

Seeing Jesus¹

John 12.20-33

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Lent 5B

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I've never seen Paris or the lavender fields of Provence. My family has never seen *Hamilton*. I've never seen a salmon run as they swim upstream and simultaneously begin and end a life cycle. I've never seen Machu Picchu or the Maasai of Kenya or the holy ashrams and temples of India or the River Jordan or Carnival in Brasil or the streets of Cuba.

We are tremendously fortunate to live near family and celebrated my son's 12th birthday yesterday with cousins and an aunt and grandparents and a great-grandmother. My grandmother will soon be 94-years-old, and my youngest nephew is 2. We all ate lunch together yesterday, celebrating the birth of her eldest great-grandchild, laughing as the two-year-old steadily stole french fries off the plate of the 12-year-old. The youngest one is named Ira, named for my grandfather, my grandmother's husband who died far too young in 1990. Later in the day, as we drove to a second birthday celebration for my son, my daughter said, "I wish I could see Grandpa Ira."

There are things we want to see—holy sites, feats of nature, masterful architecture, tremendous works of art. We can see photographs, read stories, watch documentaries, buy soundtracks, immerse ourselves in the data and content and fragrances and food and come close to the experience of the thing. But it's not the same. We want to see for ourselves. And when we say we want to see, it's about the full-body experience of being in the presence of another, feeling the heartbeat of a person or a place, sensing the truth and the energy and the beauty of a person or a region or an experience, and letting it become part of who we are. We want to see.

¹ also "So You Want to See Jesus," March 22, 2015 by Rev. Elizabeth Mangham Lott

John plays with this theme a lot in his gospel: who can see, who can't see, who wants to see, who fails to see, who sees by day, who sees by night. For John, vision is a state of being. You have to be awake to see; awake as though being born all over again. Seeing as if for the first time. It is important to pay attention in his stories to who has sight and who is blind. And a physical state of seeing might not be the real vision going on. 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. Clearly, they've heard about him. They know the stories. The rumors and reputation have already reached them. But hearing about and knowing a little information and catching a sense of a person second-hand aren't the same thing. The Greeks are interested in seeing Jesus.

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 just as Jesus answers a direct question with a parable in other gospels, 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, another 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" want to see.

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 people go looking for Jesus with curious anticipation and don't like what they find.

We are nearing Holy Week. And so today's verses are part of Jesus' warning words that he is leaving the disciples soon. They will be following a man who is entirely out of sight. 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. They want to watch people get to see Jesus just as they have. Instead, Jesus alludes to his death and then hides from them. The seeing will soon be there job.

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, but 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).” How will you know follow and draw close to Jesus when you can’t see at all? Where will you find the path beneath your feet when he isn’t there to show you?

Throughout his ministry, the model of seeing God in a new way through Jesus was friends and followers bringing 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. Get close and see for yourself.

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.”² So who will do that work when he is gone?

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 show up in the lives of those who live like Jesus. Take on Jesus’ light, and you become children of light. Serve Jesus, follow him, gather people at your own tables, welcome and love with your whole life, and Jesus will somehow still be there.

Once Jesus is gone and only his followers are left, seeing Jesus is only possible in seeing the people who bear his name. This is you, friends. This is what the work of your lives points to. Show people how he lived. See past the trappings of propriety into the essence of what really matters. Speak in his way as you advocate for those our society ignores. Love as he loved as you welcome and notice and pay attention

² Gerard Sloyan, *Interpretation: John*, p. 157

to your neighbors. Get angry and flip tables with his passion and heart for justice. 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 and the ends of the earth, 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.

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.”³

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. And we are still figuring out what it all means. In many ways, we are every bit the friends and followers who are still bringing one another back to Jesus’ presence. And maybe we are Andrew and Philip who do so without understanding that we are being asked to do more. We think Jesus will do the work for us and don’t fully grasp that 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 peace and nearness and justice 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

³ <http://sojo.net/blogs/2015/03/18/when-world-looks-back>

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."⁴

If you are interested in seeing 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. Keep searching for God. Keep seeking justice in loud and quiet ways.

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.

To see Jesus, keep making choices, big ones and small ones, that align your life with his even (and especially when!) that alignment requires you let go of some practices and habits that no longer serve. Keep discovering ways to wake up to your life at its fullest, and best, and holiest. Release what is harmful, selfish, arrogant, and pain inducing. Release it like a grain dying to the ground, like a light pushing its way against darkness, and allow the Jesus Way of extraordinary grace and revolutionary love to take hold in your being. In seeing your life and love, the world is seeing the Christ.

Have you come to see Jesus? Look around you, friends, and you will find him here.

⁴ <http://www.davidlose.net/2015/03/lent-5-b/>