

Jeremiah 31:31-34 ~ John 12:20-33
We Wish to See Jesus
 March 18, 2018 ~ 5th Sunday in Lent
 The Rev Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis

Introduction

In the narrative arc of John's Gospel, by the time John 12:20 rolls around, Jesus was crushing it! Everyone was amazed and astounded at his power to raise a dead man, Lazarus, after 4 days in the tomb. Talk about buzz. They formed a flash mob when he entered Jerusalem, the story we will celebrate on Palm Sunday next week. In today's story, Jesus' triumphal entry on a donkey with palms and Hosannas has just happened. It freaked out the Pharisees who said to one another, "You see you can do nothing. Look, the whole world has gone after him. (v.19)"

You will hear Jesus say, "The hour has come." This is a fulcrum point. A turn. With his fame rising, so also was his opposition. This is the very last time Jesus speaks in public to a crowd before his trial and execution. What will he say to his adoring groupies and new fans? They definitely get an earful, and another quick sound and light show from heaven—but probably not what they were expecting or wanting. Did they *really* wish to see Jesus?

Sermon

An usher told me that one Sunday morning a family came in the door with two small children, a little girl about 6 and her little brother who was about 3. This was his very first Sunday to attend worship instead of being in the nursery. And so the "Big Sister" was all about teaching her little brother what to expect at "Big Church." She explained to him, "You have to be really, really quiet! If you make any noise, that man in the back there will come and make you be quiet." The boy took a look at this man, eyes huge with fear, and asked his all-knowing sister, "He will? Who is he?" His sister explained, "He's the Husher!"

What do we expect when we come to worship? Just imagine, if you were explaining to a friend who was coming to a worship service for the first time. What would you tell her or him to expect? What does draw you here, week after week, when you could be sleeping in, going on an outing, enjoying a slow breakfast, playing video games, pining over the trade of wide receiver Gordy Nelson from the Packers to the Oakland Raiders, or marveling at the stunning upset win of 16th seed UMBC over #1 Virginia Cavaliers in the NCAA March madness, or whatever your favorite kick-back activity may be? But instead you are here in worship. What happens in worship that drew you here today?

Let's think about this question for a moment. Why *did* you come this morning—and what *do* you expect? Maybe you came for healing, for hope, to hear some good news, or to regain balance after a rough week. Maybe to hear some Good News, gospel truth that you can trust, a nugget of truth that will get you through whatever you may be facing. Maybe your mom or dad or grandparents made you come. You may have come to see friends or make friends, to hear the music, to sing

hymns, and maybe just maybe-- to learn more about Christ, to find a larger purpose than gutting through the daily grind—why did we come? **Do we wish to see Jesus?**

Maybe, maybe not. I think that's partly what's in play here in today's story. Like the crowd that had gathered to worship at the festival, *some of us* may feel like the Greeks, the outsiders, the first timers, not sure quite what goes on here, but curious. Maybe eager just to see the source of the spectacle: the guy who changed water in wine, who made the blind man see. Who wouldn't want a look at the man who fed five thousand people with five barley loaves and two fish, and just the other day brought Lazarus, a man who had been dead for four days, back to life? Everyone was talking about him. Got to go see this guy. I may want to hitch my wagon to his star. Whatever he's got, I'd like some of that.

Others of us may feel more like the Pharisees—a little *too* close and familiar, upset about this so called Messiah who is acting nothing like the Messiah they expected. The Pharisees were the “but we've never done it this way before “ ones, who were confused, maybe even angry at Jesus' pushing back against the traditions they had organized their lives around. Without realizing it, their faith had boiled down to following certain rules to the point where they were scared to death to trust their hearts. Or to upset the status quo where they were in power and had a stake in maintaining. Not too sure about where this Jesus is taking things,

We aren't told much about those curious Greeks. We aren't told why they were eager to see Jesus. Nor do we even know whether they actually got to see him. But we *do know* the one thing Jesus chose to tell his disciples, maybe those Greeks, and whomever else was in earshot. I'm sure it wasn't what they expected or wanted. It likely wasn't what they came to see or hear. His message at this fulcrum point, this turning point, was a hard one. He knew his time was up, so he had to cut to the chase and land his core message.

What was it? “*Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me.*” (v.25-26a). Being a Christian, being a Christ follower, is not a spectator sport. If you really want to **see** Jesus, you have to follow him. And following him means letting go of all in this world that separates us from Christ. Letting go of all that separates us from the Flame of Divine Compassion. All that stuff that we let build up week after week: all that stuff we're so sure we are right about (like the Pharisees) and all that anxiety, the uncertainty, the need to know now, not later, the questions and doubts that keep us from fully committing (like the Greeks and onlookers). All those attitudes that bind us up in knots and blind us to the Jesus who can free us from this world of desperate attachment.

