

"Seeing Jesus"
5th Sunday in Lent – March 18, 2018 – John 12:20-33/B

Tiger Woods is back. Last weekend he reappeared as a contender on the golf course, and you couldn't get near him. Everyone wanted to see Tiger. Everyone wanted to get close to the Best Golfer. Ever. Love 'em or hate 'em, folks just *love* celebrities.

Jesus was pretty big in his time as well, as we see in our story today. By this time, in John's Gospel, Jesus has become the most-watched rabbi in town, and his ministry was becoming more and more controversial. Most notably, he had given sight to a grown man who had been born blind, and then, raised Lazarus from death, long after the breath and spirit had left his friend. *(At this point, the religious authorities started thinking Jesus himself should be sentenced to death for raising someone from the dead. There's some irony for you.)* Finally, Jesus arrived for the festival of Passover with a triumphal entry into Jerusalem worthy of a conquering hero, surrounded by a parade of supporters waving palm branches and shouting, "*Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!*"

Power. Resurrection. Spectacle. That's what folks are drawn to. And so it was that some Greeks turn up in the story. Why Greeks? Some say the author of John belonged to a diverse community of multicultural and inter-religious seekers. Thus, these Greeks represented John's living examples of the world Jesus spoke about to Nicodemus when he said, *For God so loved the world.* For the storyteller, writing almost two generations after Jesus, the presence of Greeks was critical for his audience to know that God really DID love the (non-Jewish) world.

Back to Jesus' time. During the major pilgrimage festivals, it was not uncommon for Gentiles to come to see the Temple (sort of like going to be in New Orleans for Mardi Gras or a Spring Break sightseeing trip.) Perhaps they wished to see Jesus because, at this point, *everybody* was talking about Jesus. Everybody wanted to see him, a real miracle man. Everybody wanted to see a Messiah.

Yet, you might notice, Jesus never actually receives the Greeks. It's almost as if he is saying, "I'm already with you, whether you see me or not. Our relationship already exists, and has for a long time..." Our Old Testament/Hebrew Bible reading today is Jeremiah 31:31-34, in which an updated arrangement is being made, wherein God promises to put the law - "torah," God's instructions - *within* us, so that we will know the Lord.

Not that people were asking for this new covenant. No one in Jeremiah's day was speaking sweetly of "letting God into" his heart. There is no hint of an invitation on the part of the people. As Walter Brueggemann points out, this covenant is given by God without reason or explanation. God wants the relationship with the people and resolves to have it. So God declares that he will write himself into the people.

So it is either by God's Holy Spirit or by great good luck that the Greeks looking for a Messiah, present themselves to Philip, the one with a Greek name and the perfect resume for that which they seek. Just think about what Philip has *seen*: Philip, has been with Jesus from the very beginning. He was at the wedding in Cana to drink wine changed from water. He was in the boat to see Jesus walk across the Sea of Galilee. Philip has *seen* some *stuff*...but that also means he has seen some other stuff as well.

Philip *knows*. He's been with Jesus from the beginning. He knows that the power and the glory of his Lord is not the power and glory that a lot of people might hope for. He knows that following his Lord will be a sacrifice, but Philip also knows that it's true. And it is this truth that all of us are seeking, which is why we all want to SEE Jesus. But here's a helpful hint: in John's Gospel,

“seeing” is believing. So in John’s telling, the Greeks were really saying, “Sir, we wish to **believe in Jesus...**” And so do we, so do we.

Next Sunday is Passion Sunday, which begins with the traditional Palm Sunday liturgy. There, we will “see Jesus” by taking **our** place in **his** human story. We’ll lay down palms and have our feet washed. We’ll eat our holy meal together and bring our words and our sorrows to the foot of the cross. We’ll hear the terrible story of Golgotha, and slam the door on the tomb. And we’ll wait in the dark...knowing that the next step is Resurrection.

As we move from Palms to Passion to Empty Tomb, let us remember and reflect deeply on the reality that the foundation of our Messiah’s Kingdom is not power and glory, but is instead the love and self-sacrifice of the cross.

Jesus’ death on the cross is a sign of solidarity with human suffering. It shows us that no matter what is happening to you in your life, he’s been there before, and will go there again to be with you. This promise brings us comfort, but it also means that when we go looking for Jesus, we may have to go look in places we’d rather not see; we may have to go to the places we’d rather not go. “*The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified...Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.*”

That grain of wheat is sown by God, the Sower of the Seed - lovingly, extravagantly, selflessly. Robert H. Smith says it this way:

*Seed scattered in all other gospel tellings, here is planted
In darkness of the earth...where it loses its old life...
but not destroyed - mysteriously transformed.*

So, as followers of Jesus, the Christ, we go to the places we’d rather not go, and are willing to go there again to be with others who need the same comfort we have received from God.

Seeing the destruction of storms and floods, you plant yourself in a mission project
And God produces restoration and community...

Seeing the pain of someone’s grief, you plant yourself beside them for a time
And God produces a deepening understanding and friendship...

Seeing the evil we are all capable of
You plant yourself to speak up, to walk out, to proclaim
And God produces justice and maturity...

We Christians, the 1st fruit of Christ’s death, will embrace that
*“when the hour comes, each of us has a grain of wheat
with which to cast our vote. It is the grain of our lives,
and all of creation is holding its breath
to see what we will do with it.” – Barbara Brown Taylor*

Yes, folks love celebrities – power, spectacle, glory. But **we** have the words of eternal life. We have the cross of Christ. Because we see Jesus. We have the power to change the world. Amen.

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Resources: Stacey E Simpson, *The Christian Century* Oct 2000; Rev. B.J. Hutto, Day One; Barbara Brown Taylor, Robert H. Smith and Walter Brueggemann (lecture notes.)