

"We Wish to See Jesus"
A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian, New Canaan, CT – March 17, 2024

Please Read:
Jeremiah 31:31-3
John 12:20-33

In the chapel of *Columbia Theological Seminary*, there is a plaque on the pulpit where the preacher's notes would sit. The plaque reads, "We wish to see Jesus." The plaque reminds the preacher, of course, that our job when we step into the pulpit is to help our fellow pilgrims see the One whom they seek in worship.

Dan Brown's book, *The Davinci Code* was popular because it suggested new secrets about Jesus were revealed through yet undiscovered ancient texts. One of my professors at Princeton, James Charlesworth, became a Rock Star as he was one of the authorities on the *Dead Sea Scrolls*. Or the *Gnostic Gospels*, written 200-400 years after the historical Jesus, claim to give secret knowledge (from the Greek word "gnosis") about Jesus otherwise rejected in the canon. Just last week in the *Atlantic* Ariel Sabal writes about a "Secret Mark" gospel hidden for thousands of years that uncovers the latest scandalous clues on Jesus' sexuality.¹

Albert Schweitzer wrote a book, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*. He researched different periods of history and how different scholars understood who Jesus was. Schweitzer reviewed all prior work on the question of the "historical Jesus" starting with the late 18th century. He notes, interestingly, how Jesus' image changes with the times and personal proclivities of the various authors. Schweitzer likens the scholars attempt to see the historical Jesus as one who looks down into a deep well. What they end up seeing is more of a reflection of themselves than anything else...

So, I found it interesting as I read this passage again and about the Greeks who came asking Philip, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." I wonder what it would be like to *see* Jesus? Of course, we can't "see" Jesus in the same sense as those Greeks wanted to see him. And I suspect that many of us who have studied him over the years and try to yield our lives to his teaching find that often our understanding of Jesus reflects more of our priorities and culture than the historical Jesus.

But Jesus does give us a clear clue about what it means to see the essence, the heart of who he really is, and what he is really all about. Jesus said, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified . . . and when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all to myself." Here is another turning point in our journey through Lent. Jesus in John's Gospel has been telling people that his hour had not yet come, but now is his "hour"... And it is a time for glory!

¹ Referenced online, March 16, 2024: <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2024/04/secret-gospel-mark-controversial-forgery-jesus/677472/>

The Hebrew word for "glory" is *kabat*, and in the New Testament "glory" is *doxa*. Both of these words imply "weightiness," or splendor. Glory is that which gives you weight, substance, and that which makes you shine above others.

Throughout the Bible we read about the glory of God, and early on the revelation is through the fire and smoke of God's mysterious nature. The glory of God, though, is most memorably revealed through God's acts of salvation. In the famous passage from Isaiah 40 (in Handel's *Messiah*), "And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed..." we hear the lost and broken exile community hoping in the One who would come to save them. God's glory and power is revealed in liberation.

We sing the doxology, "Praise God from whom all blessings flow; praise God above all creatures here below; praise God above the heavenly hosts..." God's glory is high, lifted up, the creator of all that is below, so that in worship, everything that is below lifts up its *doxa*, its praise, to God on high, the great God who is high and lifted up... We talk about Christ being raised by the glory of the Father, that he was taken up into glory, that he will come again in glory.

Have you noticed that in general, all, even the mid-century modern, architects don't build one story churches? We don't write church anthems for the harmonica or kazoo, either. We install hundreds of pipes, and when Terry wants to make that organ really play to high heaven, he pulls out all the stops! And what a glorious sound it is!

But in today's Gospel lesson, Jesus shows us another kind of glory, a strange glory, to be sure... These Hellenists come wanting to see Jesus. They come from the great traditions of Pythagoras, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, and I'm guessing they wanted to see what Jesus thought of the great tradition of Greek ideas... I'm sure they were curious about his signs and wonders, about his "glory"...

At last, at long last, the Son shall be glorified, thought his politically minded disciples. Enough of this Galilean flesh-and-blood, ordinary humanness thing. At last Jesus shall throw off the cloak of his humanity and reveal his divine "glory." At last is the hour for the weighty, illustrious, high and lifted-up God to reveal his power and might.

Jesus' announcement then, is utterly astonishing: "Unless a grain of wheat fall to the earth and dies..." The Greeks came saying, "we wish to see Jesus." We want to see who is the glorious one come from God. And they were shown one who spoke of his life as a grain of wheat, dead in the earth; his glory as his death, on who,

when struck on the cheek, offered his other tear-stained cheek as well. When we cursed him, he blessed us.

Jesus gives a new distinction between divine and worldly glory. Those weighted with this world's glory make the breaking new cycle and podcast circles. They do the victory dance around the field, shouting, "We're number one!" They get the spoils of war, or a building named after them. They are always trying to make something or other great again, but mainly themselves. That's worldly glory, and you can tell a great deal about us and our culture by watching whom we glorify.

Jesus goes silently but strongly against that culture current. When we are so preoccupied with getting filled up, he talks about emptying. When we want so desperately to find ourselves, Jesus talks about losing... When we talk about hating our enemies, Jesus calls us to love. We work and strive so that we might be weighty enough so as never to be required to bow to anyone. He showed glory a with basin and towel. We want to hail him on Palm Sunday as King. By week's end, he took the place of a despised criminal.

So as eager as we are to get on with Easter glory, there is no getting there without facing crucifixion "glory." No cross, no crown for Christ. No cross, no crown for you or me either. And that, my friends, is not attractive. The way of Jesus' suffering love appears at first glance repulsive, horrifying...

I think you all know I've been ill for a number of weeks now. First time in my life I've ever been this sick for so long. I think part of it has been grief. There have been some terrible losses in our town and in our community in the past weeks. To be honest, as hard as it's been, I've been so impressed by how caring and compassionate, how loving and kind so many of you are. The way you've cared for those who are suffering, the way you've cared for me. Compassion literally means sharing pain. I've seen you join in the suffering of Jesus in the small acts of kindness that have been offered, by how so many people have showed love and care for those who are grieving. It's been very moving, really...

Today is St. Patrick's Day. I know most of us mainly check quickly if we're wearing green and joke about the luck of the Irish before we get pinched. But St. Patrick was an historical figure and had an interesting way of sharing the gospel. He traveled in a large group. And throughout Ireland he would travel to visit the different clans and share the good news of God's love. But here's the thing. If there was some openness to the gospel, he would leave one of his disciples to stay and live with the clan members, that they would see the gospel lived out in a real person. I've always found that fascinating.

Perhaps that's a clue to how we'll see Jesus today, friends. It's about community, and whenever wherever one of Jesus' followers embodies the gospel of grace and mercy, not of judgment or condemnation, but of forgiveness and love. To come alongside those who are broken and searching for hope and new life. We may not be able to see Jesus alone, but together, as a community, I think we can.

So, my friends, how do you see it? Has the glory of this world waned rather thin for you? Have you wondered where God was during suffering? When the weight of sin, suffering, hatred, betrayal, illness, loneliness, suicide, divorce, depression, or abuse seem to overcome us, I am grateful that the church still proclaims the cross and self-giving love. The only God I can believe in is the One Nietzsche ridiculed as "God on the cross."

I wonder if those Greeks were disappointed, as Jesus didn't give them an insightful new idea to be thought, but rather a paradoxical good news to be lived. Jesus draws us to himself, and calls us to follow, even through suffering love. For there alone can be seen the glory of new life, even life eternal.

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer.