

Sermon for Zion – September 3, 2017 – Rev. Douglas Rollwage

Hymns: 4 – Lord, as I wake I turn to you; Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus;

445 – Open our eyes, Lord; 472 – We Are God’s People (1,2,4)

Scripture Readings: Exodus 33:12-23; 1 Thessalonians 1:2-10; John 12:20-22

Sermon Title: “To See Jesus”

Exodus 33:12-23 – selected verses (NLT)

One day Moses said to the Lord, “You have been telling me, ‘Take these people up to the Promised Land.’ But you haven’t told me whom you will send with me. You have told me, ‘I know you by name, and I look favorably on you.’ If it is true, let me know your ways so I may understand you more fully and continue to enjoy your favor. And remember that this nation is your very own people.”

The Lord replied, “I will personally go with you, Moses, and I will give you rest—everything will be fine for you.”

Moses responded, “Then show me your glorious presence.”

The Lord replied, “I will make all my goodness pass before you, and I will call out my name, Yahweh, before you. But you may not look directly at my face, for no one may see me and live.” The Lord continued, “Look, stand near me on this rock. As my glorious presence passes by, I will hide you in the crevice of the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will remove my hand and let you see me from behind. But my face will not be seen.”

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10 – The Message (selected verses)

Every time we think of you, we thank God for you. Day and night you’re in our prayers as we call to mind your work of faith, your labour of love, and your patience of hope in following our Master, Jesus Christ, before God our Father. It is clear to us, friends, that God not only loves you very much but also has put his hand on you for something special. When the Message we preached came to you, it wasn’t just words. Something happened in you.

The word has gotten around. Your lives are echoing the Master’s Word all over the place. The news of your faith in God is out. We don’t even have to say anything anymore—you’re the message!

John 12:20-22 (New Life Version)

Some Greek people had come to worship at the religious gathering. They were among the others who had come to worship. These Greek people came to Philip. He was from the city of Bethsaida in the country of Galilee. They said to him, “Sir, we want to see Jesus!” Philip went and told Andrew. Then Andrew and Philip told Jesus.

As many of you know, Dana and I spent two weeks in Northern Italy this past summer, in the region called Tuscany, in the foothills of the Apennine Mountains. We were there primarily to hear our daughter Hannah sing in Handel's opera "Alcina" in the beautiful walled city of Lucca, but of course, we also had lots of time to wander and to tour.

Our motto was, "Never walk by an open church," and there being lots of churches there, we had plenty of opportunity to encounter the Italian expression of the Christian faith, particularly in terms of art. And such glorious art! From 6th Century baptismal fonts to austere 10th Century crucifixes to jaw-dropping mosaic ceilings to stunning Renaissance canvasses to small, roadside Stations of the Cross, we never failed to be blessed by the many ways in which the Biblical story was being presented. No matter where in Italy we were, we were never far from an opportunity to see Jesus. Visiting there, it seems people throughout history want to be reminded of, to be in the presence of, to see Jesus.

And not only in Italy. A look around our own sanctuary reveals no fewer than 13 stained glass window depictions of Jesus, from infancy through Resurrected glory. We, too, are looking for contact. Like those from our Scripture readings this morning, we too want to see God. We want to see Jesus.

Moses is speaking with God, in the way that only Moses could. He is at once appealing and complaining, asking God's help, griping about the spot into which God has placed him. It all boils down to this: All that Moses has gone through, all the promises passed along, all the miracles, all the plagues, all the wandering, all the squabbles, and it strikes Moses that while he has seen plenty of God's work, he hasn't actually laid eyes on God Himself. He is beginning to doubt a bit, informing God that if God doesn't plan to be with them for the long run, maybe it is better they end it all right here, and God comforts with promises of fidelity and steadfast, unending love. But Moses wants more, needs more. "Show me your glory, I pray." Maybe, thinks Moses, if he could only see; maybe, if he could see, if he could but glimpse God, he might understand, might realize, might know why and what and who he had gotten into in the first place.

God says sure, but just a peek, because anything more would fry Moses on the spot, root him to the ground, turn him into a pillar of salt; anything more would be like reaching out and touching the sun, with similar results. So it is into a cleft in the rock, a gash in the face of the cliff, Moses shielded from the all-consuming Glory of

the Lord by a divine hand, and somehow surviving the experience, but maybe not by much. We presume that Moses got what he was looking for, because he never asked again, and also because when anybody looked at Moses from then on, it seemed as though Moses's face was still glowing from the reflected wonder of it all.

Moses asked for and saw God, we read, and it makes us stop and wonder. What if we saw? What would we see? So much of the art Dana and I encountered in Italy was trying to answer that very question. What would it be like to capture a glimpse of the Glory of God? And what did Jesus look like? What was it like to look into those eyes, hear that voice, see that face?

