

Aware: Seeing the Signs
Will You See?
June 5, 2011

One of the great and foundational teachings of the Bible is that God is everywhere.

"Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me; your right hand will hold me fast." Psalm 139:7-10 (NIV)

One of the great and foundational teachings of the Bible is that God is everywhere. And one of the greatest blessings a human being can receive is to experience God being

everywhere – to see the signs of his presence and activity in our lives; to hear the whispers of His Spirit.

As Jesus put it:

*“Blessed are your eyes
because they see, and your
ears because they hear.”*

Matthew 13:16 (NIV)

How can we know for sure that God really *is* everywhere ... *to us*? How can we see Him working in our lives and hear Him speaking to our hearts? Answer that question and Christianity goes from being an idea to an experience; from a set of principles to a relationship with the God of the Universe.

And that’s our goal in this series – to take our faith from the abstract and theoretical to the practical and personal. My hope is that by the end of these 10 weeks, you’ll have

become more aware of God's presence and activity in your life than ever before.

Now, to accomplish that, we're going to have to work on developing our eyes and our ears. Not our *physical* eyes and ears – but our *spiritual* eyes and ears. And that's a big job, so we're going to split this series into two parts.

The first part, which we're beginning this morning, is called “Seeing the Signs” and will last five weeks.

The idea behind it is that if we're going to be able to see with our spiritual eyes we need to know what to look for. What are the signs of God at work *on us, in us, for us and through us?*

But before we can get to that we need to deal with a more basic question: *are we even open to what we might see? Will we*

see?

Once, Jesus was asked why he told so many parables. In response, he described an amazing – and sad – aspect of the human condition.

“Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand ... For this people’s heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes.” *Matthew*
6:13,15 (NIV)

If we’re going to hear, our heart must be willing to hear. If we’re going to see, our heart must be willing to see. So, that’s where we’ll start in this series.

And to help us with that, I’m going to use one of my favorite movies of all time ... M. Night

Shyamalan's "Signs." How many of you have seen it? In my opinion it's one of the best "scary movies" ever made because of the way it was made. As movie critic Jeffery Overstreet puts it:

M. Night Shyamalan is "a master of the 'less is more' principle." Instead of flashy special effects, it's "the sound of dogs barking or the rush of cornstalks disturbed by an unseen trespasser [that] sends chills up our spines."ⁱ

Cast of Characters

So, let's get into it by meeting the four main characters in the story, members of the Hess family, each of whom has an obvious struggle and weakness that is central to understanding the point Shyamalan is trying to make.

1. First there's Graham Hess (played by Mel Gibson).

He's a widower who has for some reason (which isn't revealed at first) recently abandoned his calling as a minister. His struggle is a lack of faith which is vividly illustrated in this scene. Let's watch.

That's one of the things I love about this movie. In one moment you're moved to tears and in the next there's something that makes you laugh.

Ok, let's meet the second character ... the guy who Graham yanks into the family hug.

2. That's Merrill, his brother ...

... who was once a rising star as a baseball player. He was a great homerun hitter, but he never got out of the minor leagues

because he also set records at striking out. That failure is what defines him.

3. The third character is Morgan, Graham Hess' son.

His struggle is with asthma. Throughout the movie we see his dependence on his inhaler.

4. Finally, there's Bo, Graham's daughter, who is obsessed with "contaminated" drinking water.

She continually asks for water and then doesn't drink it because she says it tastes funny or smells funny or whatever. For me, this was one of the more unnerving things the first time I saw this movie. I kept thinking "something's wrong with the water and she's the only one who gets it! They're all going to die!"

But there *is really* nothing wrong with the water. The problem is with Bo. She has a

psychological problem. That's her weakness.

Storyline

As I said, all of these character weaknesses are important in understanding the point of the movie, so try to keep them in mind as we quickly run through the storyline ... which is, basically, that "aliens are about to invade the earth and destroy everyone and everything!"

That seems a little far-fetched for such a serious movie about faith but keep in mind that "alien invasions" are the classic worst-case scenario storytellers use to raise the specter of "unimaginable evil and life-threatening disaster."

The story begins with Graham discovering that a circle has been cut into his cornfield.

At first, he thinks it's the work of local pranksters and spends a great deal of time and energy to prove that theory. But, eventually, he has to give that up as crop circles begin appearing all over the world.

Let's watch.

And that's a very good question to ask ... and it also serves as foreshadowing as to what the movie is really about. "What in God's name is going on?"

But what's going on with the circles? Morgan and Bo are convinced that the crop signs are the work of extraterrestrials planning to invade. But Graham is still a skeptic.

Unfortunately, "eating fruit or something" won't change the fact that the kids are right. The source of the crop signs *is* extraterrestrials – aliens – and, now, their

spaceships have appeared in the skies worldwide. As Bo said, "This is serious." And it's really scary. Could the world be coming to an end?

As it turns out, the aliens *do* invade worldwide. Though you never see them, they also invade Graham's house. In a very tense scene, the family hides in the basement as aliens try to break through the cellar door which Graham and Merrill have barricaded. Then lights go out ... and you think they're goners ... but for some reason, it's *the aliens* who wind up "gone."

