
WE WISH TO SEE JESUS
JOHN 12:20-33
A SERMON PREACHED IN DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL
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You should have seen me. I was some sort of spectacle, but I was ready. Bible. Books. Binoculars. I traveled prepared. I spent the last week in prayer and reflection with Duke students at Christ in the Desert Monastery in Abiquiu, New Mexico. My sincere prayer going into the week was, “Lord, help me return with all the students I started with.” Ok, maybe it wasn’t that. My prayer was, “Lord, Jesus, I want to see you.” And I went looking. Maybe you don’t carry your binoculars around when you’re hoping to catch a glimpse of Jesus, but I did. I knew the beautiful landscape and the glory of creation was going to draw me in. How couldn’t you see Jesus’s face and God’s glory in the beauty of the blue barn swallows and the red and gold peculiarity of the Pedernal mesa? If I was going to see Jesus there, I wanted the close-up view. In the mountains and with the monks, I felt my heart stirring with the prayer, “I wish to see Jesus.”

“Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” That’s what John reports some Greek men said to Philip, one of Jesus’s disciples. Like someone bursting into the doctor’s office begging the receptionist for a visit, these men came to Philip. “We want to see Jesus.” Like people searching Ticketmaster and StubHub for the last tickets on the last night of final run of a show, these men came to see Jesus. They may not have realized it, but the opportunities to see Jesus were running out. “We wish to see Jesus.” We aren’t certain why these men wanted to see Jesus, we just know they did. And because of where this story is in John’s Gospel, we know the time was getting short. “We want to see Jesus.”

It’s a simple request really. Throughout John’s Gospel many have come wanting to see Jesus. They’ve followed him near and far, visited synagogues to hear him teach, searched for him across bodies of water, and waited on him to return when he went away. People were eager to see Jesus. And from early on in John’s Gospel, the response was, “Come and see.” When some of John the Baptist’s disciples decided they wanted to follow Jesus instead of John who was preaching about Jesus, Jesus said to them, “Come and see” (1:39). When Philip, the newly minted disciple, told Nathanael about Jesus, Nathanael asked “Can anything good come from Nazareth?” Philip responded, inviting Nathanael to come and see. And when Jesus was speaking with the Samaritan woman at the well, sharing with her about the living water that would quench her deepest thirsts forever, she left to tell all the people of her town. “He told me everything I’ve ever done. Come and see” (4:29). People coming out to see Jesus is just what people do.

Like us, people throughout John’s Gospel come desiring to see Jesus for countless reasons. Some look to Jesus to be healed. Just a few chapters in, John tells us about an official from Capernaum (Ca-per-nay-um) who came searching for Jesus because his son was dying. The official had heard about Jesus’s miracles, and he knew his son needed one. Jesus responded to the man, “Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe.” But the official was undeterred, and

simply said, “Come before my child dies.” There’s a certain desperation, a certain boldness, a certain honesty that comes when someone approaches Jesus with this need for healing.

Maybe you’ve sought Jesus with this same desperation and boldness and honesty. Whether it’s for your own healing or the healing of someone you love, you know what it is like to be searching for Jesus as the one who can heal in body, mind, and spirit. You go to all the places you know you’ve encountered him in the past and maybe try some new ones, as you say, “I want to see Jesus.”

Others direct their attention to Jesus desiring to be fed. John tells us that large crowds had been following Jesus because they had seen the healing miracles he had been doing. On one occasion, there were five thousand men, not including women and children, gathered listening to Jesus, and it was time to eat. The Gospel writer tells us that the disciples had no idea how they would feed so many people, but they brought a boy’s offering of 5 loaves and 2 fish and took it to Jesus. Jesus gave thanks for these gifts and then started passing out the food. Everyone was fed and there were 12 baskets full left over. The people came to see Jesus, and they were fed.

Maybe you’ve sought Jesus because you were hungry. Some of us have known the pangs of physical hunger and have sought Jesus as we’ve struggled to have our basic needs met. Others have had a different kind of hunger. It’s a hunger a full belly doesn’t really touch. Some try to satisfy it or mask it with food or drink or any other number of distractions, but the hunger is deeper than that. You don’t just want to see Jesus. You long to have your deepest needs for connection, for community, for provision, for protection, and for love met. You want to know what a bread that satisfies all your deepest longings tastes like. You seek the bread that will endure to eternal life, the bread from heaven that gives life to the world (6:33). So you go to all the places you know you’ve encountered Jesus in the past, and maybe try some new ones, as you say, “I want to see Jesus.”

Others turn their faces to Jesus hoping to make it through a storm. After feeding all those people, Jesus went up on a mountain and his disciples went down to the sea to set sail. While they were at sea, a strong storm blew in. The disciples rowed and rowed in the storm for about 3 or 4 miles. Then they looked up and saw Jesus walking on the water toward them. And as the scriptures said, “Like any sane people, this scared the living daylights out of the disciples.” (Maybe that’s the Bruce International Version, but the point is they were frightened.) Jesus said to the disciples, “It is I; do not be afraid.” When they heard this, they were eager to have him come onboard. And just like that, they arrived at the other side. You know, it’s not always about the storm stopping. Sometimes it’s just about getting to the other side.

Maybe you long to encounter Jesus just so you can make it to the other side of whatever hardship you’ve been struggling through. You know the strain of perpetual effort and ceaseless struggle and insurmountable anxiety as you try to find your way through. It’s not so much that you just want Jesus to fix all your troubles for you. You’ve been rowing hard in the turbulence and through the terrors, you’re doing your work, but there just doesn’t seem to be a shore to be reached

in the sea of your trials. So you find yourself straining your eyes as the rain and wind beat down on you, and you say, “I want to see Jesus.”