Which is what our Greek friends had in mind when they asked Philip if they, too, could see. But not just to look at, not just to judge the shape of his face, the colour of his hair, the look in his eye. You see, of the many Greek words for "see", John in writing his Gospel used, "*idein*". This is the same word Jesus used when he told Nicodemus, "You must be reborn from above, to see – to *idein* - the Kingdom of God." *Idein* means much more than just "see", like we see these windows on our walls. It means also to experience, to understand. Just like the Hebrew word used in the Exodus story about Moses, who asked to see, to "*ra'ah*" the Glory of God – another word which means much more than just looking. Both *ra'ah* and *idein* mean experiencing, encountering, knowing. We often use our word "see" the same way. For instance, when somebody is explaining something to us, and we suddenly catch on, we say, "Ah, I see it now!" If we want to make sure somebody has grasped what we have said, we ask them "Do you see what I'm saying?" Across many languages, "To see" has come to mean "to understand."

So then, one way we are able to "see" Jesus is to understand Jesus. And to understand him, we must listen to what he has to say. We are very lucky, that others have heard, and have written down the things he has said, that we too might "see what he is saying." What is it Jesus says? What does Jesus have to say to us?

For most of us, it is a surprise when we hear what Jesus really has to say, rather than what we might think he says. He does not say, as some seem to think, "I'm here to make your life miserable": rather, he says "I have come that you might have life, and have it more abundantly." He does not come to imprison us; rather he says "I have come that you might know the truth, and the truth shall set you free." He asks us to follow him, that "our joy may be full". He tells us that we need only ask, and our sins are forgiven; that we only believe, and we have eternal life. To hear Jesus is to

hear the Good News, that God loves us, and that he has made a way, through his Son, for us to love him back. To hear Jesus, and with God's help to understand what he says to us, *is to see him*, for through hearing and understanding and believing the words of Jesus, we are brought from the darkness into the light of God's love.

Secondly, to see is to experience. And we can experience Jesus in several ways.

First of all, we can experience him through the stories in the Scriptures. We can hear the first-hand testimony of those who were close to him, who followed him through those dusty streets of ancient Israel. We can look in on his birth, witness the miracles he shared, see the reaction of the crowd. We can rejoice with the blind and the disabled whom he healed, marvel with the five thousand he fed, feel release with those who finally felt the grace of God's forgiveness. We can witness the trial before Pilate, listen to the taunts of the jeering, bloodthirsty crowd, hear his words as he hung on the cross, dying on our behalf; "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." We can walk with Mary to the tomb, only to find it empty, and to see him alive again, risen from the dead. We can stand with that great crowd, the last to see him on this earth, and watch as he ascends to heaven.

To read the Scriptures is to experience Jesus; to know his life, his friends, his country, his compassion. It is to see him as he was, to know who he is, and thus to know what he can be, to us, and for us, today. To engage in the study of Scripture, through regular daily reading or through Bible study, is to lean in for a closer look, for a deeper vision, for an experience which can change the very way we think; to see Jesus can change the very way we live.

For another way to see him, to best experience Jesus, is to go one step beyond merely reading, hearing and knowing about him. It is to take what he has promised as our own; to acknowledge him as our Lord and Saviour. It is to take the same step the disciples took, so long ago; to follow him who calls us.

To accept, as he enables us, the gift of salvation; to ask, and to be forgiven. To stop running after those foolish, fleeting things we thought important, and instead to live a life that matters, a life lived as it is meant to be, as we are made to live. This is to see Jesus: to see with new eyes the one who gives us sight, who leads us from the darkness of our lives to the light of life in him.

To see Jesus; to understand him, to experience him, to live for him. When he helps us to do this, there is even better news; we shall truly see him, with our own eyes. The first letter of John assures us: *“We know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he really is.”* Our fear of death is swallowed up in the victory we have in Christ, which is eternal life with Him.

The astonishing thing is that when we see Jesus, when we experience God, we, like Moses, come away from it all with a reflected glow of our own. When we experience the new life which God offers to us, and with it reach out to our world, then others see God, others catch a glimpse of Jesus, through us. As Paul reminded the church at Thessalonica (1 Thessalonians 1:7-8)

Do you know that all over, believers look up to you? The word has gotten around. Your lives are echoing the Master’s Word, not only in the provinces but all over the place. The news of your faith in God is out. We don’t even have to say anything anymore - you’re the message!

When we see Jesus, when we experience God, we become the mirror, we become the message, our lives become the canvas upon which is painted the face of the Master.

All of us have seen many things in our lives; majestic mountains, crashing waves, breathtaking sunsets, a sky full of countless stars; all of these things give us a sense of wonder and awe. But to see Jesus; that is to be given new life. To see Jesus is to be given new hope. To see Jesus is to see our Creator, our Redeemer, our God.

Have you seen Jesus? I pray that as this new church year progresses, we shall all open our eyes, that we may see the Son of God, and look upon our hope. Thanks be to God, who has given sight to we who were blind, that we might see the light of his mercy. Amen.

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