

So You Want to See Jesus?
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John 12.20-36
Lent 4B
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Do you have a bucket list? Is there a list of goals you wish to accomplish, experiences you hope to have, and places you want to see before the end of your life? Skydiving on your 70th birthday, finally writing that novel, visiting all 50 states. Touring Provence as the lavender fields are blooming, seeing a hit Broadway show with its original cast while the early buzz is buzzing, watching your grandchildren grow and marry and have children of their own.

We spend years of our lives focused on our fears, on our immediate needs, on the voices in our heads running all kinds of narratives. The consequence is that we don't really see and experience the life that is before us. If we start working on these life lists, perhaps it is because we reach a point at which we start to wake up to life and notice what's before us to be enjoyed, explored, and savored. We want to see it all. We want to see our lives as they really are. We want to see the world in its sameness and in its great diversity. We want to reach the end of our lives and know we have not missed out on the living.

Hopefully, one of the reasons we show up here each week is because we are people who want to live well. We want to be awake to our lives. We want to fully see them for the great mystery that lives are. We want to see each other and know that we are seen by each other. These are inherently human desires.

Hold that thread as we enter John's gospel this morning; a passage heavy with metaphor and symbol. One theme John revisits throughout his gospel is the play on vision as a state of being. Who has sight? Who is blind? Who really sees what God is up to in the world? Who is too lost in his own life to notice anything beyond his nose?

So when "some Greeks" in verse 21 wish to see Jesus, we are to wonder what kind of seeing they might do. Do they want to see him to judge him and join the building case against him? See him because they're curious? See him because they wish to follow him but need proof first that he really is who people say he is? Jesus' followers wonder, too, as a little flurry of activity ensues; Philip tells Andrew and the two go together to tell Jesus.

But like the Jesus who answers a direct question with a parable, John's Jesus speaks to Andrew and Philip in poetry.

Grain that falls to the earth and dies bears much fruit.

Love your life, lose it. Hate your life, keep it.

Follow me to serve me, and I will be where you are. God will honor your following ways.

He keeps talking in these one line codes until finally a voice interrupts, and everyone standing there hears something. It reminds us of the time Jesus was baptized and the heavens were ripped open to speak of his belovedness. This time Jesus and some of his followers, it seems, hear a word from God. But others hear a clap of thunder. Still others think an angel has spoken.

Then Jesus keeps talking, though this time more to the point, about the end of his life. He will be lifted up. He will draw all people to himself. Finally, he adds one more image, a recurring favorite of John's, the light is with you, for now, in the darkness. While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light.

All of this in response to news that "some Greeks" wish to see him.

What in the world? Were the Greeks there with Andrew and Philip to witness all of this? Clearly, bringing a friend to church with you is not the same as the disciples bringing people directly to Jesus, but wouldn't you be mortified if you brought your new next-door-neighbor to church one Sunday, and I spoke in disjointed code for 15 minutes?

Let's unpack this a bit, shall we? Sometimes when a passage of scripture cobbles together multiple images and phrases as this morning's gospel reading does, I will focus on what feels to be the most central image or even the most compelling turn of phrase. We cannot dissect each part but can grab onto one morsel to explore and consider. Today, however, I think we must look at the overview of this John 12 scene before we sink down into it. Some Greeks want to see Jesus, some disciples go to let Jesus know, and Jesus responds with no less than six different metaphors or symbolic phrases for the listening crowd to decode.

What did the Greeks want to see? What did Andrew and Philip think was going to happen in that interaction? What is Jesus trying to tell them all? Is this the Jesus that you and I really want to see? Is this the Jesus we look away from and dismiss? Do we skip past these verses and pretend the thunder and the dying grain and hating one's life never happened?

Sometimes we go looking for Jesus with curious anticipation and don't like what we find. It's the last Sunday in Lent. Next week begins our journey through Holy Week. And so today's verses are part of Jesus' warning words that he is leaving the disciples soon. They want to keep bringing new people to him as they have all along. They want Jesus to do his charming thing and tell a great story. They want Jesus to teach and heal and attract. Instead, Jesus alludes to his death and then hides from them.

Dying grain, losing life, light leaving darkness, the hour coming in which Jesus will be lifted up and draw all things to himself. We're to anticipate crucifixion here. Yet Karoline Lewis notes that these assorted images don't stand alone as arrows pointing to the cross. Instead, when "viewed through the lens of the Farewell Discourse [each image] has less to do with function of Jesus' death as it does with the possibility of what the disciples will do when Jesus is gone."

