

Palm Sunday April 1, 2012
The National Presbyterian Church

Never Seen Jesus?

John 12:12-26; 2 Corinthians 4:5-12

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I do not know what parades you have to in your life. I'm sure you've been to far more parades than I've been to. I've never been to the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. Or the Rose Bowl Parade. Or the Disney Parade in the Magic Kingdom (my children who are now in their late 20s and early 30s accuse me of not being a good dad because I never took them to Disney World when they were young! I tell them that I'm waiting for them to take me there when they have children. But that's another story). Haven't been to Disney. Haven't been to the St. Patrick's Day Parade. Or the Mardi Gras Parade in New Orleans. Though . . . I have been, on numerous occasions, to a parade in Chicago. I believe it's called the Von Steuben Day Parade. In Chicago. Thought, I have to admit, I've never been there in person; I've only been there in the movies! In fact, I've only been there in one movie that I've seen many times, that some of you know well, going back a while, to 1985. One of my favorite movies: *Ferris Buehler's Day Off!*

Now, I don't know how many of you have seen *Ferris Buehler's Day Off*, but the movie is about a high school student called Ferris who does what every high school student should not do – he takes a day off school with two good friends. He takes his best friend's father's prized sports car, heads to downtown Chicago, does all kinds of different things, and ends up at a parade (the Von Steuben day parade!). And not just at the parade, but in it, on a float, singing "Danke Schoen" and "Twist And Shout" while his friends, Cameron and Sloane, who have lost him recognize his voice and look on in amazement as he performs!

For me, and I think for many, this is a scene of unrivaled joy and laughter. The moment is absolutely carefree. Absolutely carefree – a good and glorious festive day with no responsibilities and cares in the world. In fact, it feels good just to think and speak about it! And my guess is that those who gathered on the Mount of Olives outside Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday with Jesus, as he was about to enter the city of Jerusalem – many in the crowd that day would have felt exactly the same: carefree, as if a huge burden had lifted off their shoulders. They were there 'in the moment,' and there was nothing but joy – sheer unadulterated joy.

You can almost feel it as you read the gospel accounts (John 12:9-15). It's a warm day. It's a bright day. The city of Jerusalem is glowing, glittering across the Kidron Valley on the other side of the Mount of Olives. There are smiles, there are noises, there are children, there are adults, there are shouts, there are waving palm branches, there are shouts of 'hosanna' (God save us!), and there is Jesus and there is the donkey, and innumerable people. It's just a sheer festival day. And it's wonderful, amazing. Thousands of people ... all there for different reasons.

Some of those surrounding Jesus, for example, were there because they really had faith; faith in Jesus. They really believed that this man at the center of attention (like Ferris on the float!), for whom the whole parade seems to exist, was their king. And not any old king, but the 'Messiah' king who had been promised in the scriptures years before.

- The promise went all the way back all the way back to the great prophet Moses (1300BC?) that there would be one who would come who would be a leader of God's people like Moses.
- Or going all the way back to King David, Israel's greatest king, one thousand years before Jesus there will be another king like David: a promise was made that the Messiah king would come who would be just like King David.

And here, some believed, he was! Right there in front of them. They were there because they believed. And the presence of the donkey was proof! According to the prophet Zechariah (9:9), this was the beast of burden on whom the king, the Messiah (that is, 'anointed') king, would come when he came. And it was all right, it was all good, it was in a sense absolutely perfect. Some were there because they believed that he was the King.

Others were there just, well, because they were curious. Like any parade, people would have been asking, "What's going on here?" Maybe they'd heard about what Jesus had done. Indeed John's gospel tells us that there were people there because they had seen and heard how Jesus had raised a man called Lazarus from the dead in nearby Bethany (12:9). Some had been there, and had seen it, and others had heard about it. They wanted to know what Jesus would do next. So they were curious about this figure, this powerful figure who was entering their city at this time.

And some were, of course, not because of Jesus at all, but because they were faithful Jews and they were there because it was Passover time. Passover was the great festival of the Jews, the greatest festival, the festival which reminded them of their redemption from slavery in Egypt and the beginning of that journey all the way to the Promised Land. God was a God who could deliver and guide them, especially now when they were in bondage to the power of Rome and at the mercy of the wealthy religious leaders in Jerusalem. Their God

was a God who could deliver them, and this festival was a festival that reminded them of the power of God in this way.