Losing our lives to find them. Yes—it will be painful and the more we have to lose, the harder it gets. Yes, it goes against our grain--but that's the way to really see Jesus because he is telling us here: *this the way he wants to be seen*. You can't get away from this teaching. This is a capstone saying of Jesus—one of the few from the

original Q Source that John uses—one that we find repeated five times in Matthew, Mark, and Luke as well. It's the way the “new covenant” works—the one that God has written on our hearts as Jeremiah prophesied in the dark days of the Babylonian exile. How could we give any less to our God who was all in for all of God's people, from the least to the greatest back in Jeremiah's time and then in Jesus actually became one of us, who chose to lose his life literally, on the cross, for all of us.

You may not have realized it but Jesus never said, “Worship me.” Instead he said, again and again “Follow me.” I didn't realize it until I read it in a Lenten reflection by Richard Rohr (Franciscan priest, author, spiritual director) who wrote; “I think it has always been much easier to worship Jesus than to follow him. That demands care for the supposedly unworthy, the sinners, the outsiders, and ‘the non-observers of the law.’ Such a lifestyle makes you few friends. When religion remains a mere belonging system instead of a transformation system it becomes a closed country club for the healthy instead of an always open hospital for the ailing and weak—which is just about all of us.”ⁱ

Caring for the supposedly unworthy outsiders demands both charity and justice. This is a crucial lesson our confirmands learned about, in theory (with games and discussion) and in practice at the sites where they volunteered last weekend on their Urban Immersion Service Retreat in Minneapolis. Following Jesus calls us to not only feed the hungry and but also to ask why are they hungry. And then to work toward systemic change, addressing the root causes, no matter the cost. This is how the world will see Jesus now.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, was executed April 9, 1945, as he followed Jesus to his own cross. Bonhoeffer was hanged at Flossenburg Prison in Germany for his participation in the Confessing Church, the protestant community that opposed the Nazi regime. Before his imprisonment, he wrote about the cost of discipleship, not knowing how high that cost would be for him. In that book he wrote, “If we answer the call to discipleship, where will it lead us? What decisions and partings will it demand? To answer this question we shall have to go to Jesus, for only he knows the answer. Only Jesus Christ, who bids us follow him, knows the journey's end.”ⁱⁱ

Remember the TV show Mission: Impossible TV, created by Bruce Gellar that began back in 1966? My parents used to watch it together, Saturday nights at 9:00. I remember the Theme Song...then “Good afternoon, Mr Phelps... Your mission should you choose to accept it...This tape will self destruct in 5 seconds... Good Luck Jim” ... As they watched it, mom would get confused (or doze off and then wake up) and ask dad questions about the plot. What's happening? I don't understand. “ To which he would reply, ...“just keep watching, honey, then you'll get it.’ My mom used to call it “plot impossible.”

Like the experience of following Jesus, our plot may seem impossible. We may not understand what is happening at the time or where it is going. And as Bonhoeffer wrote so eloquently as a young adult, truly only Jesus knows the

journey's end. But we do know that it will be a road of boundless mercy. Dietrich Bonhoeffer gave his life in "doing justice" as he fought the evil of Nazism under Adolf Hitler. Our sacrifices will be different. Here in 2018, we face and fight the near and present threat of nuclear holocaust, climate holocaust, and the ever widening disparities between the haves and have not's, across this world that God so loved and still loves.

Surely, we don't know how it will end, but we do know who will be there with us. And that it will be glorious. Yes, I believe that we are here because we wish to see Jesus, to know, and to follow Jesus, let come what will. Let us pray, "O Lord, help us to see thee more clearly, love thee more dearly, and follow thee more nearly, day-by-day. "Amen.

ⁱ Richard Rohr, "Shrove Tuesday and First Week of Lent," *God for Us*, ed. Greg Pennoyer & Gregory Wolfe (Brewster, MASS: Paraclete Press, 2015) p.32.

ⁱⁱ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Macmillan, 1958, reprint ed. New York: touchstone/Simon & Schuster, 1995) p. 38, as quoted in Beverly A. Zink-Sawyer, Fifth Sunday in Lent, *The Women's Preaching Annual Series 3, Year B*, edited by Beverley A. Zink-Sawyer, (Nashville, TENN: Abingdon Press, 2002) p. 75.