

“Astonishing Grace”

Sunday, March 21, 2021

John 12:20-33

The Fifth Sunday of Lent

As the hour of Jesus’ crucifixion draws near, his words offer instruction on what it means to truly follow him.

There was a song we would sing in youth group at church—

“Have you seen Jesus my Lord?”

A simple chorus, repeated over and over. At first glance, the song sounds too simple. It easily evokes the sort of sarcasm high school youth know best: “Have you seen Jesus my Lord?”

“Why, is he missing?”

“Was he supposed to bring snacks this week?”

But the song keeps moving, repeated over and over again, on and on: “He’s here in plain view.”

Have you ever stood at the ocean,
Felt the endless thundering motion?
Have you ever stood at the sunset,
with the sky mellowing red,
And the clouds suspended like feathers,
Have you ever stood at the cross, seen the look of love in his eyes?
Then I say, you’ve seen Jesus my Lord.¹

Have you seen Jesus? That is the question John tells us is on the minds of the Greeks who push their way through the crowds. They find Philip, who reverses the pattern from earlier in the gospel by going and finding his brother Andrew. “Have you seen Jesus?” they ask. It is the question that is on their hearts, and whether or not you have experienced God’s presence with the tide pulling against your feet it is possible this is the question which is on yours as well.

Have you seen Jesus my Lord?

¹ “Have You Seen Jesus My Lord,” words and music by John Fischer, 1970.

We do not know much about those unnamed Greeks in the Gospel reading. They are cameo players in a much longer drama. We do not know who they were, why they were there or what's behind their question. But I believe we know that question very well. In the middle of the crowded streets, they stumble on one of his disciples and ask, "We wish to see Jesus."

It is the question that stalks us in moments of struggle: when grief is too much, when we are paradoxically filled with emptiness. It is the question that arises in the moments of great tragedy: when children are killed in the streets of their city, or when people are mocked because of their heritage or ethnicity. It is the question that wells up inside of us when we do not know what else to say or do: have you seen Jesus? I'd like to find him.

These words from John's Gospel are commonly found inscribed in majestic old pulpits, hidden where only the preacher can see them. They are framed on doorways leading from pastor's offices into the sanctuary: "We want to see Jesus."

Inside an anteroom behind the chancel of a large, gothic cathedral of a Presbyterian church in suburban Philadelphia, they are framed near the door the worship leaders use to enter the sanctuary. The ministers and liturgists gather inside this inner sanctum as the organ prelude rolls along. They chat and gossip, don their robes, and pray. Filing into the chancel, they'd pass under the words: "We would see Jesus."

No one else in the church ever sees these words, and that makes me wonder what church members would write on the doorway for their preacher to see. Maybe they would write, "Remember, everyone likes a short sermon!" Or "No more cute stories about your kids," "Can you go easy on the guilt this week?" or even "Remember, noon kickoff!"

Would they dare to say, "Spare us the details, just talk about Jesus."

That is all these Greeks wanted. "Can we see Jesus?"

This request is a theological turning point in the gospel of John.

John's gospel uses sensory words like "hearing" and "seeing" to indicate the ways that people come to believe and trust in Jesus. The scene in today's scripture runs parallel to the early part of the Gospel where Jesus says to Andrew, "Come and see," and "follow me" to Philip.

These words take us to Jesus.

For preachers, they are reminders about the sacredness of their work. “It is so easy,” writes one preacher, “to be seduced by our own eloquence or communication skills, but the message is greater than the speaker. The preacher’s task is to communicate such that the people see Jesus.” (Richard A. Burrridge).

Yet John intends this to be more than some instructions for preachers. These words represent the climax of Jesus’ public ministry. His crucifixion is close, his hour is at hand. Arrest warrants have already been issued, and the crowds are stirred by his presence in Jerusalem. At this moment seeing Jesus takes on a different moment: not only is he the one who raises the dead, but he is also the one who raises the ire of the establishment.

According to John, the concern over Jesus has been growing in this week since he raised Lazarus from the dead. The chief priests and Pharisees had issued arrest warrants for Jesus. The plot continues to grow when a great crowd learns that Jesus was coming into Jerusalem. Everyone was shouting and telling about the things Jesus had done—leading the Pharisees to grumble that “the whole world has gone after him.”

No wonder the Greeks are curious about Jesus. They represent the world which the Pharisees have just said has gone crazy for Jesus—but also the world which God so deeply loves.

We do not know whether the Greeks ever got the answer to their questions. Instead of responding to them, Jesus takes center stage and begins to speak of his death. His words are thick with symbolic meaning, his images hard to understand. His soul is troubled. Unlike the other Gospels, John does not show Jesus wrestling with the decision to be crucified. He accepts it and understands now is the time. He does not ask to be spared, but instead reminds those who are listening that his death will be the seed of new life.

As he speaks, it suddenly becomes clear: if you want to see Jesus, then you will find him giving up his life for those whom he loved.

In John’s Gospel, seeing is indeed believing. It is the blind man who sees Jesus, even when the religious leaders do not. It is the crowds who see Jesus curing the sick. It is Nicodemus, a Jewish leader, who comes to see Jesus in the middle of the night.

Right from the very beginning of the Gospel, John draws a connection between the two. “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.”

To see Jesus is to see astonishing grace.

Have you seen Jesus my Lord?

This question becomes the question that will guide us in these final days of Lent. John tells us, “If you want to see Jesus, then look to the places where only death abides, and where no trace of hope can be seen. If you want to see Jesus, then watch as the seed falls, is buried in the ground, dead to the world.”

If you want to see Jesus, then you will love with the sort of love Jesus offered—the love that dared to cross boundaries, a love poured out for all of the world, a love that gives without expectation of return.

This has been the hardest lesson of the pandemic. Learning to love our neighbor has meant putting off trips and refraining from hugging. It has meant wearing masks that fog up our glasses and are hot and uncomfortable. It has meant placing our needs behind the needs of those who are more fragile.

Sometime around 166 AD, a devastating plague erupted in the Roman empire. It lasted for 23 years. Deathrates were high: historians put it at 7-10 percent of the population. In heavily populated cities, the rate was perhaps as high as 13-15 percent. The economy collapsed, there was widespread fear.

...historians of Christianity have suggested that this plague — and the subsequent Plague of Cyprian in the next century — was the context for the rapid spread of the Christian faith in these centuries following Jesus’ death. Christians didn’t flee the plague. Of course, many of them were poor and couldn’t. But they demonstrated rare courage caring for the sick and risking their own lives for the sake of their neighbors.²

To see Jesus is to follow him.

It is more than saying nice things about him.

It includes loving those we cannot stand;

It involves reaching out in love,

It participates in naming the ways suffering continues.

It requires that we speak up when we see ugliness, violence, and hatred.

Have you seen Jesus my Lord?

Here’s here with us now. Amen.

² Diana Butler Bass, https://dianabutlerbass.substack.com/p/moral-malpractice-and-the-future?r=65y0&utm_campaign=post&utm_medium=email&utm_source=email.