

Wishing to See

Learning in the absence of Jesus

a Homily by The Rev. Andrew Downs

Text: *John 12:20-33*

Lent 5B | March 22, 2015

Wishing to See

“Sir, we wish to see Jesus.”

It is a deceptively simple moment. We’d almost overlook it. These people come to Philip looking for Jesus. Philip goes to Andrew and they both go to Jesus.

“Sir, we wish to see Jesus,” they say. In Greek, no doubt. They’re Greek. They pick out the disciple with the Greek name, Philip. He’s from a city that is half-Greek / half-Hebrew. Perhaps he’s bilingual. He can interpret!

He goes to Andrew, the one who brings people to Jesus. He brought Simon, his brother. He brought the young man with the fish and bread lunch that would feed the multitudes. He is bringing Philip the interpreter to Jesus.

“Sir, these Greeks wish to see you,” they’ll say.

But Jesus won’t deal with the request. He’ll go off about life and death and service and honor. About being lifted up in death and being the light in the midst of darkness. And when he’s done, he’ll hide, going where he can’t be found.

When the crowds see him again, it will be on the day of his death, either carrying the cross piece to his crucifixion, or it will be when he is raised up on the cross and visible to all who pass by.

They wish to see Jesus, but see him is all they get to do. They don’t get to speak with him, learn from him. They catch a glimpse of him and then he’s gone.

Departure

Just past today’s reading, the end of verse 36 reads

After Jesus had said this, he departed and hid from them.

This, for me, is the main subject at the end of Holy Week: of dealing with the second day, the day when Jesus is gone but has not yet come back, dead but not yet raised. And I struggle with talking about Jesus’s absence yet - for in our own Lenten journey, Jesus has not yet gone anywhere.

Here, before going away, Jesus calls the question, he brings an end to the discussion and says that the time to live as he has taught is now. No more learning, no big graduation ceremony, no caps and gowns and tossing mortar boards in celebration. No summer to relax before “real life” sets in. It’s time.

For as much as I believe the disciples were unprepared to just pick things up and run with them, I wonder if we've learned anything from this moment. How prepared are we to take the reigns from Jesus and go: to be the light in a dark world? We've had two thousand years. Are we any more ready?

It feels more like we're feeling our way in the dark, alone, not trusting the light coming from one another. *But I can't see my light*, we argue. But we aren't supposed to be "ready," we're supposed to open our eyes.

Seeing Jesus

Seeing Jesus will turn out to be an important motif in John, especially later. The disciples will get a chance to see and to proclaim. One of their own will miss the opportunity to see with his own eyes, but will receive witness from the others. He will still insist on seeing for himself. "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe," Jesus will say.

We're not quite there yet, though. We have other stuff to see first.

After speaking of his death, the people stop him and say *wait a minute! The Messiah isn't supposed to die!* But Jesus brings up the light and the dark again, about trying to make one's way in the darkness. The sort of deal that seems like he's telling them to wake up and pay attention. There's more to hear and see. And yet, in saying this, Jesus is done and he walks away and hides.

There's no way they understand it. We hardly do. But a few days later, these crowds will see something else, the Messiah lifted up, just like he said. On a cross on a hill. They will see it. They will remember. Seeing the cross will remind them of what came before.

The End, a Beginning

What if the kind of seeing we're being compelled into is not the easy, but the hard? What if you and I *think* we're supposed to find the Jesus who raised Lazarus from the dead and fed the multitudes with a couple of fish and loaves of somebody else's bread, but the Jesus we *get to see* is the Jesus on the cross? The Jesus lifted up to the sky to die an insurrectionist's death?

What if this is what we need to see? Who cares what we *want* to see; this is what we *need* to see.

This is why I think Jesus goes into hiding in this story because if we haven't heard him yet, there isn't anything he can say. If we haven't believed in our seeing yet, there is nothing more Jesus can show. If we haven't felt the burning in our hearts yet, there isn't anything more Jesus can make us feel.

We want it to go the other way. Like the disciples, we want more teaching. Like the Greeks, we want to see the teacher. But we don't need more teaching, we need to hear the teaching we already have! We need to see in the injustice of the cross the same injustice in our world. We need to face our own fear of death, of loss, of fear itself. We need to learn from Jesus's final teaching.

And what we learn is that there is always more to learn. Even after the official teaching comes to an end. As long as we're willing to see it.