A CLOSE LOOK

Order of Service (bulletin)
https://www.spiritofhope.ca/news-and-events
Video (recorded live stream)
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October 18, 2026
Pentecost 21

Exodus 33:18-23

> Then Moses said, "Please, show me your glory!" [Adonai] said, "I will make all of my goodness pass before your eyes, and I will pronounce my Name, I AM, in your presence: I will show my grace to whom I will show my grace, and I will show my compassion to whom I will show my compassion. But you cannot see my face," God continued. "No human can see my face and live." Then [Adonai] said, "Look – here is a place beside me, where you can stand on a rock. When my glory passes you, I will place you in a cleft in the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by. When I remove my hand you will see my back; but my face, you must not see.

Matthew 22:15-22

> Then the Pharisees went off and began to plot how they might trap Jesus by his speech.They sent their disciples to Jesus, accompanied by sympathizers of Herod, who said, "Teacher, we know you're honest and teach God's way sincerely. You court no one's favour and don't act out of respect for important people. Give us your opinion, then, in this case. Is it lawful to pay tax to the Roman emperor, or not?" Jesus recognized their bad faith and said to them, "Why are you trying to trick me, you hypocrites? Show me the coin which is used to pay the tax." When they handed Jesus a small Roman coin, Jesus asked them, "Whose head is this, and whose inscription?" 'Caesar's," they replied. At that, Jesus said to them, "Then give to Caesar what is Caesar's, but give to God what is God's." When they heard this, they were astonished and went away.



Now, when I went into the voting booth at an advanced poll on Wednesday, I had done my research. I had carefully read and studied and reflected and prayed on each of the 10 questions. I'd listened to proponents on both sides of every issue raised in the various referenda.

I was not undecided as I began to unfold my first ballot. And it was a good thing that I knew how I was going to vote because I didn't have my glasses with me. Now, my eyesight is not so far gone from 2020 for a person my age, I think. For the last 20 years or so, I have benefited from the over-the-counter reading glasses. 1.5x still works okay, but 1.75 is more where I am now. On Wednesday, although slightly blurry, I could still clearly make out the words yes and no, which got me through the first nine ballots. And I could even tell which of the verbose options on option 10 was my preference on the issue of Alberta independence.

We heard today that fun little tale of Moses asking for and receiving from God a physical glimpse of God. Now, if we look at the verses that lead up to what we heard today, Moses was concerned that when they left Mount

Horeb, where the people of the Exodus had camped, to continue their journey to the land that they only knew in stories, to the land of Canaan, Moses was worried that they would be leaving God behind on the mountain: and the relationship that they had grown and known in this place with God would be lost. Moses says to God, "If your presence does not come with us, do not send us away from this place. How can it be known that we have found favor in your eyes, God, if you do not accompany us?" Adonai-God reassures Moses, "Set your mind at ease. My presence will go with you."

We're limited by our human experiences. We are limited by the languages and the symbols that we've imagined and created in how we might try to explain and understand the nature of God. I don't know if any of you happen to see video clips of Gabe Poirot: he was interviewed on Fox News a couple of weeks ago. Poirot recounted how he had a near-death experience when he wound up in a coma after a skateboarding accident back in 2019. Poirot claims to have spent the 18 days that he was unconscious, in heaven: including getting to meet Jesus face to face. Now, I am not one to poo poo anyone's spiritual or mystical experiences. To me, it's real if it's real for you, right? I you don't have to argue whether it happened or didn't happen or it was an imagination of your mind. If it's real, it's real. I go with the Dumbledore rule *from the last Harry Potter book: just because it isn't real, does that make it not true?*

The Fox interviewer wanted Poirot to describe Jesus physically. What did he look like when you saw him? And I wrote down the key words out of the interview.

> Pure fire. 5'11" like six feet yet as tall as eternity. Like an ocean of love. Yet his eyes were burning white and red at the same time. And talk about testosterone. Like a mustang He's the lion of Judah with a roar in his voice. Not a lion angry at me, but a lion angry for me.

I was surprised at how little of that description was about Jesus physically. 6 feet tall, white and red eyes, presumably quite a muscular male, given that testosterone reference. Poirot did go on to say that

> Jesus was definitely not a woman and he was not timid or weak or tolerant. Even saying that the Jesus he met is not that tolerant Jesus people say he is.

A man's man would be my way of interpreting what he said.

