

To See Jesus

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Jeremiah 31:31-34

John 12:20-26

I've been thinking a lot lately about interference.

This probably qualifies as my first “back in my day” sermon, but back in my day, when the iPod was first introduced, there was a device that they made that allowed you to listen to the iPod in your car. This little device plugged in to the iPod, and then became an FM transmitter broadcasting signal that you could listen to in the car. This worked really well when we were here in town, particularly around the suburbs. But every time Sarah and I would take a trip to New York City, we found trouble. As we would get closer and closer to the big city, which boasts tons of radio stations, all with different styles of music and talk and news, we found that it was harder and harder to get a clear signal from this little FM transmitter. Even though the iPod was sitting right in the cup holder in front of me, there was just too much interference. I couldn't hear what was going on right beside me.

I think this is actually a fitting analogy for the world in which we find ourselves. According to PEW research, in 2017 27% of the United States population sees themselves as “spiritual, but not religious,” which is up from 19% just 5 years earlier. Most of the increase here comes from my generation, the Millennials. Now, I know it's very tempting to disparage the Millennials, the dismiss them as young people who don't respect the traditions of the faith, but two words of warning about that. First, I am a Millennial, so don't do that. And secondly, I wonder if there might be something more going on here. Something much deeper and more poignant than meets the eye.

Our text in John today is a little bit odd to show up in the lectionary this week, because the story takes place after the events of Palm Sunday. This is a huge party for Jesus! It's a big show, with a big crowd, with lots of attention. And the Pharisees, who are starting to see their market share of the spiritual leadership landscape decrease, end the Palm Sunday story in John with this great line: "You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him!"

Then we get to our text, where we find the world going after Jesus. The text begins by mentioning that "some Greeks" have come to see Jesus. This is not horribly specific! These Greeks could have been people who were completely on the outside of the Jewish faith, tried and true Gentiles, who just so happened to find themselves taking in a parade, and wanting to know more about Jesus. They could have been Hellenistic Jews, those who were not Jewish by birth, but wanted to celebrate the faith. This would be interesting, because this would be a group of people who wanted to be in on the faith, but even they were restricted in what they could do. They would have had a special area of the temple for them, close to the action, but not on the inside. In either case, it's a good bet to say that these Greeks were on the outside looking in.

They come with such a simple, but intriguing request: We want to see Jesus. I don't get the impression that these folks were looking to get tickets to the Jesus zoo, just to come and look at what he was wearing and then move on with their days. When John talks in his gospel about "seeing," there's a connected meaning of "understanding." You get the sense that these Greeks are saying "We have heard rumors or seen a parade or maybe even witnessed a sign or miracle, and we want to understand what this guy is

all about. How is he acting in the world? What is he up to? How does he do his business? What is he calling his followers to?”

So Phillip and Andrew go to Jesus and say, “Hey, these Greeks want to see you.” If *ever* there was a simple question for Jesus to respond to in the Bible, this is it! May these Greeks come and talk to you? Check yes or no. But instead, Jesus launches into a story about how he is going to die. You can just imagine the blank stares of the disciples at this point, can’t you? “That’s great Jesus, but how about you just answer the question?”

The odd thing is that we don’t know if Jesus ever actually has a face to face meeting with these Greeks. It’s entirely possible that Jesus never met with them, never let them in, never answered their questions.

But in a way, Jesus does start pointing to the answer to Phillip and Andrew’s question. Buried deep within a story about his death on a cross, almost like a clue in a mystery novel, Jesus says “When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself.” It’s complicated, but Jesus is essentially saying “Yes of course these Greeks want to come and see me. So will all the people on the earth. That’s why we’re here! My death is going to have a magnetic effect on the rest of the world. I will draw all these people to myself.” It turns out that what feels like Jesus’ refusal to answer a simple question is *actually* Jesus expanding the question, taking it father than these disciples can see in the moment.

As it turns out, Jesus does this quite a bit. We can see it in the way he teaches with parables. A story about a farmer scattering his seed is not actually a story about

agriculture, but rather a story about spreading the word of God, and our ability to receive it. Or a story that is meant to answer the question “Who exactly is our neighbor” that turns into a tale about the kindness of the enemy Samaritans when they find a fellow human in need.

Jesus also does this with the object lessons right in front of him. We heard a few weeks ago a story that seemed at first to be about Jesus being interrupted by noisy kids in worship, when actually he expanded the story to speak about what true humility and kingdom values were about. Or the time when Jesus and the disciples saw a woman give only two small coins to the offering plate, which became an occasion for discussing generosity and selfless giving.

It would appear after a quick study of Scripture that this is a big piece of what Jesus is calling us to. Jesus says to us:

“You are at point A, but I really need you to see things from point Q.”

“You think this is about kids making noise, but it’s really about each of our spirits of humility and dependence on God.”

“You think this is about following the law as closely as possible, but it’s really about your heart. Have you given everything you have to follow me?”

“You think this is about letting a couple of curious Greeks in to see what I’m up to, but I’m telling you the whole world is about to be a part of what we’re up to so buckle up!”

Part of the redemption and new life that Jesus wants to offer us is to move from where we are to where we could be, to see an expanding Kingdom of possibility and invitation to newness.

I think we live in a world that is just like our Greek friends in this passage. It's a world that is proclaiming that they wish to see Jesus. It's a world who wants to see the one who is making all of this commotion. It's a world who wants to see the one who offers healing and wholeness. It's a world that wants to see the one who invites us to new possibilities and better versions of ourselves and the world.

