

**Sermon Preached by The Reverend Jonathon W. Jensen, Rector  
at Calvary Episcopal Church, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania  
on the Fifth Sunday in Lent, Year B  
March 17, 2024**

*John 12:20-33*

“Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” Where, how, in whom, do you encounter God?

A woman, about 60, hesitant, timid even, approached me on Ash Wednesday. She was a silhouette, a halo of light behind a mass of big hair. I was sheltered behind the massive oak doors having finished offering Ashes to Go from the steps of the church. We had about 50 people at noon seek this mark of mortality and penitence to turn back to God. *Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return.*

As she drew closer, I could see she had a smudge of ashes. Who was she? Why was she here? She had kind eyes that highlighted a countenance of concern. She called out, “Hello, Faaatha. Can you help me?” There was instant recognition as old Pittsburgh, Catholic, salt of the earth.

Janice told me she had a friend sick at home, who could not go out, but really wanted ashes. It was important to him and important enough to her to move past her shyness to ask for help. The church nearby, from which she received her ashes and was a member, could not oblige. Could we help her friend? What would you do if you were in my place? Of course we helped. s

I had several other engagements so could not visit which would have been best. We listened to her story, asked about her friend, prayed with her and invited them to Calvary. We gave her ashes with instructions how to administer them and what they mean and the leaflet with the brief service for her to follow. She thanked us and ambled away with a toothy smile.

*Sir, we wish to see Jesus.* As she departed, I wondered, who had I just met? It was Janice, a local lady, but was that all? Who is her unnamed friend? That was a profoundly moving day to administer ashes to a couple of hundred people, some not far from birth and others not far from death. It is an intimate act of recognition of one person to another each with the same words, *Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return.* Reconstituted dust. Who was Janice?

The experience reminded me of Rabbi Bisno’s teaching about the Jewish legend of Lamed Vav Tzadikim, the 36 Righteous Ones. The legend says their presence, their connection to God allows the world to continue, to keep hope alive. The world depends on them. The identity of these 36 people is unknown to anyone, including themselves. But... it is likely the person you least expect that harbors the very presence of God. Janice or her friend could be one. Your neighbor or co-worker, even the annoying one, might be one of the 36. You might be, too. There is a close Christian parallel to this. We can meet, recognize, Christ in each person. Is it Jesus in front of us in the guise of the most or least expected individual? Who was she?

Sir, we wish to see Jesus. Jesus made a triumphal entry into the city of Jerusalem. We observe this on Palm Sunday next week. The whole story is building to the dramatic conclusion of his sacrifice on the Cross that makes way for the resurrection three days later. That is the fullest revelation of who Jesus is and what his life and mission mean.

Crowds had gathered in the city to celebrate the Passover commemorating God's deliverance of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. This feast, at which each family sacrificed a lamb, remembered their defining moment that helped forge them into a people.

Jesus entered into that city and scene as an outlaw. The powers that be had a standing order to arrest him so he could be killed. Even though he was greeted as a hero by the people, the disciples would have been suspicious of anyone who wanted to get too close.

To this Passover feast in Jerusalem, some Greeks came to worship. Traditionally, the Greeks were viewed as seekers of wisdom. At the beginning of his life, Gentile wise men (magi) from the east sought out Jesus. At the *end* of his life, Gentile wisdom seekers from the west sought out Jesus. Jesus entered the world for Jews and Gentiles, everyone.

These Greeks approached the disciple, Philip, who had a Greek name himself. Maybe they thought he would be sympathetic or was someone who could relate to them. They told him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Were they spies or genuine seekers? Who were they? Philip was not sure what to do so he told Andrew. Together, they went and told Jesus.

Jesus replied to the Greeks' request in a rather cryptic way. "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified." The "Son of Man" is a reference to the Book of Daniel (chap 7). In it the prophet described worldly rulers as beasts and foretold a new reign that will come from God that would be merciful and just and would never end. The one who ushers in this new Kingdom is called the "Son of Man." The people had been waiting a long time for that to happen.

"Glorified," in this sense, refers to the crucifixion and resurrection. "The hour has come" means the point of no return, the pregnant moment of possibility realized. All the teaching and miracles had been leading up to this. The crucifixion and resurrection, the glorification of Jesus, are the means the new reign of God, a golden age without end, the Kingdom of Heaven, enters the world. This was the moment they all had been waiting for... The Son of Man was Jesus who would usher in God's new Kingdom, and it was about to happen in front of them.

Just as God intervened to set the Israelites free through the Exodus, God would set all people free through Jesus's death and resurrection. Jesus is the new Passover lamb freely offering himself for the abundant life and freedom of the world. He taught this as he was surrounded by thousands of people and sheep in the streets for the Passover feast. The symbolism was obvious.

Then Jesus explained why he had to die even though the disciples still couldn't accept it or the Greeks understand it. Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it cannot produce a harvest. The seed has to die to make new life. That's how sacrifice works. You offer something of value now to receive something greater later. Unless Jesus offers himself and dies, there can be no fruit in the resurrection to produce new life for all.

For the Kingdom to be born in you, to come to life, also requires a type of death. "Those who love their life will lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life." "Those who love their life will lose it" means those who try to cling to security or power or the values of the world or keep it all to yourself- miss the point of what Jesus had been teaching and all the miracles. It misses the mark of why he is in Jerusalem headed to the cross, living and dying for the world... for other people. Jesus invites us to join in this mission of good news.

We are not called to hate our lives in this sense of detesting ourselves but to see ourselves as so valuable, so precious, so sacred we freely offer our lives as a gift day by day. You are God's beloved child with a divine purpose to love. What is more valuable than that? What if you are one of the legendary 36 people on whose virtue the world continues to spin on its axis? Would you act or treat people differently if they might be Jesus manifest right in front of you?

“Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” If people are to see Jesus it may be in no other way than through you. Your life will reveal the presence of God to others in what you do and say, how you spend your time or money, how you treat your boss or employee or man on the street. They will see Jesus when you fail but recognize you are forgiven and try to do better. They will see Jesus through you when you live like you are in the Kingdom even when no one is looking.

Who was Janice, that woman who wandered in? In one sense, she was ordinary... like everyone else. But seeing with eyes of faith, she was the most important person in the world in that moment. If you are open enough, Jesus might be the very next person you meet.