And so Jerusalem was filled with people at this particular time. In fact some historians (especially Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*) estimate that while the normal population of Jerusalem was around 50,000 people, at Passover time the population would swell to around 170,000 people – over three times the normal population coming in from all over the world. Faithful Jewish people from all over the world were in the city, and not only Jews were there but Gentiles, converts to Judaism there as well. And among those converts, those ‘proselytes’ as we call them, were the Greeks whom John mentions in his gospel. In John 12:20 we read this: *now among those who went up to worship at the festival the God of Israel at Passover time were some Greeks.*

It’s a simple statement. There they were, in the middle of the crowd, and they were looking for something. No doubt they originally came to Jerusalem because they were faithful Jewish converts. But they saw the parade and like many people wondered what was going on so they became among the curious to find out who was at the center of this parade (who was on the float in the middle!), and realizing it was this man Jesus they wanted to come up close to him and meet him directly. So they found one of his followers, a man by the name of Phillip (Phillip is a Greek name, so maybe they felt a kinship – maybe he spoke Greek to them), and they said “Sir, we would see Jesus.” . . . Sir, we would see Jesus . . . And Phillip responded by finding his friend Andrew, and together Phillip and Andrew went and found Jesus and told Jesus about this request: “Sir, we would see Jesus.”

Seems like a simple enough request, a straightforward request. There they are on the outside, the crowd is between them and Jesus and they want to come up close and personal and see him. But there’s nothing simple or straightforward about the way John tells his story about Jesus. In his gospel account you often find there’s the surface meaning and then there’s a deeper meaning. You have the literal meaning and then you have the spiritual meaning which is almost always just below the surface, not very far, but just a little bit below the surface. And that is surely the case in this instance as well. They wanted an appointment with Jesus: “Let’s come close, we want to meet this man. If he is of any significance we want to meet him.” But the deeper meaning is there as well. And the deeper meaning has to do not with just the sight of the eyes but with perception of the heart. Not just the sight of the eyes but the perception of the heart as well.

Some of you were here a few weeks ago when we looked at the 9th Chapter of John’s gospel, at a story in which Jesus heals a man who is born blind. Well, the same issue is there in that chapter as we find present here. In Chapter 9, Jesus heals the man. He gives him sight. But it’s very clear at the end of that passage

that that man sees not with just his eyes but with the eyes and the heart of faith. The same kind of issue is going on here in Chapter 12. As these Greeks come up and say, "Sir we would see Jesus," Jesus wants to give them far more than they are initially asking for. A specific kind of sight Like the sight of a sculptor who can see something within what appears to most people to be just a block of stone.

I once heard a story about a sculptor who happened to be in a hotel in the highlands of Scotland. This is over 100 years ago and I believe the story is true. The sculptor's name was Sir Edwin Landseer. He was in this hotel bar when some fishermen came in. They'd been fishing all day and they were telling some fish stories. And you know how they go, demonstrating the size of their fish with their arms outspread, getting wider and wider until in their exuberance one of them knocked over a glass filled with whisky or beer – a drink that made a stain on a whitewashed wall. The conversation quickly came to an end and as the barman came over they were wondering what they could do with this stain, this nasty ugly stain on the whitewashed wall. Before anyone could act, a man walked up and pulled out a crayon or piece of charcoal out of his pocket and began to draw around this stain until all of a sudden in front of them, instead of there being a stain, there appeared a stag – a portrait, marvelous, beautiful out of the ugliness; something no one else could have imagined. Whether or not they knew who he was at the time they certainly found out quickly, and the owner of this hotel suddenly had a prized possession created by a person who was at that time Britain's premier artist and sculptor of animals. His most famous painting, of a highland stag, is called "The Monarch of the Glen," and his most famous sculptures are seen to this day by almost every tourist in London: the lions in Trafalgar Square, symbolic of British identity.

But there he was: in that initial moment what they saw was one thing, and what he saw was another. And it's this kind of sight that Jesus wanted to share with those Greeks who came to him, perhaps at first with their superficial question but needing to see far more than at first they were looking for: "Sir, we would see Jesus!" And Jesus turns to them to open their eyes and the eyes of their hearts.

He says to them first (12:23) "*the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.*" The "Son of Man" may mean a divine figure but it also may be just what we call a 'circumlocution' – a way for Jesus to refer to himself. In any event, Jesus was saying that the hour had come for him to be 'glorified'. And 'glorified' is a word which means 'revealed': 'seen in all his splendor,' 'seen for who I really am.' The hour has come for me to share the whole story, to open many eyes so that people will see me as I really am.

And then Jesus follows this statement, by actually revealing the heart of who he is and what he came to do ('revealing his glory') by saying something that was in sharp contrast with the festivities of the day... everybody was joyful, everybody

was shouting God's praise, everybody was hopeful, and out of the blue Jesus bursts the bubble by speaking of death (12:24): "*unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone. But if it dies it bears much fruit.*" Do you sense this jarring disconnect? Death! In the midst of this parade which is filled with life Jesus changes the subject and speaks about death! As if Jesus deliberately says something shocking (like Ferris singing "Danke Schoen!") to truly get their attention.

Try reading through all the gospels and you'll find Jesus does this consistently in all the gospels telling a nice story and then he adds this jarring end to it to get people's attention. This is a consistent picture of Jesus throughout all the gospels.

Well, Jesus makes the statement and captures the moment as if to say:

"Listen, nobody more than me wants you to be joyful, as in this Palm Sunday procession. Remember, I'm the one who when the party was about to die turned the water into wine? I want you to be filled with joy and there are some of us here today who need that joy more than anything else. I want this for you.

