

“From Seen to Unseen”

Soul Shift – part #4. Based on the book by Steve DeNeff and David Drury

John 20:19-31

[68-69] (Welcome, prayer, where we are in Soul Shift, etc.)

[70] My friend, Pastor Larry, loves to take photos of the Northern Lights. How many of you saw them over Labor Day Weekend? Well, I missed them. Larry told me, once, while he was taking pictures, some people watched him with puzzled faces. They couldn't figure out what he was doing. When they looked at the horizon, they just saw vague white lights, like fog. But when Larry had them look through his camera, the colors were sharpened and defined. These beautiful lights, to the normal eye, were invisible, but to someone who knew what to look for, they were incredible.

We live in a world surrounded by the invisible. Our atmosphere is made up of invisible molecules of nitrogen and oxygen. The Northern Lights consist of ions streaming from the Sun. Normally, these particles are invisible to the human eye, until they interact with our magnetic poles and the earth's upper atmosphere.

[71] When I studied science and engineering, I was fascinated by the discovery of atomic particles. The ancient Greeks proposed that all matter was made up of tiny indivisible pieces he called “atoms.” But it wasn't until the late 1800's and early 1900's when John Dalton, J.J. Thompson, and Ernest Rutherford proved by various experiments the existence of atoms, electrons, protons and neutrons.¹ Now we have huge atom smashers (particle accelerators), like the Large Hadron Collider in Switzerland, which is 5 miles in diameter, showing us the existence of even smaller particles called quarks, which make up atoms.

Let's do a little survey. Who here believes in air? Who believes in atoms? Atomic particles? Quarks?

Have you ever seen one?

[72] There are seven octillion atoms in the typical human body.² 7,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000. That's seven followed by 27 zeroes.

¹ [https://www.uu.edu/dept/physics/scienceguys/2002July article on Dalton et al.](https://www.uu.edu/dept/physics/scienceguys/2002July%20article%20on%20Dalton%20et%20al)

² <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2013/jan/27/20-human-body-facts-science>

And we cannot see a single one of them, yet we certainly feel the effects of them. Especially if we carry around a few octillion too many.

[73] Today’s shift – from Seen to Unseen – doesn’t have anything to do with atoms, but atomic physics makes a helpful parallel. We live in a world surrounded by unseen things that influence us all the time.

[74] In his sermon, “Seen to Unseen,” Steve DeNeff mentions how modern culture skews our vision. We are taught to believe only what we can see with our own eyes. He gives four examples of types of people:

1. Skeptics: People who will never believe even if they see proof.
2. Scientists: People who only believe what they see. They like to say, “Show me the evidence.” (And they often handpick that evidence.)
3. Christians: People who have not seen and still believe. By faith, they can believe without evidence.
4. And finally, there are those who have shifted from Seen to Unseen. They have an even greater faith. They are the Christians who have learned to look for what is unseen.

It is ironic that Christians seem to get a lot of flak from scientists. Scientists say, “show me the evidence,” when there are a lot of things we believe in our modern world that we cannot see. We can theorize from our evidence and experiments, but in the end, we must decide to believe based on our observations. The choice is still ours. Sadly, our world rejects a lot of truth in spite of the evidence we see.

There is no such thing as a neutral observer. With the existence of quarks and ions and cosmic forces, we are beginning to understand how little we really do understand. With the advent of computers and movies, we are beginning to learn we cannot simply trust our eyes and ears. There must be something else. We need new sight.

[75] I got my first pair of glasses in the ninth grade. The difference was astounding. Not only did my vision change, so did my behavior and posture. I used to stare at my feet when I walked down the hallway, because that was as far as I could clearly see. The first day I got my new glasses, I walked with my head up. I could see people coming. It was incredible!

[76] John 20:29 says, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe." This verse comes from the story of Thomas, the disciple who missed out. When Jesus first appeared after the resurrection, in a locked room full of scared-stiff disciples, Thomas wasn't there. The other disciples went to him afterwards and said, "We have seen the Lord!" Thomas wasn't a skeptic; he was a scientist. He said, "Show me the evidence. Show me the scars, and then I will believe." (my paraphrase)

[77] Jesus showed up a week later, and he said to Thomas, "Here I am. Put your hands on my scars. It's really me. Believe." (my paraphrase) What did Thomas say? "My Lord and my God!" Thomas received his evidence, and he expressed his belief. Observation gave way to belief.

And then Jesus said, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." (John 20:29) Jesus wasn't really saying this to Thomas; Jesus was saying it to us! The story of Jesus and Thomas is not an admonishment of Thomas; it is a word of hope for all of us. We will never see Jesus in this life the way Thomas did, but we can have an even greater faith and revelation.

