

“IF WE WOULD SEE JESUS”

John 12:20-33

Sermon by Mack Dennis, Pastor

Jesus has become famous. He makes his reluctant debut at a wedding party in Cana. I think it was an Episcopal wedding. They run out of wine. Jesus keeps the party going by turning water into top shelf vintage. The word about him begins to spread.

There's the feeding of a crowd of thousands with little more than a respectable haul from a good morning of trout fishing. There is just no way this could have happened. Could this really have happened? Do miracles like this really happen? This is the only miracle we find in all four gospel accounts. Something quite miraculous happens. And the word spreads.

Then Jesus is walking along and sees a man born blind from birth. He spits on the ground, makes a mud paste, cakes it over the man's eyes. "Go wash in the pool of Siloam." He does and comes back able to see. The religious authorities can't believe it. Is this really the one who was blind? Get his parents in here. Is this your son? That's him. I told you I was him! And the word spreads.

Then Lazarus. Lazarus is dead. Dead. The King James Version says, "By this time he stinketh." But Jesus comes at Death with visceral emotion, snorting like a bull. And through tears and snot and spit, "Take away the stone!" And, "Lazarus, come out!" And, "Unbind him and let him go!" And the word spreads.

Now Jesus' reputation precedes him, and not only those who witnessed Lazarus' raising from the dead are following him and praising him, but the crowds have gathered around him. Can we have your autograph? Can I get a picture? And it crawls all over the religious-authority-preacher-types. They say to each other, "You can't do anything about it. Look, the world has gone after him!"

Which brings us to these Greek fellows who would see Jesus. I'm not sure about these fraternity brothers. They could be like the friend you have who always seems to have tickets to the Super Bowl because they "know a guy," or backstage passes to Beyoncé, or they finagle their way into the locker room to meet LeBron James. It's a big religious festival, after all, and they have connections to meet Jesus, the star of the show. They come to Philip because Philip speaks their language. See? They know a guy.

But let's give the Greeks the benefit of the doubt, and say that they are sincere seekers, trained in the philosophies of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, and fascinated about this Jesus fellow who could possibly be the next great philosopher. Could they have a meeting with him, probe his intellect, ask him burning questions, find out a little more about him, see for themselves? Maybe they could go home and spread the word.

They ask Philip. Philip goes to Andrew. Andrew and Philip go to Jesus. Jesus says, “Time’s up.” Jesus ignores their request. Which makes me wonder why it is, exactly, that John even mentions this “almost” encounter. If we read to the very end of the Gospel of John, we know the last thing John says is this: “But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that could be written.” So, my question is...if Jesus did so many more amazing things, and if—as was the case in biblical times—parchment paper was very expensive, and if you had paper to write on you would only write on it the most essential information, then why would you write about this “almost” encounter?

I believe John tells it this way in order to emphasize that at this point, the word has gotten out. The word about Jesus—what Jesus has done, who Jesus is—has spread so that now the levy between Jews and Greeks, between the Son of God and the world God loves, has been breached, and the message is covering everyone’s ankles now. *So, if your only desire at this point is “We wish to see Jesus,” it’s not enough.* I wonder how Jesus would have responded if these Greeks had asked instead, “We desire to *follow* Jesus...”

Jesus says, “Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also” (v. 26). Jesus says earlier from John, “You’ve seen me, but you haven’t believed.” And now Jesus starts saying these foreboding things, “My hour has come. Unless a grain of wheat falls and dies, it cannot bear fruit. Those who love their life will lose it, and those who hate their life in this world, will find it.”

Now my soul is troubled. What should I say? Storm cloud is gathering on the horizon, and Jesus turns to everyone and says, “Look. I’m going in. Will you come?”

I told some of you before about my friend, Marsha, whom I met when we lived in Durham. Marsha was your typical church member, council member, committee person, do-gooder, helper, loving, family lady, soccer mom. That’s how she describes herself. “I used to be a soccer mom.” Just a good down-to-earth, salt of the earth Christian. One day she was at a missions committee meeting. They were trying to decide whether to take some meals into a neighborhood where there was often gunfire. And, the committee started waffling on whether they should take meals into “that neighborhood,” or not. “Oh, I don’t know about that neighborhood. We can take meals over here, but that neighborhood is dangerous. Didn’t you read the news last week? Two people shot.”

Then Marsha said, “But there’s children there. Can we not go where there are children?” And she went. And there she discovered new friends, one of whom was putting her children in the bathtub at night to protect them from drive-by shootings. Now you remember, as I said, Marsha was just Methodist soccer mom. Then all of a sudden, she found herself walking into the storm, and her life was never the same.

I read earlier this week about a gentleman that had long been retired, and he took up a new habit in his retirement. Now all of his other peers, enjoying their Golden Years, enjoying their travel, playing golf, and doing all the fun things you do in retirement. All well and good, if that’s your thing, he said. But his heart had already broken for babies in the NICU. So, newly retired, he

made this his new hobby: going to the Neonatal ICU, just to hold the babies. He said research has shown that babies are healthier the more they're held, and why not go where they need that the most? And, even if that research is wrong, it shouldn't be! But you know, some of those babies live, and some of those babies die. But, he goes on holding them -collecting his pension, going to the NICU, holding babies, in the 'storm.'

"If you want to be with me, well, you have to go where I am. If you want to serve me, you have to go where I am, and where I said I was going to be, and I'm going into the storm! If you want to be with me, you're going to have to come into the dark cloud with me."

Jesus says, "Father glorify your name," which means maximize, shine a light on all that I've done, and what you've done through me. Then a voice comes from heaven and says, "I've already glorified it and I will glorify it again."

The crowd thinks they hear thunder (because we're heading into the storm!). An voice has spoken, and Jesus says "This voice has not come for my sake, but for yours. These are directions for you—from now on, if you want to find me, here's where I'll be. Where my name has been glorified, and where it will yet be glorified –is on the cross."

So, from now on, Jesus is pushing against the headwind of death – driving out the Ruler of this world, lifted up, and so lifted, drawing all the world to himself. So, the question is, do we wish to see Jesus? Maybe there are some here whose faith is fading, you feel like you're losing faith, the substance of it. You don't feel the weight of it anymore, or it's not carrying you anymore.

You know that there's something out there- there's something that you're called to do, but you haven't found it. Maybe there are some among us who are giving up on faith. I don't know. Some of you have walked into this storm, and you know the joy of being next to the thunderclap when it happens.

But if any of us would see Jesus, then it's time for us to go where Jesus said he would be. Time for us to follow him into the thundercloud, and live with him, in this supercell, and put our fear of death behind us. For these are the places where Jesus said he would be. The poor, the weak, the suffering, those who hunger, those who are naked, those who are in prison. And even in close proximity to the rulers of this age, whom Jesus confronts and amazes.

What do you believe would happen if a church like ours were to head straight into the thundercloud? We can't foresee it all, but I know this...the Word will spread.

