

We Wish to See Jesus

Lent is a somber season; perhaps you can tell in the tone of our worship, and some years it drags on a bit. Truly, there are years when it feels like we are in an interminable slough of despond, but not this year; maybe it's the weather, maybe it's the early Easter. So, it was a bit of a rude awakening to open the lectionary on my computer this week and realize Lent isn't done with us yet.

We still have to walk the rest of the way through this valley of Lent to get to the other side. We still need to remember our sin. We still need to think on the things that Jesus said, and did, on the way to the cross. At least we do if we hope to be able to celebrate with integrity come Easter.

In other words, we can't race to the triumph of the resurrection without facing the train-wreck of the cross. That might just be John's Gospel in miniature.

In light of this, there are two things about our text for today that strike me. The first is the arrival of the Greeks. The second is Jesus' declaration that "The hour has come."

Both are instructive for us as we consider the claim of this text upon our lives.

Let's take the second one first.

Remember that structurally, John has four parts, a prologue that is about a chapter, an epilogue that is about a chapter, and nineteen chapters in between. Those in-between chapters are divided into what scholars call the "Book of Signs," and "Book of Glory."

The "Book of Signs" runs from chapter 2-12 and it is the Galilean ministry of Jesus. It is in the course of these chapters that we see seven significant miracles from Jesus.

These miracles are interspersed with many of the "I am" discourses where Jesus tells his listeners something about who he is: *I am the bread of life... I am the living waters... I am the way, the truth and the life...*

These sayings are interspersed as theological teaching from Jesus in between all of the miracles that he is performing in order that the miracle won't simply be seen as a parlor trick. Rather, the signs will teach the people who encounter them something about who Jesus is and what his life and death will mean. Throughout the Book of Signs, as Jesus does his miracles and talks about who he is, he periodically says, "My hour has not yet come."

From his very first miracle in Cana where he turned the water into wine at his mother's request, his words were, "Woman, what business is this of ours?"

Then he adds, "My hour has not come."

Now, though, Jesus says, “The hour *has* come for the Son of Man to be glorified.”

It would be easy, particularly in John where Jesus *does* make of all those “I am” statements, to miss the significance of what Jesus is saying in this moment. John has easily the most developed Christology of all of the Gospel writers, which is to say that Jesus understands his role as messiah much more clearly in John, as opposed to say, Mark. In Mark, Jesus’ understanding of who he is, and what his mission is, unfolds through the progression of the story. In Mark, Jesus’ motivation for what he does is to preach the Gospel and his dogged determination to keep going, no matter what obstacles he encounters, is what landed him on the tree.

John is different. In John, Jesus knows who he is and what he is doing. Jesus understands himself to be a sacrificial lamb and his motivation is to see his mission through, no matter what.

Jesus knows what needs to be done and is going to do it.

So, when Jesus makes his statement that the hour has come, the Book of Signs ends, The Book of Glory begins, and all of the events the Passion that we observe during Holy Week unfold. We see the triumphal entry on Palm Sunday, and then Jesus gives his disciples their commands on Maundy Thursday, then he is betrayed, before he “suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried.”

Just before we get to this point, there is this odd interlude where Jesus acknowledges that he knows he is going to *suffer*.

It is odd, because John is generally the favorite Gospel for folks who don’t want to see Jesus suffering. He appears stoical throughout his trial and execution. Moreover, his last words in John are not the cry of dereliction from the cross, those pathos-laden words, “My God, why have you forsaken me,” but rather the more philosophical, resigned sounding, “It is finished.”

In John, it is easy to let the death of Jesus trouble our *minds* rather than our *hearts*.

But that would be wrong, even in John’s narrative.

“Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say--’ Father, save me from this hour’? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour.”

To move quickly past all of this to the triumphal finish of the Gospel is to miss its point.

Our sin matters.

Our sin matters so much that God decided to do something about it.

And because the imagery of sacrifice is so strong in John, there is a theological misstep we could make: We could say that God sacrificed Jesus for our sins.

Here, a right understanding of the Trinity helps guard against a profound theological error. We don't divide the *one God, Father, Son and Holy Ghost* into component parts or jobs. Father, Son and Holy Ghost, *One God* – because of that, when one suffers, they all suffer, right.

The God we worship is the God who suffers for our sins.

But, in the early church there was a heresy that went something like this: Jesus didn't really suffer like a human because Jesus was God. To suffer like a human, to be unsure of oneself, to go to death not knowing whether resurrection would follow... that would be positively unseemly.

