

FAITH REFRACTED: 5. SANCTIFY

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2 Corinthians 4:3-6

If a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound? Well, that is a question that philosophers and scientists have pondered for centuries. Scientists would argue that a falling tree creates vibrations which move through the air. Those vibrations exist whether or not there is anyone present to hear them. Philosophers would argue that without someone to perceive those vibrations then there is no sound exists. Which side are you on?

Here's another question for you. If a musician performs in a public space and no one listens, has the musician truly played? Yes, it's an odd question, but believe it or not, this very question was put to the test. Back in 2007, the violinist Joshua Bell performed incognito in a subway station in Washington DC.

Joshua Bell is arguably one of the finest violinists of our age. He was born in Indiana in 1967. At age 4, his parents noticed that he had taken rubber bands and stretched them across the handles of his dresser drawers and plucked out musical notes that he had heard his mother play at the piano. His parents arranged for formal violin lessons, and at age 14, Bell soloed with the Philadelphia Orchestra. At 17, he played Carnegie Hall. He was quite the prodigy. As an adult, Bell has performed with nearly every major orchestra in the world.

Almost as interesting as the musician is the instrument he plays. Today, Bell performs on what is known as the Gibson Stradivarius. It was built in 1713 by the acclaimed violin maker. Bell purchased the violin in 2001 for close to four million dollars. Today, it is valued at over fourteen million dollars.

So, it was on January 12, 2007, at 7:51 AM, that Joshua Bell quietly walked into a Metro station. He was dressed casually in jeans and a long sleeve tee shirt and wearing a baseball cap. He removed his priceless violin from its case and laid the case on the ground. He tossed a few dollar bills and coins into the case to prime the pump, and he began to play. Bell played 43 minutes. He didn't play popular tunes that the average person would recognize. He started off with "Chaconne" from Johann Sebastian Bach's Partita No. 2 in D Minor which Bell describes as "a spiritually powerful piece." From there, he played Franz Schubert's "Ave Maria," and so on.

This was not a random event. Bell was not busking on a whim. This impromptu street performance was actually organized by the Washington Post¹ newspaper as an experiment of sorts. Reporters were there watching the crowd. A hidden video camera was recording all that took place.

The premise of the experiment was simple. What would happen if a world-renowned talent with a multi-million dollar instrument started playing anonymously in a public space?

The answer, as it turns out, is “nothing.” In the 43 minutes that Bell performed, exactly 1097 people passed by. Of these, only seven stopped to listen. The rest kept walking. But it all wasn't for naught. Bell collected \$32 and change in his violin case. On stage, he earns about \$1000 a minute.

So, why didn't more people stop to listen? Could they not recognize the greatness that was right there in front of them? Couldn't they take a moment and just listen? Well, there are lots of answers to this question. It was early in the morning and these folk were on their way to work. Their minds were full of all they had to do that day. The music was nice, but they were on a schedule. They had places to be, things to do. They didn't know who this musician was. Some had headphones and were listening to their own music.

Now, it would be interesting to track down each person who walked by and tell them exactly what they had missed. And it makes me wonder what wonderful things that I miss each day in my busyness? As a person of faith, I wonder what God-encounters I ignore as I rush from A to B? What am I denying myself?

For the past five weeks, we've been reading through Paul's letters to the church in Corinth. As I've mentioned, while staying in the Greek city of Corinth, Paul reached out and invited people to learn about Jesus Christ. As he taught, he gathered these people into a worshiping community. He then moved on to Ephesus to start another church. But he kept in touch with his old parishioners and learned from them of conflicts and divisions within the church in Corinth. He writes back to the church with words of guidance and instruction, of encouragement and love.

And as we've journeyed through these letters, we might get the impression that being in church is about doing things a certain way, about being proper and following certain rules. Through his correspondence, Paul addresses these issues within the church one by one.

But to be honest, Paul would be the first to admit that these issues are secondary. They are not what being a church is about. They are merely distractions.

¹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/magazine/pearls-before-breakfast-can-one-of-the-nations-great-musicians-cut-through-the-fog-of-a-dc-rush-hour-lets-find-out/2014/09/23/8a6d46da-4331-11e4-b47c-f5889e061e5f_story.html

Being a Christ follower is not about being perfect or how you worship. It is not about the food you eat or the car you drive. Being a Christ follower is much more. Paul takes a step back from the distractions of Corinth to remind the people that to be a Christian is to see the light of God in the face of Christ. That is it.

Imagine that we were able to have a conversation with Paul today. And we were to tell him the Joshua Bell story about how so few people stopped to listen when he played his violin in the subway. Paul would likely say that all those people who walked by did so because they were veiled, that is they could not recognize the beauty of this music because of the veil covering their eyes (or their ears in this case).

This is what he tells the members of the church in Corinth—that for those who cannot see the glory of God, it is because it is like their eyes are covered. For those in Corinth, the gospel is there in front of them. Either they can see it, or they are veiled.

If they are veiled, it is because Satan—the one Paul calls *the god of this age*—has blinded their minds. Satan has blinded them *to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ*. And Christ, Paul tells us, is nothing less than *the image of God*. Those who are blind cannot see God even though God is right there in Christ.

As Christ followers, their purpose (and our purpose) is to let the light shine out of the darkness. This light is God's light. It is the light of creation. It is not just the light of the sun. It is the light of God's son. The light of the gospel of Christ illumines our world and enables us to see.

On the Christian calendar, today is Transfiguration Sunday. Lent begins this Wednesday. But before we enter that season of penitence that takes us to Easter, it is good to remember exactly who Jesus is.

In the account of the Transfiguration, Jesus leads Peter, James, and John up a mountain all alone. And at the top of the mountain, Jesus changes. He is “transfigured.” Even his clothes shine brightly. And then, along with Jesus are Moses and Elijah, ancient heroes of the faith, and they are deep in conversation with Jesus.

There, on that mountain, for the first time, the disciples see Jesus as more than human. He is divine. His face and being reflect the glory of God. Although they had not seen it before, this is the true Christ they have been following—not the Christ of miracles and healings, not the Christ of stories and parables. This is Christ, the one who reflects God's glory.

Caught up in the moment and not knowing what else to do, Peter calls out his suggestion that they construct three booths or huts. In other words, he wants to

build three churches to contain these holy figures, three little museums to hold this moment in time. But God interrupts and says “no.” Peter's idea is to do what we humans always do, create distractions. God corrects him saying, *This is my son, the beloved; listen to him.*

My question for you today is this: In your everyday lives, in this church, are we victims of distractions? Do we get sidetracked by demands that blind us to God's presence, that keep us from listening to the word of God's son? Are we willing to confront the question if what we are doing is a distraction or is it truly part of our mission?

Being a Christ follower is not easy. We are sinful, we are easily distracted by what is not primary to our goal of loving God and loving our neighbor. What we have to remember, what we have to make the focus of our lives, is to see the glory of God in the face of Christ and listen to him. Amen.