We learn later that battle against the invaders turned in the Middle East when "three small villages discovered a primitive method to defeat them."

We learn what that primitive method is at the end of the film – water – and that, I believe, is

the tipoff that this movie is not really about aliens from outer space. In fact, if you think about what you're seeing as you watch, you realize that these aliens are kind of dumb. They surround the world in their spaceships but they can't break down a door to a basement or get out of a locked pantry. You'd think they'd have some laser-zapper-thingy that would do those kinds of things!

See, there are really *two scary stories* happening in this movie. Externally, the worst of the worst is happening with an alien invasion. But, internally, for Graham Hess, the worst of the worst has already happened. He's already experienced unimaginable evil and disaster. His son is dependent on an inhaler and his daughter has a severe psychological problem. Is there anything more heartbreaking than to see your kids suffer from debilitating illnesses? I know people who've had to deal with that

kind of thing and every one of them has struggled mightily. It's a deep wound in the heart of a parent.

But there *is* something even more heartbreaking for Graham. His wife is dead – killed in a freak accident, an incredible case of being in the exact wrong place at the exact wrong time. As she was taking a walk one evening, a car ran off the road and pinned her to a tree. Graham was called to the scene where he watched her die. And the kicker is that the driver isn't some unknown drunk. He's a good guy from town who just happened to fall asleep at the wheel at the precise instant that would kill her.

So, when the aliens arrive, Graham has already been overwhelmed by the terror of his own life. They're not the main story for him – or for us. They only serve as the device

to call the question that this movie invites us to consider ... a question that is finally stated as Graham and Merrill discuss TV reports of the mysterious lights in the sky.

Let's watch.

Pretty powerful stuff! But did you catch the question?

"What kind of person are you?" Graham asks. "The kind that sees signs and believes that someone is watching out for us? Or do you believe that people just get lucky?"

Merrill sees signs which confirm that everything is part of a grand plan – with turning away just in time to avoid kissing the "vomiting Miranda" as a prime example! But Graham, because of his wife's death, has come to believe that there are only coincidences which confirm nothing. There

is no one watching out for us.

Resolution

Now, the purpose of the movie is to resolve this question – to give an answer. And I'll tell you up front that I like the answer that it gives. However, *Signs* is *also* trying to teach us a lesson. And I'll tell you up front that I dislike the lesson. I'll explain why when we get to it.

So, let's look at the answer. Are there signs which confirm that there is someone watching out for us?

“Signs” (the movie) says “yes, there is Someone watching out for us though we may not understand His ways.”

It's the clear message of this movie and, by the way, it's the clear message of the Bible as well. Speaking through the prophet

Isaiah, God says ...

"My thoughts are completely different from yours," says the Lord. "And my ways are far beyond anything you could imagine." Isaiah 55:8[NLT]

"You can't always figure me out. But I'm here. And I'm for you."

We don't get that message from the movie until the final scene when, in a moment of blinding insight, Graham sees all the tragedy of his life come together as part of a grand plan. Let me set the stage.

- The extraterrestrials have been vanquished by that "primitive weapon."
- Graham and his family have come upstairs and turned on the TV to see what happened.

- Morgan is still struggling to breathe because they forgot to take his inhaler to the basement.
- Everything seems like it's OK now.

But it's *not*. There's a lone alien who apparently didn't get back to his ship in time *still in the house*. Graham turns his back for a moment, the alien grabs Morgan and then a very bizarre standoff occurs. The whole family is in the living room looking at this alien, not knowing what to do. And then ... Graham has a flashback to the night his wife was killed, to those final words just before she died.

Take a deep breath and let's watch.

Everything that Graham thought was bad in his life, in the end, actually turned out to work for good.

Now, that's not the same thing as saying that all of those things in themselves were good. But they *worked* together for good because someone was watching out for Graham; someone who had the power to redeem the most awful kind evil.

And if you walked in here this morning struggling with how the evil in your life makes sense, you need to know that the promise of the Bible is that there is Someone who can do that for you. For everyone who believes, God promises to take all the junk that's happened and eventually turn it into something good. You may not understand how He'll do that, but He can do that for you. All things work together for good for those who love God and who have been called to Christ and have said yes to him as their savior and Lord.

So, for that reason, I like the answer that "Signs" gives. As for the lesson it teaches ... well, first of all, what is the lesson? I think it's that ...

The key to having faith is to "see the signs" (where "seeing the signs" means "see how it all connects together.")

In fact, the whole movie rests on one word that was spoken prophetically by Graham's wife. "Tell Graham," she said, to do what? "See" ... but not just physically. "See" ... with spiritual eyes.

And that's what happens. For an instant, the veil between Heaven and Earth is removed and Graham sees how everything fits together – his wife's death, Merrill's failure, Morgan's asthma, Bo's obsession with water (which, by the way, was the primitive weapon). And that "seeing" serves as a sign to him to him that God really does exist, that

he never really was alone, that there really is a plan.

In addition, Graham gets to see the miracle of his son being saved. That, too, is a sign of God's presence and care. And as the movie comes to an end, his faith is restored and he goes back into the ministry.

