Before the word was the world.

Now, I know, that in the beginning was the Word, as John’s Gospel tells us. And in the Book of Genesis we are told that God spoke the word and the world came into being. So you could properly say that before the world was the Word.

But nature was the only “Bible” that people had had for most of human existence. If the universe is about 13.8 billion years old and the earth is about 4.5 billion years old, and if homo sapiens appeared only about 200,000 years ago and they began to develop language only about 5,000 years ago, then world predates word in human experience.

This means that people learned to look before they learned to talk. Our biblical tradition of revelation, which began when God delivered the word to Moses, is only a little more than 3,000 years old. And even that event took place only in one of the most astonishing examples of looking. Moses was tending sheep on the back side of the desert when he saw something.

A bush—a bush that is burning. A bush that is burning but not burning up. A bush, in other words, that seems alive in an extraordinary way.

Maybe it was the bush itself that was extraordinary, but maybe it was Moses who was extraordinary for stopping and looking, seeing it for something sacred and making himself open to a word from God.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning, in her poem “Aurora Leigh,” takes us into that moment afresh:

Earth’s crammed with heaven,/ And every common bush afire with God,/ But only he who sees takes off his shoes;/ The rest sit round and pluck blackberries.

How do we learn to see like that?

Our Lenten theme this year is God Be in Us. We are trying to learn the spiritual disciplines necessary to experience the presence of God in us and around us. We want to learn to see God in everything and
everybody. But to do that, we have to learn to look.

The Sarum Prayer we have been using to guide our spiritual path in this season begins with the words God be in my head and in my understanding. We attended to that last week. Today we look at the second line: God be in our eyes and in our looking. We learn to look by inviting God to open our eyes so that we may see.

Clara Scott wrote the old gospel song we will sing next week. It begins, Open my eyes that I may see, glimpses of truth thou hast for me. It comes from Psalm 119:18, in which the psalmist prays: Open my eyes, so that I may behold wondrous things out of your law.

Behold. Now there’s a Bible word. Behold. Look. It’s interesting that in the Bible, the first beholder is God. At the end of every day of creation, we are told that God saw all that God had made, and God declared that it was good. On the sixth day, God made human beings, and then, in Robert Alter’s wonderful translation, we are told that God saw all that He had done, and look, it was very good. It’s as if the Chief Beholder was now inviting humans to do the same: to look upon creation to see the good in it. Even more than the good in nature, we are invited to see the very good in our fellow human beings.

Back to that in a moment. But first we should clarify language a bit between looking and seeing. Generally speaking, we make a distinction between looking, which is a glance or stare at something, and seeing, which is the awareness or recognition of what we are looking at. It’s possible to look and not see. This is something Kim makes clear to me every time I tell her I have cleaned something—like a toilet bowl, say. That may or may not be a random illustration, don’t you know?!

But before we can make too much of this distinction, our prayer for God to be in our eyes and in our looking is really the same as our prayer to turn our looking into seeing. The words can usually be used interchangeably. Like the title line in the Burt Bacharach song The look of love is in your eyes ... There’s no difference here between looking and seeing. Look doesn’t mean just the

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Thanks to Ken Wilson, God Be in My Head: The Sarum Prayer (Church Publishing, 2019), p. 40, for this citation.
formal function of our eyes; it means *what* they see.

We know this from experience. There's that moment of holding a gaze just a little longer than normal, so that the other person sees that you see him or her. That kind of looking is seeing. It goes beyond the surface to the soul.

This is what is happening in the encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus. Let’s set the stage: John’s Gospel is full of contrasts: light and darkness, seeing and unseeing, belief and unbelief, water and living water, flesh and spirit, death and life. John’s Gospel is the most visual of the four gospels. He wants us to see the truth, not just hear it, and so he uses language fit for the eye.

We see this in the way he tells the story of Nicodemus, a Jewish religious leader who comes to Jesus by night. Already we get the idea that John wants to show us that Jesus is the light that enlightens every person.

Most of us who grew up hearing the story of Nicodemus coming to Jesus and heard sermons that focused on Jesus’ words: *You must be born again.* To be a Christian, we were told, is to be born again. If one is a bona fide, born-again Christian—as opposed to one who just goes by the name—you will have had a sudden experience with God that you can point to and describe with clarity when you were born again. That’s a sermon for another day; today I want to take you back to what comes just before it.

