

**“The Gradually, Dazzling Kingdom of God”**

***Razzle-dazzle.*** What a neat word. It is one of the more “fun” words in the English vocabulary. It’s entertaining just hearing yourself say it-- “Razzle-dazzle. Razzle-dazzle.” Mr. Webster defines it as a state of hilarity, a colorful action or display, a “maneuver designed to confuse,” such as in a football game when the defense expects a run and gets burned by the Hail Mary pass. *Razzmatazz* is another neat word that has a similar meaning, but it doesn’t have the “ring” like razzle-dazzle does.

Have you ever been razzle-dazzled, bedazzled, or simply dazzled? If not, why not? Is it because you’ve not been lucky? Is it because you’ve never been at the right place at the right time? Is it because you have a high “astonishment threshold” that leaves you unmoved and uninspired about much of anything? Is it because you wouldn’t know a dazzling moment if it hit you on the head with a hammer?

There is a scene from the movie, *The Coneheads*, which illustrates the move from, “Big deal...” to ABSOLUTE AWE. The Conehead family is from the planet Remulak. They land in New Jersey and begin the hilarious challenge of assimilating into earth culture. The distinctive “conical” shape of their heads often leads to the question, “*Where are you from?*” They respond, “*We are from France.*” Their daughter is a popular student at the high school. Her father, Beldar, volunteers to do the fireworks display during halftime of the Homecoming game. Watch what happens. (SHOW FILM CLIP)

The people in the bleachers were dazzled. What they saw would forever change their understanding of fireworks. The Fourth of July would never be the same.

I recall the story of a young boy sitting at the end of a pier, fishing with his grandfather. It is one of those perfect moments that grandparents dream of. They talk and laugh and even have some fish in the basket. As they watch the sun dip to the horizon, the boy asks questions. “Grandpa, why does the rain fall? Why is the sunset red? Why are some people happy and others are so sad?” The grandfather gives thoughtful answers. Several moments pass in silence as the two watch the last crescent of the sun and its reflection on the water. Then the boy’s question turns to an ultimate concern. “*Grandpa, does anyone ever really see God?*” The old man slips his arms around his grandson’s shoulder and says, “Son, it’s getting so I can hardly see anything else.”

We hear stories like this and wonder why we can’t see the same. Some of us have stopped wondering because the odds are remote at best. We don’t admit it, but we haven’t had a dazzling glimpse of God’s glory, at least not in an obvious way, so we no longer look. The grudge against God is that God is not visible to the naked eye. If God’s dream for the world is so important, why doesn’t God give us a little peek now and then, or write in the sky, “*I exist!*” Why doesn’t God speak clearly so that monks or religious fanatics aren’t the only ones to hear the Divine?

A group of people sat with Jesus and the disciples. “Why all the parables?” they asked. I think he said, “Well, *everybody* loves a good story.” In our lesson, Jesus told them, “You’ve been given the secret of the kingdom of God. You’ve been given a new way of living and being. God wants the world to know something wonderful is in the works. You can live in the kingdom right now. You don’t have to just imagine it. You’re surrounded by it. The ways of the world are obsolete. God gives you his Spirit. Show what this Kingdom is all about by loving others the way I have and loved you.” Then he said, “To those outside, everything is in parables.”

I want to get back to the question I asked earlier. Have you been dazzled? Have you ever felt anything like a tug at your heart? Huston Smith, the great scholar of the world’s religions said: “The longing is there, built into us like a jack-in-the-box that

**presses for release... Whether we realize it or not, simply to be human is to long for release from mundane existence with its confining walls of mortality. The Good News...is that that longing can be fulfilled.”**

**Experience teaches us that the fulfillment of the longing doesn't come at once, though we wish it would. It is gradual. It comes and goes and can't be contained or domesticated. Sue Monk Kidd says we get discouraged in our spiritual journey because we've been conditioned to expect immediate results. Loose twenty-five pounds in six weeks. Earn a degree on line in four months. Get your burger hot and NOW!” She calls it “quickness” spirituality... McPrayer. McMeditation.**

