

6 April 2003
Lent 5

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Seeing Jesus is Seeing God For You”

Text: John 12:20-33

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

“Now among those who went up to worship at the feast were some Greeks. So these came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and asked him, ‘Sir, we wish to see Jesus.’”

These words are every church’s and Evangelism Committee’s dream come true! People coming up to us and asking about Jesus! Sign them up for instruction classes, give them some brochures, introduce them to the pastor! It seems like all of our efforts are finally paying off. Word is getting around. The kingdom is growing!

Except when they tell Jesus, he doesn’t seem so excited. He starts talking about death, and being troubled, and judgment. He talks about being crucified. And rather than give these curious Greek seekers an audience, Jesus in effect, says: *“They want to see me? They will see me. They’re going to see me with everyone else, when I am lifted up from the earth on the cross. They’re going to see me in humiliation, and weakness, and suffering, and pain. They’re going to see me die.”* . . . And you can almost imagine Andrew and Philip, that first Evangelism Committee, thinking . . . *“Uh, I don’t think that’s what they had in mind!”*

But why did these Greeks want to see Jesus anyway? We’re not told, but I think we often *assume* that they’re pretty much like us, and have come to believe in Jesus and therefore want to meet Him. But that may not be the case. Perhaps, as Paul writes in First Corinthians, they were among the Greeks seeking wisdom, and they wanted to see Jesus not as Saviour, but as a wise man. Or perhaps they were among the people who just wanted to see Jesus perform one of His miraculous signs and wonders. Or perhaps they wanted to *confront* Jesus, having heard of His claims to be the Son of God, and they wanted to see who would be so audacious as to make such a claim. Or perhaps they were just curious about this guy who had been stirring things up so much! . . . No, we don’t know why they wanted to see Jesus, and truthfully, part of us says, *“Who cares?!”* We think: who cares why they want to – just get them in there and let Jesus do the rest! . . .

But Jesus doesn't always jump through the hoops we'd like Him to. Jesus doesn't heal on command. He doesn't impart wisdom for wisdom's sake. He didn't come to be put on trial and prove to all who come along that He is indeed who He says He is! He came to go to the cross. He came to die on it. And all who want to see Him must see Him there. For apart from the cross He is no Saviour. He may be a spectacle, a wonder, and someone people may be willing to wait in line to see – but apart from the cross, that's all He would be. . . . But He came to be much more than that. ***“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”***

And so Jesus says, ***“The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.”*** But not glorified by men, acclaimed and exalted for His wisdom, or power, or authority – but glorified by His Father for His obedience, His suffering, His weakness, His humiliation, and His most shameful, inglorious death. For that is the glory of God. His glory is not in that He remains in Heaven and demands that we climb up to Him and find a way to save ourselves through following a certain set of rules or instructions – no, that's not very glorious. That's *tyrannical*. His glory, rather, is in coming down to us. His glory is serving us. His glory is that He was not ashamed to become one of us. His glory is in the gift of His Son, to come and be our brother and Saviour, and to die on the cross for us. . . . And so if you want to see God, if you want to see Him as He really is, if you want to understand His will and His ways and His love and His mercy, look at the cross. That's God. That humiliated, shameful, weak man, condemned as a criminal and punished accordingly, that's God. That's God **for you**.

Now, some people are offended by a statement like that. Not wanting to see God in that way, but wanting to see Him instead as a king, enthroned, powerful, guiding and directing all things by His might. That's God! . . . Well, yes, it is – but that's not God **for you**. That God can be a frightening God, for who is worthy to approach such majesty, such holiness, such awesomeness? Not you or me, that's for sure! For our hands and feet and lips and mouths and eyes and ears and hearts and minds have all done that which we know is wrong and sinful. We have said what should not be said, we have seen what should not be seen, we have thought what should not be thought, we have done what should not be done – and as we look at ourselves, in all those ways and more, it is as Lady MacBeth did! If you remember that story, there was the scene where no matter how many times she washed her hands, she still saw blood on them. And no matter how many times you and I may try to wash ourselves clean of our sins, we see them still. Others may not know, but we know. And we know that with such shame and sin we could not possibly stand before our holy, perfect, and awesome God, for He would see our sin and shame! Every drop and splatter of it, all over us.