No, they concluded, Jesus only *appeared* human.

If you want to show off at cocktail parties, that is the heresy of Docetism with a dash of Patripassianism thrown in. Bandy those words around and you'll be the life of any party.

Sometimes, I don't think the modern church tries hard enough to understand the cross. The early church really was trying to understand the mysteries of our faith, to work out what happened on the cross. So, at Chalcedon, they answered this problem. The church affirmed that Jesus Christ is both fully human and fully divine. Jesus didn't just *appear* human when he was on earth, it wasn't a bait and switch with the Father on the cross, it was real suffering, really done for us.

When we have eyes to see it, it is evident. The penultimate words that Jesus speaks in John before he dies are words of concern for his mother, entrusting her to his best friend to be sure she would be cared for in life and in her old age.

That's sort of the opposite of stoical resignation to fate.

Which brings us to the reminder that for us, and for our salvation, Christ died on the cross.

Which brings us to that first part of the passage that struck me, the arrival of the Greeks to see Jesus. They came to the disciples, to Philip, and said the words that I just haven't been able to get out of my head this week, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus."

It is a throwaway line, easily forgotten.

John doesn't say anything more about the Greeks. He doesn't mention them again, and we don't know whether they got to see Jesus or not.

It looks like a throwaway line.

Except that if there is one thing to know about John, it is that he doesn't throw away lines.

"Sir, we wish to see Jesus."

How many times have I heard that this week?

How many times have you?

“Ma’am, we wish to see Jesus?”

Christ’s suffering demands a response from us.

Not in order to be effective for salvation – God has already done that – but so that we might have some salvation in our lives, in our world.

Christ’s disciples continually need to hear the words, “We wish to see Jesus?”

It is hard work to show people Jesus, because in order to show people Jesus, we might just encounter some suffering.

That’s why it’s so easy to want to glide right on through Lent.

That’s why it is so hard to answer the request, “We want to see Jesus.”

This is easy to *say*, but much harder to *do*.

I read an old homiletical chestnut this week that has been a burr under my saddle. In a text about preaching, the admonition was given, “Don’t preach *about* the Gospel; preach the Gospel.”

That’s the burr that’s under my saddle, and now it’s yours also: Don’t talk *about* the Gospel, talk the Gospel.

“We wish to see Jesus.”

I keep a file of articles that I think might someday help us understand the Gospel, and here’s a little clip that I found a while back.

“Despite the stratospheric levels of her success, she hasn’t forgotten being a misfit. ‘It wasn’t until I put my music out into the world that I was able to look into myself and honor my own misfit and honor the reality of how I was treated when I was a kid, not by my family, but by my peers in school, and how it affected me.’ Consequently, Lady Gaga’s message to her devoted fans is that it is all right for them to be ‘little monsters.’ Others may regard them as too fat, or too skinny, or harass them because they are gay or otherwise different. But she reminds them that they have real worth.”¹

The author concludes, “Intentionally or not, Lady Gaga reminds us that Jesus came among us as a misfit.”

She’s a wonderful entertainer, and it is wonderful that she can bridge the gap of hurt feelings for so many, just as it is wonderful to see the ways that a local club can provide a safe space, and unconditional acceptance.

With all due respect, *that’s our job!*

¹ Clapp, Rodney. *From Shame to Fame* in The Christian Century. P45. July 26, 2011

“We wish to see Jesus.”

Can you believe it, when the Greeks came, the disciples had to think about it?

They had to talk amongst themselves about whether or not to let them see Jesus, and we don't know the answer as to whether or not they did.

Because letting folks see Jesus can be awfully hard work.

Lent keeps us from prettifying the Gospel.

The Gospel is good news.

It is life-giving, life-renewing, life-changing *good news*.

But it is not pretty. It came at a cost.

So, we don't just talk *about* the Gospel, we *tell* the Gospel.

We tell the Gospel to poverty. We tell it to homelessness. We tell it to homophobia. We tell the Gospel to our personal politics. We tell it to anti-Semitism and Islamophobia. We tell it to everything and everyone who says, “Well, this is just the way it's going to be, there's nothing to be done.”

There is always something to be done, because there is *always* someone asking, “We wish to see Jesus.”

It is just two weeks until Easter, and I want to make a bold prediction: Somewhere, somehow, in the very near future, someone is going to say to you, “We wish to see Jesus.”

What will the answer be?

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.