So, what's not to like about that?!

On the surface ... nothing. But if the lesson is that "faith is dependent on seeing how it all connects" ... then a lot of us are in trouble because *few are those who get to "see" like that on this side of Heaven.* And if that's what you're waiting for – if that's what your faith is based on – then more than likely you will be sorely disappointed with God.

For example, I've told you about the struggle of losing our dog Deuce last fall and then

getting a new dog, Trey who is also an American Eskimo but very different from Deuce, unfortunately. Not long after that we got a second Eskie, Tery, who is more like Deuce than Trey, but still it's just not the same. Try as I might, I can't connect the dots. I can't see how losing our beloved Deuce "fits" in any way, shape or form.

And I'm just talking about dogs. A lot of us in this room have lost spouses or children or parents or jobs or homes – something that really matters. Try as you might, you can't connect the dots, either. And if your faith rests on that, you're in trouble.

That's why as much as I *do* like this movie I *don't* like the lesson it teaches.

The Bible on "Signs"

Now, I know that some of you might be

thinking, “So are you saying that we shouldn’t look for signs in our lives? If so, then you have a big problem because the next four weeks you’re talking about signs!”

Fortunately, that’s not what I’m saying. What I’m saying – actually, what the Bible warns us about – is that ...

1. “Connecting-the-dots kind of faith” is not sustaining faith.

I’ve heard people say, “If God just wrote a clear message in the clouds for every person alive that would do it. If He wrote, ‘I’m here. Jesus is my son. Believe in him or perish’ everyone would believe and trust. Unfortunately, history reveals otherwise. The “wow ‘em with a miraculous sign” approach doesn’t have the effect that we’d expect.

Just one verse sums it up (although there are many others). Speaking of Jesus, who the

Bible records as doing more miracles than all the others put together, John makes this incredible statement.

Despite all the miraculous signs he had done, most of the people did not believe in him. John 12:37 [NLT]

Are you kidding? How can that be? Because people were always waiting for the next miracle and it didn't always come in the way or time they expected ... and so they lost faith.

Faith that is based on signs that connects the dots is not sustaining faith - faith that lasts. I think that's why God doesn't employ that method very often.

But more importantly and more concerning to me:

2. The signs we look for are not necessarily the signs God gives.

After Jesus did all those miracles and had this ministry all over Palestine, the Bible tells us that ...

Some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, "Teacher, we want to see a sign from you."

He answered, "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.

"For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." Matthew 12:38-40 (NIV)

Now, notice Jesus didn't say to them, "No, I'm not giving you a sign." What he said was, "not the sign you want but the sign I want to give you. I'm going to do something that is going to show you that I'm real, that I care about you, that I'm invested in your life. It's not necessarily what you expect, but here's what I'm going to do: I'm going to be nailed to a cross and I'm going to die at the hands of the Romans and the leaders of the Jews. And that death is going to be for your sin. Then, three days later, just as happened with Jonah, I'm going to rise again. I'm going to defeat sin and death. *That* will be the sign. Will you believe?"

And I think that's the question we have to ask ourselves as we think about signs, as we think about understanding the kinds of signs God gives us that He's there for us. Are we willing to see? Or, are we so fixed on our own preconceived notion that God's going to

make it all line up for me now so I can see how it all fits together. I think God says, "No. I'm not going to do that for you. Instead, I've already given you a sign that I'm there, that I love you and I care for you." So, are we willing to see that? We'll talk more about that as we go into this series.

Reflection

We're going to close this morning with a time of reflection. In just a minute, we're going to put a couple of questions on the video screen and take some time to ponder. There's a card in your program where you can write down your thoughts so you might want to get it out.

But before we get to that ...

I want to share something with you that the Apostle Paul once wrote. He was writing to

the churches in Ephesus; he said:

I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better.

I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened ... [not so you can see how it all connects but] in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe.
Ephesians 1:17-19 (NIV)

I pray that for you. I pray that for us. That's our hope as we go into this series.

Ok, here's the question we're going to

ponder.

What are you demanding to “see” that proves God cares and that God is watching? It might take some time to think about this. You may not even have an answer to this question. You might think of someone you know who is always saying, “if I could just see this ... If God would just do this ...” Or, maybe there’s a situation in your life that makes you say, “I’m not sure God really loves me or cares about me, and I’ve got to see God do ‘this’ or show up in this way, or I’m not going to believe that he really cares and is watching over me.”

Just take a minute and think about that as we close this service. And then, the question is, will you consider releasing that demand and become willing to accept the signs God is choosing to give?

The sign of the resurrection of Jesus and also the other signs that we'll be talking about in the next few weeks – the signs that God is working on you, in you, for you and through you?

Just think about that for a few minutes and write your response on a card and then, if you're willing just write over that, "I release God of this demand," and then you're free to leave. Give the card to an usher on the way out or put it somewhere special.

Ok, here we go.

Endnotes

ⁱ Jeffery Overstreet, promontoryartists.org/lookingcloser/movie%20reviews/Q-Z/signs.htm