But it is not to such a God that we must go, in our shame and sin and humiliation. No, we have been given the gift of going to the God who is just like us, because He came down from His throne and became like us. He took on our human nature, and then even more than that, He took our sin and shame. What we cannot remove, He removed. And He put it all on Himself, and then was lifted up on the cross. . . . That is our God! A glorious God indeed, who would do that for sinners like you and me. And so that's how God wants to be seen and known – not in power but in weakness; not in majesty but in shame; not in exaltation but in humiliation. And so that's what Jesus tells His Evangelism Committee: ***“The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. . . . And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”*** And that is the God we have been drawn to, and which we approach – the One, the only One, who took our sins away. For He is our Saviour. Or as someone once said: *“Christ died – that's history; Christ died for us – that's Christianity; Christ died for me – that's salvation.”*

And to provide for our salvation, to save you and me from sin and death and grave and Satan – that's what Jesus has come to do. That's why He wants to be seen – not just in *any* way – but lifted high on the cross; and that's why He rose again from the dead on the Third Day. *“For us and for our salvation.”*

And so still Jesus is drawing you and me and many people to Himself on the cross. For while His work of salvation in dying and rising is finished and completed, His giving of the gifts earned for us in His death and resurrection – His gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation – He is not finished giving those. And so He says, ***“Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also.”*** That's cross talk, and it is that last sentence that is the most important: ***“and where I am, there will my servant be also.”*** We are His servants when we are where He is. And where He is is not in Heaven, but still down here, still on earth, *“for us and for our salvation.”* For He has promised to be here for us, in His Word, in the waters of Holy Baptism, and on the altar in the Lord's Supper. We cannot go up into Heaven, and we cannot go back in time to the moment of the cross – and so He brings the cross and Heaven here to us. And where He is, we are. And so we gather around His Word, to hear it preached into our ears and hearts, and to *“read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest it.”* That it become a part of us. And we gather around the waters of Holy Baptism, for there the sin and shame that no amount of effort on our part can wash away, our Saviour washes away. And we gather around His altar, to treat our Saviour's body and blood *just as ingloriously as it was treated on the cross* – there pierced by nails, here eaten and drunk. . . .

But our Lord wouldn't have it any other way! This is exactly what He wants to do and

wants us to do, for it is His glory. It is His glory to die shamefully for us and our sins, to be treated as a sinner, to be rejected and mocked, and now to have His body and blood eaten and drunk – all so that by taking what is ours, He may give us what is His. **And so where He is, we are; and where He is, His gifts are; and He gives them to us.** And so we are forgiven and cleansed of all our sins; we are given a new life which will last for all eternity; and we are given the gift of salvation – that we are not only saved but that we know that we are saved, that we can live the life our Saviour has given us. A life free from worry, a life free from the burden and terror of the Law, a life filled with the love and grace and mercy of our God.

“Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” As Holy Week draws ever closer, we will again see Jesus where and as He wants to be seen – in shame and humiliation on the cross. He wants it no other way. As we heard from His own lips, ***“And what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour?’”*** No, He will not avoid it. He will be lifted up, that He may lift us up. For as He was lifted up on the cross, and as He was lifted up from the grave, and then as He was lifted up in His ascension, that will be our lifting up us well. For joined to Him and He to us, we will be where He is. He will take us through His cross and grave and into life, and into life eternal.

“Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” When people want to be seen, they usually try to look their best, with special clothes, and hair, and make-up, and all the rest. Jesus wants us to see Him at His best too – and that is in His glory on the cross. See Him. See Him there **for you**. For you will see no greater God than the God who hangs there in sin and shame and humility for you.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds steadfast in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.