**“Okay God-- I'm sitting at this stoplight thinking about you. I'm ready for some illumination.” “Well, Lord, as you can see, I'm in church. Here I sit. My eyes are closed. My hands are folded. I'm singing all the hymns and I'm trying to pay attention to the sermon. You've got an hour and fifteen minutes to start shining.”**

**My friend Joe is an amateur botanist and ornithologist. Over the past twenty-five years he has taught me to identify the calls of many birds. It used to be that I didn't pay much attention. I loved the sound, but it was like background music to whatever I was doing. The birds insisted on singing at the same time and I couldn't tell one from another. But Joe taught me to hear the distinctive call of each bird. I can no longer hear them as I once did now that I know what I'm listening to.**

**Brian McLaren says that in a similar way, God is all around us, but we don't know what we are seeing. Once we realize however, that there is more to life than what our five senses can absorb, we become open to another way of knowing-- not something we grasp with our intellects, but a presence that stirs in our hearts. Jesus talked much about the importance of sight and insight. When it comes to seeing evidences of the kingdom of God, it is not with eyes of flesh that we see it.**

I recall a particular potluck when we were at Benham and Wolf. I returned to the trough for the dessert course and took a slice of pie that Betty Yoder had made. I knew it would be good, but I wasn't prepared for what the first taste would do. My Grandma Bibbee made a brown sugar pie to die for. It was my absolute favorite. After she died, the recipe was passed along to the cooks in the family, but none could get it right. I remember thinking, "Even when I'm old and wrinkled, if I taste a pie like she made it, I'll know immediately."

I took one bite of Betty's pie and I was at the table in Grandma's kitchen. She gave me a second slice along with her signature expression, "*If you eat too much of that, you'll go to bed and see bears with calico tails.*" I saw everything exactly as it was forty years earlier. A feeling of warmth and well being that washed over me.

All it takes is a word or hymn to trigger it -- the cadence of a song bird, a taste or a smell that carries you back in time and makes something inside well up within you. An expert in brain physiology could give an explanation of what happens in the brain to cause such sensations. She could explain the function of memory, but not explain the feelings of longing that go with it. Jesus' brought light to people who were first to hear him. He's doing it still. God is showing himself all the time... in a bite of sugar cream pie, in the silence of wordless prayer, in the cadence of a bird's song, in a line of a literature that shoots a dazzling ray of light upon a difficulty or doubt that oppresses you, or sitting on a bench in the prayer garden, listening to the music of water tumbling over rocks.

Lisel Mueller wrote a poem called, "*Monet Refuses the Operation.*" A doctor tells the impressionist artist, Claude Monet that he can perform surgery on his eyes so he can see things as they really are -- the way people with "normal vision" see them, and not in the blurred, blotchy way that Monet sees things:

(SHOW THE MONET SLIDE)

Doctor, you say there are no halos  
around the streetlights in Paris

and what I see is an aberration  
caused by old age, an affliction.  
I tell you it has taken me all my life  
to arrive at the vision of gas lamps as angels,  
to soften and blur and finally banish  
the edges you regret I don't see,  
to learn that the line I called the horizon  
does not exist and sky and water,  
so long apart, are the same state of being.  
Fifty-four years before I could see  
Rouen cathedral is built  
of parallel shafts of sun,  
and now you want to restore  
my youthful errors: fixed  
notions of top and bottom,  
the illusion of three-dimensional space,

I will not return to a universe  
of objects that don't know each other,  
as if islands were not the lost children  
of one gray continent. The world  
is flux, and light becomes what it touches,  
becomes water, lilies on water,  
above and below water,  
becomes lilac and mauve and yellow  
and white and cerulean lamps,

Our weighted shapes, these verticals,  
burn to mix with air and change our bones, skin, clothes  
to gases.

Doctor, if only you could see  
how Heaven pulls earth into its arms  
and how infinitely the heart expands  
to claim this world, blue vapor without end.

**We cannot bring about the Kingdom of God. We can't hurry it along. Frederick Buechner says that we can, however, ... "be kind to ourselves and others. We can make green places within ourselves and among ourselves where God can make his Kingdom happen."**