Nicodemus comes to Jesus honestly, although John wants us to see that he is honestly still emerging from the dark. He doesn't ask Jesus anything. He comments on what he has seen. *Rabbi,* he says, *we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.* This is good. Nicodemus has been looking at Jesus and what he has done. He sees more than just the deeds themselves; he sees the deeds as signs pointing to God. In other words, he is already moving beyond the looking to the seeing.

Most often we hear Jesus’ response to Nicodemus’s statement as a corrective, a call for him to be born again so that he can see, as if for the first time, as if his words betray his utter spiritual blindness. But I don’t think that’s what’s going on here
at all. I think Jesus is just taking Nicodemus more deeply into the process of how it is he is already beginning to see what God is up to in Jesus. Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above [or born again]. Nicodemus is beginning to see, and Jesus is telling him why that is so. It’s because God has been opening his eyes to move beyond flesh to spirit, beyond the visible to the invisible, beyond the appearance of things to the essence of things.

The fact that Nicodemus doesn’t understand Jesus’ metaphor of new birth and thinks he’s being literal doesn’t change the fact that something is happening in Nicodemus that Jesus is encouraging. God is opening his eyes, and Jesus is inviting him to go deeper and be thoroughly transformed about the way he looks at the world.

What would it look like if we Christians today had our prayer answered for God to be in our eyes and in our looking?

I think it would first mean that we become more attentive to the spiritual saturation of the world. We would recognize, as Gerard Manley Hopkins put it, that “The world is charged with the grandeur of God.” Every single bit of it. Creation reveals the Creator. The natural and the supernatural coexist right before our eyes. If only we would look.

So we need to slow down long enough to look, to meditate on what our eyes fall upon, to contemplate our linkage, our connectedness to all things.

Second, we will begin to see the kingdom of God in the here and now. When we use the phrase “kingdom of God,” we tend to think it means heaven someday, in the future, after we are dead and gone. To see the kingdom of God this way leads you only to prepare for an eternity that is way off in the distance. But the way Jesus always uses the phrase “kingdom of God” is in its proximity to us now.

Wherever we see God being present among us, this is a sign of the kingdom of God. Wherever. Nicodemus saw that in Jesus. God was present in and through his actions in this life. But if we are really looking, if we have born-again eyes, we will be able to see that God is present and the kingdom of God is revealing itself in people whom we may not otherwise see.
When Martin Luther King, Jr. returned from a two-month tour of India in 1959, he had seen the effects of the Indian spiritual revolution that had brought together different religious groups in a nonviolent movement that astonished the world. King mounted his pulpit in Montgomery, Alabama, on Palm Sunday and said the following to his congregation about the late Mahatma Gandhi:

*I believe this man, more than anybody else in the modern world, caught the spirit of Jesus Christ and lived it more completely in his life. ... [H]ere was a man who was not a Christian in terms of being a member of the Christian church but who was a Christian. And it is one of the strange ironies of the modern world that the greatest Christian of the twentieth century was not a member of the Christian church.*

Wherever and whenever and in whomever we see the kingdom of God, God has been in our eyes and in our looking.

Finally this: when God has been

in our eyes and in our looking, we will see people as subjects, not objects. We will see them as precious children of God, not as things to be used for our pleasure and purpose.

After our worship today we will have the opportunity to view the award-winning documentary film by our own Cheryl Allison, *Shatter the Silence*. In this #MeToo era, Cheryl shines the light on the ways the church both has and has not treated women the way they deserve to be treated. We also have a Church Too problem. Unless the church is born again, it cannot see the kingdom of God. And that requires that God be in our eyes and in our looking.

When women have not been overlooked, they have been looked down on or looked at—for their physical rather than their spiritual value. This is carnal looking. On the other hand, when we see with the eyes of the spirit, we see the souls and the hearts of women. We see them the way God sees them. And not just women, but also people of color, people with disabilities and LGBTQ people. And when we do, when we see them, really see them, we ourselves become signs of the

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kingdom of God in the here and now.

God be in my eyes and in my looking. God be in my eyes and in my looking. Say it with me: 
*God be in my eyes and in my looking.*

Let us pray that the world will see the look of love in our eyes for all things and all people. 
Amen.