The reasons we want to see Jesus are as many and as varied as the number of people in this room and more. We want to see Jesus because we want to be truly known, because we want rescued, because we want to be blessed, because we want our path made clear, because we want to be touched, because we want a sense of purpose, because we want to be free, because we want to be loved. What has made you say, “I want to see Jesus” in the past? What makes you say it now?

Like security at a prestigious party, Philip and then Andrew with him are the gatekeepers for these men getting to Jesus. I wonder what they were thinking about the request to see Jesus. Where was the eager, “Come and see” that so many others received? Instead of inviting the men in, Philip and Andrew took this request to Jesus. And Jesus’s response was surprising and indirect. The religious leaders had observed that the world was coming to Jesus, and now these Greek men, possibly representing the world, had come seeking him. It’s as if this allowed Jesus to see himself and his time more clearly. Perhaps this request was a sort of mirror to Jesus, allowing him to see, because Jesus responded, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.” Time and again throughout John’s Gospel, we hear that Jesus’s hour had not yet come. But Jesus recognized a time change—a sort of divine daylight-saving time. And this time change meant a shift in how, where, and who would come to see him. Still not quite answering the question, Jesus continued talking about grain being buried in the earth and dying so that it can bear much fruit. This analogy surely pointed to Jesus’s own death, resurrection, and ascension through which the spreading of God’s kingdom would come to all the world. It is surprising that death would lead to the flourishing and spreading of God’s ways to all people, but from Jesus’s perspective, this is built into the very structures of creation. Grain goes into the ground, it dies, and then from the burial ground new life springs forth.

Jesus’s indirect response continued still on the theme of life and death. “Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” What a strange and uncomfortable thing for Jesus to say. On the one hand, Jesus realized his hour had come to be glorified, so he knew his own death was fast approaching. Because of this, we can hear this teaching on loving and hating as a word about Jesus himself. He was not so attached to saving his life, to continuing his mission and ministry on earth, that he was going to resist God’s calling for him to lay down his life. Instead, Jesus was pursuing life in God, life that continues eternally, the life of God’s kingdom, the life that springs forth through death.

On the other hand, Jesus was speaking to those who were following him and any who want to see him. Paradoxically, loving your life, which is to say grasping for, clinging to, and prioritizing above all else life according to your own desires and ways, ends up in the loss of your life. But hating your life in this world leads to eternal life. Let me be clear, Jesus is not speaking of a negative emotional feeling toward yourself. He is not advocating for self-loathing, as if it is the way to life. He instead is speaking to an internal and external disposition toward a life pursuing God and God’s ways over life pursuing the things of this world. As St. Benedict put it, “Prefer nothing whatever to

Christ.” Jesus is calling for God’s plans and priorities to be at the top of your list, your number one preference in all things, even when like Jesus it means surrendering one’s own life for God’s glory. It is about being so set on serving and following Jesus that as the hymn writer says, “the things of earth will grow strangely dim...” To have little or no regard for anything other than God’s ways and God’s glory is what it means to hate one’s life in this world and is what it looks like to live in God’s eternal life in the present. Now don’t get me wrong, to love God’s ways and to pursue God’s glory is as earthy and as material as healing the sick, feeding the hungry, and being protected from strong winds and high seas. It’s not to be so heavenly minded that you are of no earthly good. It’s just that the earthly good is always wrapped up in what is beyond it; it’s always wrapped in the goodness of eternal life.

If you have any doubt whether this is a challenging word, what Jesus said next should confirm it. “Now my soul is troubled.” “Now I’m disturbed.” Or as some might say, “Now I’m shook.” Jesus was moved to the core from the reality of this absolute pursuit of God’s ways and purposes. And while John’s Gospel emphasizes Jesus’s confidence in his connection with the Father and in his purpose on earth even at his death, Jesus was disturbed. Maybe Jesus didn’t need to be reassured in that moment of his connection to God the Father, but it didn’t hurt for his disciples and those gathered around to hear it. So God spoke. Some thought it was thunder and others thought it was angels, but Jesus knew this was God’s voice for the sake of the people. And in God’s speaking, Jesus heard that the ruler of the world, the one whose ways of death and destruction and decay were not God’s ways, the one whose kind of loving and living leads to death, this ruler had been put on notice. The ruler’s time was up. The hour had come, and God’s reign and rule was breaking-in.

After all of this, Jesus finally gave any who were listening the closest thing to a direct response to those longing to see him. Jesus said, “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” If there was any confusion about what Jesus meant, the Gospel writer cleared it up: “He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.” Jesus draws all the world to himself through the cross, through that cursed place where all sin and death come to die. If you want to see Jesus, don’t bother taking your binoculars. Don’t go searching for signs and miracles. Don’t wait to see thousands fed, or a loved one healed, or that you’ve made it through the storm. Sure, all those things God has done and continues to do. And maybe like me you think you need to be in the mountains or with the monks to encounter Jesus, to see his face, to hear his voice, to feel his presence, to taste his goodness, to smell his aroma. But if you want to see Jesus, there is one sign, and it is available wherever you find yourself. If you want to see healing, and rescue, and redemption, and forgiveness, and freedom; if you want to see God’s plan and where Jesus is calling all who want to follow and serve him; if you want to see God’s eternal life; if you want to see God’s glory, look up with the eyes of your soul and see Jesus on the cross—perfect love hanging for all the world to see.

The famous hymn writer Isaac Watts penned: “At the cross, at the cross where I first saw the light, and the burden of my heart rolled away. It was there by faith I received my sight, and now I am happy all the day.”

Come and see at the cross. Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.
Don't look away. God wants to show you eternal life.