[78] Maybe the world needs the Church to reveal the things we miss. Maybe the church exists to point to the unseen, the spiritual world that is behind the physical world, and show how these two are intertwined. DeNeff says, "Faith is the way we penetrate the veil between seen and unseen." We need to see what God is doing in us and in others. We are the spiritual optometrists of the world, without all the fancy technology.

In their book Soul Shift, DeNeff and Drury write, "For some, faith is a grand leap in the dark." (p.62) Our faith seems to go beyond reason or evidence. Frankly, it makes others wonder if we've lost touch with reality. Consider: we believe in God, though we do not see God; we believe in heaven, though we've never been there; we believe in prayer, though we cannot prove it changes anything. We believe in angels, demons, healing, miracles – the list goes on.

DeNeff and Drury wonder, "Perhaps faith has the capacity to see what is already there" but is invisible to others. (p.63) Perhaps faith gives us God's 20-20 vision. "God can be trusted, the poor own the kingdom, the hungry may be full of

the Spirit, those who mourn are loved, those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake are...rock stars in...the kingdom of heaven.” (p.65)

[79] Choosing faith does not mean forsaking reason. Rather, it means not be blinded by doubt. There is a fantastic quote from Yann Martel in *Life of Pi*. Martel says, “To choose doubt as a philosophy of life is akin to choosing immobility as a means of transportation.”³

We believe that faith and reasoning work together; it’s another great reason to be a United Methodist! Shifting from Seen to Unseen means we must look beyond the visible world and use faith to make sense of what we observe.

[80] Let me give you a practical example that happen to me recently. I was out jogging with my dog, when a family of six came toward me on their bicycles. As they approached me, they were riding side-by-side but stayed on the narrow path. As a result, I was forced off the path. As they went by, without a word or even slowing down, I mentioned they could share the road. The oldest man in the group retorted, “What’s your problem?” and rode on.

Consider my reaction without faith: this guy is a stupid jerk. And he likely thinks I’m the same. That doesn’t get either of us anywhere.

However, what if I could see the invisible condition of his soul? With faith, what if I could know what kind of life this man has? Is he sick? Is his family OK? Are his grandkids with him because their father left them? I know, this is all in my imagination. I don’t know him and might never see him again. But my faith prompts me to look beyond my tangible observations and ask questions about the soul and the heart. I could ask the same of myself. Why did I respond the way I did? What was unseen in my life that provoked me?

Soul Shift is not about becoming perfect people. It is about becoming faithful people, disciples who take responsibility for their own faith. That cannot happen unless we look beyond our immediate senses – sight, sound, touch, taste, feel – and start seeing things with our hearts. ISTJ’s like me – this is painful.⁴ We just want the numbers, the facts. Empathy is hard for us.

³³ Yann Martel, *The Life of Pi* (New York: Harcourt, 2001), 28.

⁴ Introverted, Sensing, Thinking, Judgmental. Personality type from Myer-Briggs test.

[81] I think Jesus was the most empathetic person that ever lived, not just because he was divine, but because his prayer life was constantly filled with requests to God for others. In John 17, Jesus prayed for his disciples’ protection just hours before he would die on the cross. Do you know what his prayer was? “My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message” (John 17:20). Jesus saw into the future and prayed for us!

Jesus chose to see the things God revealed. Jesus could have rejected them. Jesus could have let the people make him king. Instead, he chose the path of faith, because Jesus could see what his sacrifice would do to change the world.

[82] To shift from the Seen to the Unseen, we have to look beyond the surface, past in the skin, and into the heart and soul. We must look past our suffering and believe there is a reason for it, like it says in Romans 5:3-5:

“...we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.”

[83] We need to develop a sort of Christian “Spidey Sense.” You remember Peter Parker? He had the ability to see, anticipate and react to things that were invisible to others. And he used that power to help other people, to warn them, to save them. If we shift our focus from Seen to Unseen, God will open our eyes to see things that are eternal, things that really matter. Instead of just believing what you cannot see, you will see things because you believe.

What happens when we receive new sight from God? Our values change. We do not listen to the voices in this world who do not speak for our encouragement or spiritual benefit. We see things with kingdom values: we see the Beatitudes. We realize we are not alone.

Go ahead, ask God for new vision. Ask for a new prescription for the eyes of your heart. Begin using new language – give God credit and glory for what is revealed. Don’t say, “It just happened.” Instead, say “The Lord allowed this...showed us...moved us...I saw it myself.”

We need to see the reality of the other, spiritual world around us.

Let's pray.

(Sing “Open My Eyes, Lord” TFWs #2086)

Memory Verse: Hebrews 12:1–2

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.”

Reflection Questions:

1. How often in a day do you look for God's activity?
2. What barriers keep you from seeing the unseen things of faith?
3. When has God shifted your vision or showed up unexpectedly? How has that changed you?
4. How do you respond when God does not seem to answer your prayers?
5. How can you shift your gaze from Seen to Unseen?