

Jeremiah 31:31-34  
Psalm 51:1-13  
Hebrews 5:5-10  
John 12:20-33

Lent 5B  
St. Barnabas, Bainbridge Island  
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### Seeing Jesus

As we enter into these last days before Holy Week, we're invited once again to reflect on our lives, and our practice, and our attention to our Lenten journeys. How has Lent happened in us? Have we been faithful to our chosen Lenten practices, spent some time with them each day? Did we even remember that it's Lent?

In the beginning, Lent seems like a long time. When Jesus went into the parched and dry desert wilderness for those 40 days and 40 nights, it was a long and hard fast. When Noah spent 40 days and 40 nights packed into an ark filled with all manner of smelly, messy animals, it was a long time to be cooped up. When Moses spent 40 days and nights on the mountaintop with God, he took a very long time carving those important covenant-making commandments on stone tablets. 40 is a big number. 40 days, 40 nights. It's a long time. And yet this Lenten season has gone by so quickly! And as the days fly by, our best intentions for a holy Lent get lost, only to be found in the desert wilderness of our rear view mirrors.

We've spent 29 days of Lent already... there are 11 days left. And whether we've kept a holy Lent, or haven't thought much about it at all, now is a very good time to stop, to reflect on where we are, and to prepare for where we're about to go. This is it. This is the last Sunday before Holy Week. The next time we gather as a community it will be Palm Sunday. That's one short week away. So let's begin again, right now in this moment, with the stories offered us today. Jesus has just made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. The Greeks John speaks of had come to Jerusalem because they knew that Jesus, a devout Jew, would be there to worship and celebrate the Passover. Pretty brave, I'd say, coming into a town you don't know for a formidable festival you haven't ever been a part of, and finding your way into a religious ceremony that belongs to a group of people who aren't your people, in a place where it isn't necessarily safe even to be with people who aren't your people. No wonder they found their way to Andrew and Philip... the men with the Greek names. They'd found something familiar – true, it was only a couple of names, but it offered some comfort and perhaps even emboldened those newcomers to voice their heart's desire... *"Sir, we wish to see Jesus."*

What stirs in your heart when you hear those words? Does your own longing to see Jesus rise to the surface? Maybe you feel the unease of being an outsider trying to find a way in, maybe you

recognize the uncertainty of the brave people who visit St Barnabas for the first time, wishing to see Jesus. Are you called to be more welcoming? Do you long to be Jesus' loving, welcoming presence for anyone who might feel like a stranger? You see, the strangers are very important for us. Just like the Greek strangers who came looking for Jesus 2,000 years ago, strangers always show us that Jesus belongs to everyone, everywhere... not just to the ones who already know how to celebrate the Passover, or in our case, the Eucharist.

*"Sir, we wish to see Jesus."*

Ahh, but which Jesus? Did they want to see the Jesus everyone was following, the one who turned water into wine at the wedding in Cana? Did they want to see the one who had just come into town on a dusty road covered in the cloaks of the people who joyfully welcomed him with shouts of "Hosanna!"? I'm quite sure they didn't want to see the Jesus who was about to go through unspeakable suffering and death on a cross. Did they really know what they were asking? Do we? Did they have any idea that that in asking to see Jesus, they would usher in the beginning of what seemed to be the end? *"Sir, we wish to see Jesus."*

Do you recall Jesus' response to their request? *"The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified."* Glorified. That's John's gospel-speak for suffering, crucifixion and resurrection. Amazing, isn't it? Strangers have come from afar to see Jesus, and when they find him, he doesn't invite them to sit at his feet for a lesson, doesn't invite them to break bread with him, doesn't ask them what he can do for them. He tells them his hour has come and that he is about to die. It's the same thing that happened when Peter recognized Jesus as the Messiah. It seems as soon as we recognize Jesus for who he really is, he talks about suffering, dying and rising. *"Very truly I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit."* That is who Jesus is.

Jesus' death, symbolized in the cross can be hard to make sense of, so Jesus told a story to help us understand. *"...unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life."* That seems hard to make sense of too. I think what Jesus was telling the disciples, and what he is telling us, is that God knows what it is to be human, to be incarnate. And that every incarnate thing must finally die.

I don't believe Jesus' death was a ransom paid – an exchange of his sinless life for our sins. Jesus on the cross is not Jesus standing in for us, dying there because God demanded atonement for all humankind's guilt and sin. Jesus died because Jesus was human, and the way he died, on the cross at the hands of civil and religious authorities, was ultimately about relationships. Listen... *"...unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit..."* This is how we can begin to understand what happened in Jesus' death.

The fruit born of his death, is the life of the community of faith that gathers because he died and rose again. That's what it means to say that Jesus died for us - not as a substitute for us, not as some sort of sacrificial victim, but for life... for the life of the world.

If Jesus, fully human, hadn't died on that cross, and if God hadn't raised him from the dead, where would we be? Certainly not here. Who would we be? Certainly not Christians. And what would we gather around if not the Eucharistic table where week after week we watch and remember – not the looking back and thinking kind of remembering, but re-remembering, sort of the opposite of dismembering, re-remembering, re-joining ourselves to Christ, and to one another.

The saving power of Jesus' death, the fruit born of his death, is the very life of this community, and every other Christian community gathered everywhere in the world. If Jesus had loved his life in this world so much that he hadn't been willing to give it up, we simply wouldn't be here.

To "*hate our life in this world*" doesn't mean we don't love being here, being God's beloved children. It only means that the life of discipleship that brings us together and draws us deeper and deeper into relationship with God and one another is the abundant life God means for us. When Jesus said "*...those who love their life lose it.*" what he meant by "loving our lives" is the erroneous assumption that we are in charge of our destiny, that we are our own personal saviors, that what we want as individuals matters more than what God wants for all people and for God's beloved creation. You see, if we walk around in the world as though our needs matter more than anyone else's, we are nothing more than one lonely, isolated, single, solitary grain. What Jesus is trying to show us is that his death gives birth to us, the believing community whose identity both individually and collectively is grounded in a love so profound that it gives everything. A community that pours God's love out for the life of the world.

This is our collective birth narrative, and in Holy Week we will live into the story once again. Don't miss this! Participating in all of Holy Week changes our lives, because when we make the journey with Jesus through Holy Week, we know at the very core of our being what it really means to be a Christian. Making the journey is how we know... How we know who Jesus is, and how we know who we are too. Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, the Great Vigil of Easter... these three days are the very heart and soul of our Christian faith, the time when we remember and celebrate the triumph of God's great love over darkness and death. It's the richest ritual expression of what it means to be a Christian, and in our re-living and re-remembering, we are renewed and reborn.

The great gift of Holy Week is that we become a part of the story, and we really do meet Jesus. When we wave our palm branches, stoop to wash each other's feet, wait and watch with Jesus, touch the hard wood of the cross... when we do these things, we incarnate the story, it gets into every cell of our being, until finally we know ourselves as God's own beloved, the believing community that has existed ever since the stories began. The journey is how we know, and we

won't know if we jump straight from Palm Sunday parade to the Easter parade. We need to make this journey together, walking each step of the way with Jesus.

No matter how we've used the days thus far, there are days of Lent ahead. As we enter these last Lenten days before Holy Week, we're invited to hear Jesus preparing us for what is to come. We're invited to make some quiet space in order to do that, and to consider what might be born in us if as a community, we help each other to gently say "no" to the other claims on our time and for those three holy days, journey together with Jesus and with each other. If you do that, you will be changed. Amen.