“So much of this last discourse from Jesus [from chapter 12 into chapter 15] is about discipleship. To serve Jesus (John 13:16) is to follow Jesus and to follow Jesus is to do the works that he did, to feed and tend his sheep (John 13:36-37; 21:15-19), to testify on his behalf (John 15:27).”

Through his ministry, the model of seeing God in a new way through Jesus was: So you want to see Jesus? Bring people to him. Go where he’s teaching, climb a tree and watch from above the crowd, rip the roof off of the house and lower your friend down to his feet, sit around the dinner table and talk with him late into the night, grab the edge of his robe as he passes by.

But that way only lasted a short while.

In John’s gospel, if you see Jesus, really see him for who he is and what he’s teaching, if you watch how he’s living and who he’s serving, if you pay attention to the way he talks and the intention with which he moves, then you are seeing the ways of God. Gerard Sloyan writes, “Whoever knows Jesus knows much about God. Jesus stands at the end of a long list of what the Bible calls ‘signs’...There are many signs worked by Jesus in John, but he is the great sign and he points to God.”¹

Jesus needs for Andrew and Philip and everyone who is listening to understand that they are about to become the way. If John’s Jesus is a sign that points to God; if John’s Jesus shows us and tells us what God is like, then it is significant that this Jesus is now telling those who follow him that God will honor those who live like Jesus. Take on Jesus’ light, and you become children of light. Serve Jesus, follow him, and Jesus will somehow still be there.

So the model after Jesus’ ministry will be: So you want to see Jesus? Show people how he lived. Speak in his way. Love as he loved. And through the living out of this way, you will become the sign that points to God.

The interesting thing about the scene before us is not really the Greeks who want to see Jesus. To be sure, John is letting the audience know that those called “children of light” will one day include the Greeks, but the interesting thing today is about Andrew and Philip. They are the ones who think they see already but need to see again. They do what they think is the best and right thing. They know Jesus is light and sign and way. They really are earnest in trying to get it right. But there is always more to see, and today is for them.

¹ Gerard Sloyan, *Interpretation: John*, p. 157

Timothy King notes, "The truth of Easter is not always readily apparent. It requires the ability to see clearly. This means rubbing our eyes, clearing them of gunk, and focusing our vision."²

Once we have done that, we may not like what we see. Or we may not be able to make sense of it. Or we may not want the responsibility of what we discover. We are still returning to these stories handed to us about who Jesus was and what Jesus did and how Jesus taught and who Jesus loved. In many ways, we are still bringing one another back to Jesus' presence without understanding that we are being asked to do more. We are being asked to give our lives to this way that he demonstrated. We are being asked to walk into his light and then carry that light into all darkness. We are being asked to be the signs of God's presence, God's love, God's nearness and mystery.

And that is most likely more than we really want to sign on for.

That's why David Lose reminds us, "the point of faith in Jesus isn't just faith, or comfort, or satisfying spiritual desires. No, the point of following Jesus is that we might be drawn more deeply into the kingdom of God through our love for, service to, and sacrifice on behalf of those around us. Jesus comes to demonstrate God's strength through vulnerability, God's power through what appears weak in the eyes of the world, and God's justice through love, mercy and forgiveness. And he calls those who would follow him to the very same kind of life and love."³

You wish to see Jesus? Keep showing up. Keep showing up here. Keep questioning the text before us each Sunday and live with both the questions and answers that we walk away holding. Elizabeth Gilbert has famously quoted one of her spiritual teachers, saying, "Look for God like a man with his head on fire looks for water." Keep searching for God.

Keep showing up in the relationships that challenge you, energize you, and draw out real life in you. Love one another as Jesus loved his friends. If you are loving each other well, people will know the love of God.

You wish to see Jesus? Keep making choices, big ones and small ones, that align your life with his. Keep discovering ways to wake up to your life in the fullest, best, holiest ways. Release what is harmful, selfish, arrogant, and pain inducing. Release it like a grain dying to the ground, and allow love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control to grow and bloom and take hold in your being.

You wish to see Jesus? Look around you, friends, and you will find him here.

² <http://sojo.net/blogs/2015/03/18/when-world-looks-back>

³ <http://www.davidlose.net/2015/03/lent-5-b/>