But I also think it's true that the world we live in is throwing out a whole bunch of interference. Perhaps some in our world are getting tired of following Jesus only to have their motives labeled, and then finding themselves in the food fights of our destructive political discourse? Perhaps some in our world are getting tired of communities that bear the name of Jesus, but spew hatred and intolerance and condemnation. Perhaps there are even those in our world who are interested in mission and service and making the world a better place, but aren't getting clear indications of how Jesus is at work in all of that.

To help cut through the interference, you and I need to remind ourselves of a few central truths. First, Jesus Christ is risen. I know that this is Lent, and we aren't quite to Easter yet, so spoiler alerts. But we don't worship a name, or an image, or an idea. We worship a living and active God, the resurrected Jesus Christ, who continues to this day to meet us and interact with us in the world we find ourselves.

The second truth to remember is that the Holy Spirit gives us a front row seat to this. The passage we heard in

Jeremiah earlier might not be completely fulfilled yet, as I still earn a paycheck as one who teaches the Word of the Lord to folks. But, we do know that the beauty of the Spirit is that we have the law of Christ written on our hearts. We can see what Christ is doing in us, through us, and around us, because Christ abides *in* us.

The third truth we would do well to remember is that the active and present Jesus is calling us to expand our worldview. If the only Jesus you see at work in the world is the one who is just fine with the way things are, you might want to check again. This may lead us to really complicated and confusing answers to our seemingly simple questions, but it's what Jesus has always been about. Jesus is nearly always saying to us "You think this is about X, but I tell you it's really about Z."

When we can claim those truths for ourselves, we get the incredible job opportunity of being like Phillip and Andrew. We can show people Jesus!

Last week during the announcements, Jim mentioned that there was a young man in our midst who needed a car to get to work. His job depended on it, and he was facing the prospect of being fired. That announcement was made at 11:00, and by the end of the service, in the greeting line, a couple approached and mentioned they had a car. The young man who needed it was just a few people back in line, and was immediately told we had something to offer. By Monday afternoon, everything had been transferred, and the young man had a car (Which, if you've ever dealt with an actual title transfer, is a miracle all by itself). Now, it's easy to say that this is just a simple thing. It's just a car! Most of us have at least one if not two. Nothing to see here but coincidence and kindness. But, for those of us who know

what to look for, we can point and say “You see! Jesus is at work here!”

We might see Jesus in the response of a few extraordinary teenagers in the wake of yet another school shooting. The students of Parkland Florida have stepped up and lent voice to a problem our nation seems to have with our violent tendencies, and our unbelievably easy access to weaponry. Maybe this feels like too much pressure to put on these teenagers, but when I look at them I see a team of prophets. Looking at the world as it is, and dreaming of a better, more just and peaceable world, is *exactly* what the prophets did in the Scriptures. I don’t know the spiritual or religious background of these kids, but I do think I see Jesus in them. The temptation of course is to get caught up in the interference. There is a temptation to make this a partisan debate, where each side will run to their tried and true sound bytes and yell them louder and louder until we can hear nothing else. But if you think this moment is about gun rights, or gun control, maybe we can find Jesus at work in the midst of the moment calling us to say “you know, it’s really about this beautiful, non-violent, loving kingdom that these teenagers are pointing you toward.”

Or perhaps like me you see Jesus in the mission and justice work we do around here as a church. Yesterday many of us went to Produce to the People, which is an awesome event that the church does regularly. If you were on the outside looking in, you might say that this was simply some wealthy individuals working to give a little bit of time and money to feel better about themselves, a temporary high of service. But maybe we can see Jesus at work here too. Maybe we can hear Jesus saying to us “You think this is really about fruits and vegetables and feeling good, but it’s really about restoring the justice the prophets spoke of,

where no one goes hungry, where everyone has as much as they need and no more, where the Kingdom of God is realized.”

This is just a sampling of the stories that have happened in the past week where I could point and see Jesus at work. The beautiful part of this is that as we leave this place, as we walk out this door, we will be presented with limitless invitations to see Jesus Christ at work in our worlds. Maybe you’ll see him in your place of work. Maybe you’ll see him at home with your family. Maybe you’ll come to see him in the places that you have always expected to find him, and maybe he’ll show up somewhere new and unforeseen.

To see Jesus requires us to carry a desire to see, and an awareness of what’s happening when we do. It will require us setting aside some of the noise and interference we are surrounded by on a daily basis. It will require us being willing to move, to expand our understanding of the question, to open ourselves up to unexpected answers. It will require us setting aside the Jesus we have always expected to see, the one we created in our own imagine, and instead be open to the Jesus who claims himself to be the way, the truth, and the life in our world.

When we’re open to this, when we’re aware, we get the honor of helping others see Jesus too. 27% of our nation right now understands that there is something bigger out there, but they don’t want the traps they’ve fallen into before with religion. That sounds to me like a group of people who want to see Jesus, free from the interference of the world around them. That sounds to me like a group of people who are hungry and thirsty for justice and righteousness, who want to see the world come together in a way that makes

sense. That sounds to me like a group of people who carry the wounds of this world, and badly want to see them healed. That sounds to me like a group of people who find themselves in dire need of redemption, reconciliation, and restoration.

Thanks be to God, that's exactly what Jesus came here to do. Let's go see him.