Almost all of what Poirot describes about what Jesus looked like are metaphors. And not even original metaphors to him. This is language and metaphor that is biblically based in some cases and certainly things you might hear in a good evangelical sermon.

Moses and God spoke about the divine presence which implies that there is a connection between God and the people that is beyond anything physical. Having a sense of God's presence isn't the same thing as looking at God in the eyes. And yet Moses still wants to have some assurance that God is going to be with them, that can trust that God's presence will be among them. And so he wants to see God physically in some way.

Regardless of what we might think the nature of God might actually be, whether there is a physicality to God in some way or a spiritual description or something that's maybe beyond the language that we have available to us, God still obliges and gives Moses a little bit about what Moses is looking for and gives Moses a closer look at God's back as God is going by. The potential physical descriptions that would be possible if somebody brushes by you and you only see them in the back for a couple seconds is pretty limited. It'd be pretty tough to say exactly what that person looked like if all you saw was the back of them as they rushed by. I called it a fun little tale because if you look at it literally, it reads as if Moses was getting a divine peak at the divine behind. I think I know exactly how Gabe Poirot would have talked about that: super taut muscular buns.

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Seeing is believing. But of course the 20th chapter of John reminds the followers of Jesus that that was not going to be the ongoing modus operandi of the early church. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe. *Blessed are those who know the presence of God without seeing.*

When we talk about taking a closer look, it can mean the ability to use our eyes physically. And there are tools like glasses or magnifying glasses or my most recent favorite thing: to use the camera phone on my app and zoom in on labels at the store going, "Okay, that's how much that costs or that's what these ingredients are."

But the phrase *a closer look* has much deeper value and greater value I think as metaphor. We live in a part of the world where we have come to expect near instant information. We've grown this expectation by the modern speed of communication and the access to instant information. And there is no shortage of information providers who are willing to give us the instant gratification we want. Now the obvious concern is that just because the information is available really quickly, it may or may not be reliable. At first glance, in this kind of instant gratification environment, it can be hard to distinguish what something might be objectively an observable fact and what might be somebody's opinion, especially if they're making an opinion on something that sounds like objectivity.

In our time and in our place, looking beyond the headline, looking beyond that opening screen is a wise, proactive measure indeed. Taking a closer look is an invitation to learn more. Taking a closer look is an invitation to open to a fresh understanding. Taking a closer look is having the humility to have your initial opinions challenged and even changed.

Jesus was asked actually what would be a fairly politically charged question. It was that question I think that is coincidentally semi-timely in our day and age.

Galilee and Judea had complicated governing histories. And due to the chance reality of geography, they lived in a really useful piece of land that was attractive to any emerging power. Galilee and Judea were literally on the crossroads of three continents as we would describe them: Europe and Africa and Asia. If you want to control the world, if you want to control trade, you'd need to have some control over where the people of Galilee and Judea lived. As such there were several pockets of time when the galileans and judeans were an occupied territory subject to the military and economic and the governance policies from powers that were beyond their land. Most notably in the biblical record we have the Babylonian Empire in the 6th and 7th century BCE and we had the Roman Empire from about the 3rd century BCE right up into Jesus' time and beyond. And even at those other times in between, the borders of what would be eventually called Galilee and Judea were pretty fluid because neighbors would encroach or be encroached upon: things have flowed like the breathing world that we are.

And so the question that Jesus was: *Is it lawful to pay tax to the Roman emperor or not?* The text tells us, editorially, that these questioners were disciples of the pharisaic leaders and among them were also very fervent supporters of King Herod Antipas of Galilee. Obviously under Roman law, you have to pay the tax as the law says but the question was deeper looking closer, *culturally, from a Hebrew Torah perspective, is it lawful to pay a Roman tax.*

My closer look into this helped me learn that there were rabbinic teachings (some after Jesus' time and certainly some before Jesus' time) that told the Hebrew people that they were obligated to pay the required taxes if they were living in a foreign land. I forget the exact Hebrew phrase of it, but it translates as *the law of the land is the law*. So if you live somewhere else and they have a tax, you pay it because that's where you're

living. But it was not clear if that rule would apply to the lands of Judea and Galilee which were not a foreign land but were foreignly occupied. You could make an argument that the law of the land is the law would apply and you could make an argument that says that: no it doesn't. Which is probably why it was a matter of debate.

