

Lent 5B 2018, John 12:20-33, March 18, 2018, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, PA, Kurt S. Strause

“Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” Seeing is believing. See for yourselves. My eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.

All these Greeks wanted was to see Jesus. We don’t know why. They were in Jerusalem for the Passover, which means somehow they were at least attracted to the God of Israel. Were they converts? Were they merely curious? Clearly, something is going on. The fact that we are told they want to “see” Jesus, not merely meet him, not only talk with him, but “see” him is itself some kind of sign. Throughout the gospel the word “see” is almost the same as “believe.” It’s why we often equate the two; seeing and believing.

Jesus sees their request itself as a sign. Several times before in John’s gospel Jesus says, “my hour has not yet come.” Now, when these Greeks come looking to see Jesus he takes it as a signal. He announces: “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.” The preparation work is completed. His earthly ministry is coming to a close. He has performed signs; water into wine at the wedding, raising his friend Lazarus from the dead. Now even those outside the Jewish world are starting to take notice. These gentile Greeks are the final signal to Jesus that his hour has arrived. But what kind of hour shall it be? His finest hour? Or his darkest hour?

His words are troubling, even as he seems to be troubled by them himself. He speaks of lonely seeds dying in the earth. He speaks of hating one’s life in order to keep it. He speaks of following him; to where the disciples can hardly imagine. One senses a crisis brewing just over the horizon, dark storm clouds of betrayal and denial, arrests and violence, puppet politicians washing hands to keep clean but always dipped in blood. Forces are gathering for a clash of cosmic proportions.

Jesus is troubled. He says so. Can we hear this? Do we think Jesus is so divine, so all knowing and all seeing that he can’t really be troubled and worried and concerned and yes, even afraid for his own life? Three months ago most of gathered here in the warm glow of Christmas candlelight and we heard our gospel writer proclaim; “and the Word became flesh.” God became human, like us, full of blood moving through vein and artery, muscles that ache when tired, a heart full of joy and sorrow, and a soul that is troubled. Can we hear a human Jesus wondering aloud if he should pray for deliverance from the gathering storm? I believe we need to hear this Jesus because only then can we hear of a God who stands with us in our own troubles, who remains by our side in our times of grief or sorrow or even doubt.

Nevertheless, Jesus remains committed to his mission. His mission is to do the will of his Father. His Father’s works in the world are being accomplished through his Son. And the Son reveals the Father’s love for the world by what he does. At this critical junction Jesus could pray to his Father to take him away from all this. But to do so would bring to an end the Father’s work of love and grace and mercy because the Son would cease working on the Father’s behalf. We can’t have one without the other; the Son and the Father work hand in hand, their work and their love are inseparable from one another. To see the Father one must see the Son. To see the Son is to see the Father.

So the hour is come. It will be both his finest hour and his darkest hour. The seed must be buried and die. Only in dying can it bear fruit, otherwise it remains single and alone. Jesus must hate his life, as we must, in order to keep it. But not hate in the sense of “despise.” We must never despise the life God gives us as a gift of sheer love and grace. No, when we are told to hate life Jesus means we are to reject the kind of narrow and self-serving life that all the rulers of this world tell us we need to hold on to in order to be worthy. Rejected is valuing outward appearance and turning a blind eye to the beauty of the inner spirit. Rejected is a life of acquisition over a life of service. Rejected are closed doors and instead unlocking and opening doors to the stranger. Rejected is fear of dying over embracing the way of the cross and suffering servanthood.

Jesus doesn't ask anything of us he's not willing to undertake himself. When he calls us to “hate” this life in order to find eternal life, he only does so because he rejects all the ways this decaying world so desperately tries to hold onto its own fading power. At every step along the way Jesus is given opportunities to take control, take charge, take up the power of the crowd and take up the sword to bring about a new world order. And at every step along the way Jesus rejects this power, for it's a fading power, a decaying power, a dead end power. Jesus plainly says, “Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out.” The rulers of this world in which Jesus lived, and we live in today, tenaciously cling to these old, fading ways. But the Father will show us a better way, more life-affirming and better way. A way that involves serving others, of forgiving others, of bearing the burdens of those stooped and bent by worldly power. The Father will show all this through his Son, and the glory of the Son shall be the glory of the Father.

This act of love on the part of the Son on behalf of the Father is universal. “When I am lifted up from the earth,” Jesus says, “I will draw all people to myself.” All people. Not just Jews. Not just Americans. Not just white people, or brown people. Not just men, or women; but all people. Jesus' mission is for everybody; why? Because God so loved the whole world that he sent his only begotten Son. The word Jesus uses here, “to draw,” as in “draw all people to myself,” is a strong word, a powerful word. In other places in the Bible it's used to speak of nets hauled onto the shore or Paul being dragged out of the Temple. Jesus actively draws people to himself, through the work and power of the Holy Spirit, creating and sustaining faith in him. Too often we are the ones who are passive about Jesus. We remain content in staying within our tribes, our communities, our own safe spaces, failing to commend to others the love of Jesus. Nevertheless, Jesus hauls us to himself, he drags us to his heart of love, he draws us to the foot of the cross where we are forgiven, healed, and given eternal life.

Sir, we wish to see Jesus. See the Son of Man lifted up, for you, for the whole world. And when you see the Son of Man living for others, serving you who he calls friend, you will believe his love is for you. You will see for yourself for the Holy Spirit is already powerfully at work in you, creating and nurturing faith so that you also may reject all forms of dead-end life and embrace the losing life in this world in order to gain true and everlasting life. You will see the glory of the Father because the glory of the Son on the cross points our vision in his direction. Our eyes see the glory of the coming of the Lord, to his destiny, to Jerusalem and to the cross, and to the world world, drawing all people to himself. Amen.