

Seeing the Jesus Who Sees Me  
By Jennifer Ellis West

As we've been reflecting together this Lent on what it means to fix our eyes on Jesus, I have been thinking about how important it is for me to be intentional about what Jesus I am looking at. In the passage that contains that phrase, I find the verb to be instructive. "Fix" as in adhere, as with glue or nails; cast before you an image of Jesus as you run the race of life, so that you won't grow faint or weary, says the writer of Hebrews; lock your gaze in place so that you don't lose sight of Him. But what image of Jesus is it that I am supposed to be staring at? What does Jesus look like? When I close my eyes and think of Jesus, what do I see?

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When I was a child, Jesus was a body stretched out on the cross at the front of Holy Savior Catholic Church. After my first communion, He was also a mysterious presence in the delicate communion wafers that dissolved on my tongue. Thanks to a well-meaning youth minister, the Jesus of my teenage years was a stern and disapproving uncle who sat silently in the backseat of cars when I went on dates and passively supervised my music and movie choices.

After living with the emaciated corpse Jesus and the judgmental uncle Jesus in my younger years, you can perhaps imagine my surprise when I encountered Jesus in the image of a stray cat. In her memoir, *Traveling Mercies*, Anne Lamott describes her first encounter with the living Jesus as a sense that "a little cat was following me, wanting me to reach down and pick it up, wanting me to open the door and let it in" (50). After attending church a week later, she writes, "I began to cry and left before the benediction, and I raced home and felt the little cat running along at my heels, and I walked down the dock past dozens of potted flowers, under a sky as blue as one of God's own dreams, and. . . I took a long deep breath and said out loud, 'All right. You can come in.'" Lamott writes, "So this was my beautiful moment of conversion" (50). It was this narrative, I think, that unlocked the carefully constructed box in which my church images of Jesus were kept and showed it for what it was: a casket. The problem with backseat-riding Jesus and crucified Jesus is that they hung over my life like a cloud or a ghost; in these images, Jesus existed, but He did not *live*. Anne Lamott's vision of a living being pursuing her, scratching at the door until she let Him in, broke open all my categories for what Jesus could be and do—and for how He might show up in my life.

Not long after this, I heard a song by Over the Rhine called "Jesus in New Orleans," where the singer sees Jesus as a woman in a bar while Dorothy Moore plays on the jukebox. "The last time I saw Jesus, I was drinking bloody Marys in the South. In a barroom in New Orleans, rinsing out a bad taste in my mouth. She wore a dark and faded blazer, with a little of the lining hanging out," goes the first verse. The chorus of that song, "Oh, ain't it crazy how we put to death the ones we need the most," speaks, I think, to our penchant for fixing Jesus, as if to a bulletin board, or behind glass, rather than fixing *on* Him, as He is transfigured across the landscape of our lives. For, though we know that Jesus is unchanging, the "image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation," we also know that we are in constant flux, being remade into that image, but in our humanness, always in a state of becoming. Jesus does not change, but who He is to me, does. When I don't recognize that, or I cling to an image of Jesus I've constructed rather than one in which He lives, it is often because I am trying to remain in

control, where I can determine His impact. When He lives and breathes, He asks things of me; He demands my response.

Over the years, the living Jesus has appeared in my life as a whisper on a spring breeze through an open window, as a chatty passenger on my lonely commute during a difficult season of marriage, in the person of my beloved grandmother, and through the eyes of both of my infant daughters. In fact, if you really want to learn what it means to fix your eyes on something, pay attention to babies who are just learning to see, especially to how they look at their mothers. I remember the first church service we took Josie to when she was a newborn. We stood to sing "Tis So Sweet to Trust in Jesus," and I looked down at this creature in my arms, gazing back at me with dark, serious, unwavering eyes, and I felt as if Jesus were staring right through me, helping me to understand what it means to be the object of such intense, adoring attention.

As is true for most other Christians I know, Jesus has also shown up in my darkest moments. When Olive was five days old, a pediatrician's visit showed that her bilirubin levels had risen so high that she needed to be rushed to the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) immediately. The doctor told us we needed to prepare for the worst: that if her levels did not come down in 12 hours, they would have to drain all the blood from her body and replace it, a risky procedure that sounded only less terrifying than the alternative, a disease that would cause permanent staining of her brain, manifesting slowly in decreased neurological functioning that could come on without warning at any point in her development. I sat with these possibilities in a rocking chair beside her crib for nearly 48 hours, with my Bible open on my lap to Isaiah or the Psalms, the words blurring before my eyes as I tried desperately to pray. My only consolation during what otherwise felt like a hazy nightmare was that every three hours, the nurses would unhook her from the sensors in the phototherapy crib and let me nurse her. Each time, she was so acutely alert, locking her eyes on mine, fixing me with her curious, wide-eyed stare. What I heard over the buzz and hum of the NICU was the steady, calm voice of Jesus, saying, "I am here. Do not fear, for I am with you. Do not be afraid. She is mine." It seems important to admit that my sense of Jesus's presence in those moments did not make me instantly peaceful or prevent me from weeping with worry and exhaustion. But it did help me feel less alone, both seen and cared for.

This seeing Jesus is the same one I see with the woman at the well and with the blind man at the pool and with the thief on the cross. Jesus knew that this kind of seeing communicates value, piercing us with His intimate knowledge while loving us to His death. In this way, perhaps we might think of seeing Jesus as just reciprocating, returning the seeing, knowing gaze with which He has already fixed us. "We love because He first loved us"; maybe, we are able to fix our eyes on Jesus because He sets His sights on us and never looks away.

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The Word became flesh, and so it is that words help put flesh on my Redeemer; stories help me better imagine Him. May we tell each other stories of what Jesus looks like when we see Him, whether in the eyes of our babies or in the voice of a barroom singer belting out the blues, so that when He comes, as He promises to do, we will have eyes primed to see.