

Beyond belief: Beholding Christ

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [January 13, 2004](#) issue

At this time of the Christian year, worship services feature narratives that stretch credulity to the limit. Whether the stories star hayseed shepherds confronted by hosts of glittering angels or desert pilgrims watching something like a dove descend upon a man in a river as a voice from heaven calls him “son,” this is the season of beholding things beyond belief. Ask some who have stopped going to church why they stopped and they may tell you that they could not pretend to believe such things any longer, while some who have stayed will tell you that is exactly the point. Faith means believing the unbelievable, they explain, but if you would rather stay home and watch the Science Channel, then good luck and God bless you. Sooner or later you will realize that the most important things in life cannot be explained.

Without getting into the debate between faith and reason, I still want to explore the relationship between beholding and believing, since it seems to me that they are two different ways of living into Christian faith. If I were to cast the relationship between them in historical terms, then beholding came first, as many who encountered Jesus in the flesh experienced things that they had never experienced before. They “beheld his glory” without knowing what it was all about, and they followed him without being able to explain to their adversaries why they were doing that, exactly. Believing in Jesus meant trusting him, even though trusting him meant deviating from central aspects of their belief systems.

Those who beheld him did not behold the same thing, either. Some beheld a human messiah, while others beheld God incarnate. Some beheld a faithful Jew, while others beheld an anti-Jew. All of this diverse beholding did not bode well for the spread of the gospel, either, so near the beginning of the fourth century the leaders of the early church got together and began to clarify what it meant to believe in Jesus Christ. In short order, what had been a matter of beholding (“Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy”) became a matter of believing (“We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God”) until those who dissented did so at their own risk. The quality of their lives mattered less to their inquisitors than the clarity of their convictions, and if they beheld anything that did not conform to orthodox

Christian belief, then their best bet was to renounce it as quickly as possible. Either that, or prepare to behold themselves on fire.

The Inquisition is over, praise God, but I am still surprised by how many Christians I meet who identify themselves as “heretics,” and who fear being found out by “more faithful” Christians. For some, the issue is that they believe *less* than they think they should about Jesus. They are not troubled by the thought that he may have had two human parents instead of one, or that his real presence with his disciples after his death may have been more metaphysical than physical. The glory they behold in him has more to do with the nature of his being than with the number of his miracles, but they have suffered enough at the hands of true believers to learn to keep their mouths shut.

For others, the issue is that they believe *more* than Jesus. Having beheld his glory, they find themselves better equipped to recognize God’s glory all over the place, including places where Christian doctrine says that it should not be. I know Christians who have beheld God’s glory in a Lakota sweat lodge, in a sacred Celtic grove, at the edge of a Hawaiian volcano and in a Hindu temple during the festival of lights, as well as in dreams and visions that they are afraid to tell anyone else about at all. These heretics not only fear being shunned for their unorthodox narratives; they also fear sharing some of the most powerful things that have ever happened to them with people who may ridicule them.

Given our history as people who started out beholding what was beyond belief, this strikes me as a lamentable state of affairs, both for those who have learned to see no more than they are supposed to see as well as for those who have excused themselves from our midst because they see too little or too much. If it is true that the most important things in life cannot be explained, then is it too big a stretch to declare that *dumbfoundedness* is what all Christians have most in common? I am not proposing that we abandon our beliefs. I am proposing that we allow God to go on challenging and refreshing our beliefs through what God gives us to behold.

This New Year, I am rooting not only for magazines like this one, where faithful beholding presses upon time-honored believing, but also for churches that do the same thing. Churches are where many of us learned how to behold, after all. By offering us places where the boundaries between this world and another are left porous on purpose, where we can find communities of support for exploring the liminal areas of our lives that few of us are equipped to navigate alone, churches

have opened our eyes to see, if not science-defying miracles, then at least the miracles of ordinary life on earth, which include occasions of such truth and beauty that it is impossible to believe they have our names on them.

Behold! I bring you good tidings of great joy! These gifts come to us from One who exists beyond all our beliefs, who beholds us with love surpassing all understanding. In the dumbfounding mystery of the Word made flesh, we see God's glory face to face.