apart and look at it and come up with a pretty good understanding of its meaning. "Be" and "hold." The word means bring your full self to this moment (be), and take it all in (hold) it some sacred space inside you. Don't miss it, don't get distracted right now, don't zone out in this holy moment, "behold!"

In May of this year, astronauts flew the space shuttle Atlantis to the Hubble telescope and refitted it with a new, technically superior camera. A couple of weeks ago, the Washington Post published some of the most recent photographs from that camera. Among the astonishing pictures, was one called Stephen's Quintet. In one frame, the uber camera captured five prominent galaxies among hundreds of others in the Pegasus constellation. Sitting there, holding my Sunday newspaper supplement, I could see 290 million light years printed on page 16. A light year, in case you've forgotten, is about 6 trillion miles. To put that in perspective, the earth's diameter is about 8,000 miles. Joel Achenbach, the author of the article, wrote that in that one picture, we actually see the light from galaxies as they were billions of years ago. In effect, as I peruse that snapshot, I'm looking back in time billions of years. I showed these photographs to my children the other night, thinking it would astonish them, but when I called their attention to the 8 X 11's of time and space, they replied rather apathetically, we've seen them at school. I wanted to say, "okay, you've seen them, but now I want you to behold them. Behold, the universe." Bring your whole self and take in the majesty of the mind-boggling cosmos in which we live.

In mid-November, I ran an errand out near the Arundel Mills Mall and I finished earlier than I expected. It was still fairly early in the afternoon and, since I had no obligations until evening, I decided to go for a walk. I parked my car and noticed that along the perimeter of the mall parking lot, a gravel road descended from the paved road toward a retaining pond with a trail around it. I headed off in that direction.

On the far side of the retaining pond, I came upon another trail leading into the woods and decided to explore it. I walked through the woods for maybe fifteen minutes and came to a narrow stream. Feeling more energetic than usual, I leaped over the stream and continued my sauntering among the leafless trees.

The sun was just beginning to slip toward dusk and the trees and shrubs were casting large shadows on the ground. I was almost ready to turn around and retrace my steps when I noticed some very large shapes looming a few yards in front of me. I froze in my tracks while my senses identified what I first thought might be buffalo. As I drew closer, however, I realized the shadows were inanimate. Ten to twelve old cars were parked in random formation in those woods. They looked like a small crowd had gathered for some urgent event, and failed to go home. As I moved among the old relics, I examined them for year and make. One rusting body of a paneled truck still had the word "Bread" printed on both sides, though the company name had long ago worn away. A small pick-up that looked like the model I am holding crouched in the grass along side 1930's and 40's era Buicks, Chryslers, Dodges and a Desoto.

Long sense robbed of any useable parts, the once gleaming vehicles rested in the woods, out of site from the rest of the world. I alone was a witness to their existence and as I examined them, the Spirit said, "behold." So I brought my full self to the moment and took it all in and started thinking about the last time those cars were driven. I could see a man in a white apron with a white paper hat dropping off bread at the corner grocery. I doubt if he knew, the day he stepped down out of that truck, that he would never step into it again.

In my mind, the big Buick carried a high school couple to their first date, an initial showing of "Rebel Without a Cause." Coming home, the boy was so mesmerized by the young lady's brown eyes, and her beaded cashmere sweater, he did not notice the temperature gauge bouncing in the danger zone until something blew and the car came to a stop. His dad said he'd have to pay for the repairs, until they received the estimate, at which point his father sadly acknowledged, "we've got to let her go son" and the dream mobile was hauled off.

The grand Chrysler, my imagination told me, carried a family of six on one more vacation down south to Mississippi to spend time with grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins and then returned with a knock in the engine that could not be quieted. A couple of shade-tree mechanics took a shot at keeping her going, but eventually they had to face facts and the family traded the classic in for a 1964 Rambler station wagon.

And that Desoto? It was bought brand new, just before the war, by a man in his late fifties named Arthur who'd always wanted a new car. For thirty years, he and his wife, Opal, spent some of the best days of their marriage riding in style, until their kids convinced them, as their eyesight grew dangerously dim, that they should let other people drive them where they wanted to go. For a few months the Desoto sat in the garage and then, when the first granddaughter to get a driver's license said she'd be mortified to be seen driving the old clunker, the couple donated it to AmVets where it was sold for parts.

As I was beholding these mammoths of the automobile industry, the Lord said, "Pay attention to your life. It's all passing so quickly. Make every trip count."

That's what beholding will do for us. As we bring our full self to a moment and take it all in, we hear the voice of God. That's why the angel of the Lord told the Shepherds that Christmas Eve, "behold, a child is born" and why the shepherds, being also very wise men, said, "Let us go to Bethlehem and behold what has come to pass."

On Christmas Eve, 410 AD, St. Augustine began his sermon with words that sound like they could have been delivered on any given Sunday in most American churches. He said, "I can tell we are still in the middle of the December gladiatorial games, for the church is only half full." Since the beginning of the Christian movement, pastors have had to battle athletic events, work schedules and leisure activities for the attention of their parishioners. Even St.

Augustine had a hard time getting people to behold. And that is probably why he asked his congregation that Christmas Eve, "have you gathered here this evening as a Quorum or a Quarum?" Loosely translated from Latin, he asked, "have you gathered here as a choir or query?" Augustine asked, in other words, "have you gathered here to behold the wonder of the moment and join the angel chorus in singing praises to our God or to question the apostle's testimony as to the birth of Christ?"

There is a time to investigate the central stories of our faith, but Christmas Eve is not that time. Christmas Eve is an exceptional moment to behold, to bring our full selves to this moment and take it all in. For when we behold, we hear the voice of God and join our voices with the choir of angels. Let us behold what has come to pass on this holy night and join the angelic chorus as we sing "Silent Night."