So the question: *Jesus, do you want to remain a part of the Roman Empire or do you want to start a formal process aimed at deciding whether we should gain our independence from the empire or not? A or B, option one or two?*

The opinion of the author of Matthew is that these questions that they were asking Jesus were really just an attempt to get Jesus to take an unpopular position because no matter what side he chose, he would be unpopular. And that was presumably so that Jesus could find some discredit within the community, a trap, a plot. And so Jesus does what Jesus too often does. He answers their question with his own question. *Is the tax Roman tax lawful? Well, whose face is on the coin that you would be using to pay those Roman taxes? Oh, Caesar's? Well, give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and give to God what belongs to God.*

Jesus' closer look at the debate informed him that a devotion to God was not limited at all by the realm of finance or taxation policies or even the issue of occupation. Even in an era of political lack of control, being faithful to one's God could be seen as something entirely separate, The Herodian and Pharisaic questioners imagined that they had thought of all the possibilities before they confronted Jesus. *We've got him. No matter what he says, we've got him.* But the teacher from Nazareth made them take the closer look. As the text said, they retreated in astonishment.

I'm generally pretty cautious to offer my opinions from the pulpit on how to vote… and for good reason, not the least of which is engaging in direct political partisanship within the church context is strongly frowned upon by the Canadian Revenue Agency. But having said that, I think it is, and it's been assured, that it is perfectly legitimate to comment on issues that intersect with the explicit ministry work of the church. So let's look at tomorrow's Alberta referendum questions from a ministry and faith perspective.

As you know, there are 10 questions, but they can be lumped together into three categories. That's at least what the Alberta government has said. There's three categories.

1. We've got questions on immigration.
2. We've got questions on the Canadian Constitution, and
3. We've got a question on Alberta independence. Sort of.

Actually, the independence question, I suppose, could be categorized as a constitutional question. So let's say there's two categories.

1. We've got five questions on immigration related changes and
2. We've got five questions on constitutional related changes: how Canada's governance is going to be structured.

Actually that first question about Alberta seeking more control of immigration is really a desire for a constitutional change, isn't it? So that's really a constitutional question. So, let's say

1. we've got four on immigration and
2. we've got six on governance.

Actually, question five in the immigration section is not directly on immigration. It's the one about requiring proof of citizenship to vote. So they're not really saying what to do about immigration directly. But… you don't have to take too much of a closer look to interpret that as this is a process to make it really hard for that alleged eager fraudulent non-citizen to try and vote.

So we've kind of got three categories, but not the same ones in the glossy brochure.

1. We've got three proposed changes to Alberta's immigration rules, and
2. one with a solution to non-existence voter fraud, and
3. six on the governance structure of Canada.

My opinions? I'll be very open and honest with anyone who would like to know my opinions. As if you wouldn't be able to guess if you stare at my social media or look at my tie.

But you know what? It doesn't really matter what I think because each of us needs to take the closer look for ourselves. In fact, that closer look, I say, I would encourage you to take a closer look at what the Bible and the historical traditional narrative of the church has had to say about the treatment of so-called foreigners in so-called our land. You might even want to ask yourself simply, what would Jesus do?

And as far as the constitutional questions and the independence question go, I'm kind of inclined to follow Jesus' example from Matthew today. Do these questions have any impact on how I can live faithfully into my spirit? At least on a surface level, I'm inclined to see those questions as Caesar questions, not God questions. Should we have a Senate? I don't know. *God tell me, should we have a Senate? I doubt you'll have a great big clear answer for me.* Having said that though, you might still want to take a closer look at the society that's being imagined by the proponents if these constitutional changes come into effect. You can ask yourself in that closer look, if those questions lead to societal changes, ask, will those changes challenge the worldview that my faith wants to see?

So, I'm resisting telling you how I think you should vote, and I'm not going to. But I will leave you with one final thought to consider.

Unless you're honestly undecided. I mean, you just can't figure out what to vote. Or if you honestly just don't care one way or the other, it's not important to you in the least. Unless those apply to you, I think that taking the necessary closer looks needs to inform any Xs you put on a ballot. Not voting is only going to help the perspective that you don't want to win.

Tomorrow is one of those days when taking a closer look is deeply warranted as people, not only of faith, but as people who are part of this society and this community in which we live.

Thanks be to God that we can be grateful that we are creatures who have been invited to learn and change and grow. Blessed be God.
Amen.

#35TLUS Bless the Lord O My Soul

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