

The Fifth Sunday in Lent
March 18, 2018
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Jeremiah 31:31-34
Psalm 119:9-16
Hebrews 5:5-10
John 12:20-33

“Sir, we wish to see Jesus.”

It’s an interesting moment in the gospel, that moment when Greeks come and ask to see Jesus. It’s a moment that raises more questions than easy answers:

Just who were they, these Greeks?

And why were they there?

Were they Greek-speaking Jews, ex-pats making a pilgrimage back for the holy-days?

Were they non-Jews, enamored of Jewish beliefs or piety?

Were they there serious about Passover

or were they merely on a “spiritual sight-seeing expedition”?

And how did they hear about Jesus?

And what did they hear?

Was Jesus the reason they came from wherever it was they came from?

or was he just an additional point of interest?

Whatever their motivation, they ask to see Jesus. And even on that point, it’s not clear if they ever did get any sort of introduction. Perhaps they’re waiting still.

Jesus did give an answer of sorts, all the same – if only to Philip and Andrew. We know that because that’s what the text says: “Jesus answered them.” And yet his “answer” is less than direct – mystical and mystifying words about being glorified and (at the same time) being a grain of wheat that falls into the earth and dies.

Maybe these unnamed Greeks listened in on that answer. But what did they make of the words?

It’s a good bet they didn’t hear the words they hoped for. Presumably they’d heard stories about Jesus, how he’d raised Lazarus from the dead. They’d have heard how the crowds came to see him, how they welcomed him to Jerusalem, singing “Hosanna” and declaring him a king! All that comes before where we pick up the story this morning.

I think that’s the Jesus they came to see: the transcendent rabbi, the miracle-worker, the one who could fire up a crowd. But Jesus wants them to see him lifted up on a cross instead.

This is hardly the only time Jesus has said as much. He is remarkably consistent on the theme.

And I've been particularly struck by just how persistent the theme has been this Lent. It's not that it's an innovative idea this year. We've used the same bulletin cover in prior years, after all. But I've found it to be particularly striking this year all the same. I've even demonstrated for you what it looks like a couple of times this Lent.

On the First Sunday of Lent, we heard the story of the Noah and the Ark. The story ends with a heart-broken God, devastated by the horrific cost of the flood. God repents, we're told, and places the rainbow in the clouds as a sign of an eternal promise never again to lash out in anger. No divine violence. Only love.

I went on to share one way a friend of mine once re-imagined the symbol of a rainbow. Imagine God standing with arms straight overhead, and then bringing them slowly down on either side, she said, leaving a perfect trail of every color all the way to the ground. This rainbow becomes a symbol of "God's permanent gesture towards us: outstretched arms and open hands."

And at least for the Church that gesture is the backdrop to the good news of Jesus. Jesus is the incarnation of "God's permanent gesture towards us: outstretched arms and open hands." And at least as I imagine it, Jesus returns from the wilderness, inviting any who would listen to dare to hope that we can take part in God's loving purpose for us and all creation.

On the Second Sunday of Lent, Jesus told his disciples that he would "undergo great suffering, and be rejected ... and be killed." Peter took Jesus to task for being such a defeatist, but Jesus rebuked Peter and said that anyone who wants to follow must take up their own cross.

A couple weeks back, we heard about that time Jesus drove the animals from the Temple, and overturned the tables of the moneychangers. And when the authorities demanded that he explain himself, Jesus didn't bluster and boast. He talked to them about the destruction of God's temple. And though they thought he was just pointing to the buildings that surrounded them on every side, John insists that Jesus "was speaking of the temple of his body."

And so I imagine Jesus standing there before them, forming the shape of a cross. It was all to insist that he wasn't a threat; he was a lamb for the slaughter. Once more, the incarnation of "God's permanent gesture towards us: outstretched arms and open hands."

And the phrase that's been repeated, both in last week's gospel and in our gospel reading this morning, is that Jesus would be "lifted up." Last week, it was lifted up as a sign of healing and this morning as an outpouring of love. As we just heard this morning:

*"And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself."
[Jesus] said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.*

To be "lifted up" is an enigmatic phrase, prompting still other questions. Does John mean to be "exalted"? Or rather, is this a reference to Jesus being nailed to a cross? The answer, of course is, "yes"; for John to be "lifted up" always means being exalted AND nailed to the cross.

And that, as I say, has been the consistent and persistent message for us this Lent.

And history has shown that Jesus was right. While the rest of the world then, as now, has only been able to see power and glory in terms of money and military strength and political clout, Jesus saw it in the cross. Rome was the epitome of power and glory in his time, of course. Its glory has collapsed, but Jesus embraced a cross and has drawn billions of people – from every time and place since – to himself.

I've told you that I've been struck this Lent with just how consistent and persistent Jesus has been. People come looking for him to be successful or powerful, and Jesus points to the cross. I think Jesus has had to be so consistent and persistent on the theme because they were, by and large, so steadfastly and adamantly *resistant*.

And frankly, it's still hard for us to hear any of it as good news.

I think that's why it still makes perfect sense to some to argue that in the face of gun violence in our schools we need to "harden our schools" by arming teachers and fortifying the buildings. What Jesus refers to as "life in this world" is what they'd probably call "life in the real world." They cannot imagine rejecting the reality this world. The only way to survive the dangers of this dangerous world is to be afraid and to hunker down and take steps to take care of ourselves.

But for love's sake, Jesus insists we cannot survive such a horrific world in the long run; the rules for living in such a world are too deadly, the "ruler(s) of this world" too dehumanizing.

Eugene Peterson renders Jesus' words this way:

Listen carefully: Unless a grain of wheat is buried in the ground, dead to the world, it is never any more than a grain of wheat. But if it is buried, it sprouts and reproduces itself many times over. In the same way, anyone who holds on to life just as it is destroys that life. But if you let it go, reckless in your love, you'll have it forever, real and eternal.

"Sir, we wish to see Jesus."

People still want to see Jesus. Perhaps, they – like the proverbial Greeks of old – are waiting still to see him as he really is for them and for us. If so, it likely falls to us to show them what Jesus looks like, lest they settle for they are already imagining him to be.

To that end, Episcopal priest and one-time seminary dean James Lemler tells a story about an interview Mother Teresa gave late in her life:

The reporter noted that religious orders in the west and many churches ... had been losing numbers. But the reporter also noted that Mother Teresa's order was growing by thousands, so she asks "Why?"

Mother Teresa answered without hesitation, "I give them Jesus."

"Yes, I know, but what strategies do you develop? How do you manage it?" asks the reporter.

"I give them Jesus" is the reply.

"Yes, I know, but can you be more specific?"

"I give them Jesus."

"Yes, we know of your fine work, but there must be something else," says the exasperated reporter.

"I give them Jesus. There is nothing else."ⁱ

Lemler tells that story to remind us that our task is to be ready, should the proverbial Greeks of our time come and ask us to see Jesus. How can we give them Jesus, not just a Jesus in our image or the Jesus in fine clothes in beautiful buildings with pretty stained glass windows, but Jesus on a cross, with "outstretched arms and open hands," an outpouring of love?

ⁱ James Lemler @ http://day1.org/984-seeking_searching_seeing.