But that's only half the story. I want you to see something else about you and your life as you follow me. And I want you to see something about me: I want you to see that my coming as your king is only part of the story. My coming as your teacher is only part of the story. My coming as your healer is only part of the story.

I want you to see me not only in the glorious, the seemingly glorious, but as I descend from this moment not just into Jerusalem but all the way to my death on the cross. I want you to follow me and observe me as this procession turns into another procession in which I take up my cross – a procession that ends in death. Because it is there, it is there above everywhere else, it is there in the cross, that you will see how much I love you, as if you were the only person on the face of the earth. How much I love you! With a love that will never ever let you go.

And it is there, at the cross, that you will also discover the path that I call you to follow: to follow me not only in the good times, not only in the easy times, but in the tough times, the hard times as well. "Where I am there you must follow too." (12:26) Both where there are shouts of hosanna and where there are mournful cries. In either place. And if you follow me there, to both places, Jesus promises, "the Father will honor you" (12:26).

Let's read through John 12:23-26 in this light --- Jesus is speaking and he says:

"The hour has come for the son of man to be glorified (that is, it's time for everybody to see what they have not seen yet).

Very truly I tell you unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies (the Greek actually has the definite article here: the grain of wheat, that is, Jesus himself must fall into the earth and die) it remains just a single

grain (it won't accomplish its purpose; as if Jesus were saying that without his death he would not accomplish his purpose!).

But if it dies it will bear much fruit (the effect of that death will spread to many people who will be blessed by that death).

Those who love their life (and Jesus here moves on to speak about us)

Those who love their life lose it (those who think it's their life and hold onto it as if it belongs to them).

Those who hate their life (and the use of the word 'hate' here is what we call 'Hebrew exaggeration', those who are willing to give it away) *those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.*

Whoever serves me must follow me (not only in the Palm Sunday parade but in every other parade I lead them into), *and where I am there my servant will be also.*

Whoever serves me, the Father (what a great promise) *will honor.*

That's what Jesus wanted those Greeks to see. And they, the Greeks, are symbolic of the whole wide world, of you and me: that's what he wants all of us to see: the length to which he would go, the destination of the parade-journey that he would follow, the depths to which he would descend, to show us his love; and not only his path, but the path that he has set before us too, which he has travelled first and on which he will continue to travel with us, that he calls all of us to take as his disciples.

Both of these paths – Christ's path and our path – the late Princeton University Chapel Dean, Ernest Gordon began to see when he was a prisoner of war in World War II on the Burma/Thailand border. In his book, *Through the Valley of the Kwai*,¹ Gordon tells of an incident that impacted the whole prison camp. The prisoners were building a railroad bridge across the River Kwai and through the incident, and others like it, began to see their lives and the impact of Christ's love and sacrifice in a way that they hadn't seen before:

"The day's work had ended. The tools were being counted as usual. As the party was about to be dismissed the guard shouted that a shovel was missing. He insisted that someone had sold it to sell to the local people. Striding up and down before the men the guard denounced them for their wickedness. Screaming, he demanded that the guilty one step forward. No one moved. "You're all going to die," he said, "you will all die!"

To show that he meant what he said he cocked his rifle, put it to his shoulder, looked down the sights ready to fire at the first man at the end of them. At that moment a solitary soldier stepped forward, stood stiffly to attention, and calmly said, "I did it." The guard unleashed all his whipped up hatred, seizing his rifle by the barrel he brought it down on the soldier until he sank limply to the ground and did not move.

The men of the work detail picked up their comrade's body, shouldered their tools, marched back to the camp. And here's the key sentence.

When the tools were counted again at the guard house no shovel was missing. [DR: The sacrifice of an innocent for the lives of another so that they might live.]”

Ernest Gordon goes on to say that that story and others like it were transitional, transformative in the lives of those prisoners. Everything had descended into deep darkness in their lives. They were hungry, desperately hungry. Their camp was riddled with disease. It was dog-eat-dog. It was every man for himself – one person against another even though they were technically on the same side. But when they heard these stories about what their comrades had done things began to change. He writes,

“death was still with us. No doubt about that. But we were slowly being freed from its destructive grip. We were seeing for ourselves the sharp contrast between the forces that made for life, that turned mere existence into living in its truest sense, and those that made for death.”

“We were seeing for ourselves.” And indeed from that moment many began to see Christ more clearly than they’d ever seen him before – the one who lives and died and rose again for them, and to follow him. And I know this to be true. One of my uncles was there at the time. He is actually mentioned in this book. It was a transformative moment in their lives. Seeing what others did they realized the connection with what Christ Jesus had done for us. His parade, his path, his journey, and theirs.

“Sir, sir, we would see Jesus!” That’s what those Greeks asked on that first Palm Sunday.

Is it what we ask as well? Is it a cry that comes from the depths of our heart? Not just a cry but a prayer to God?

“Sir, Lord, we would see Jesus” -- in a way that we haven’t seen him before. Maybe we’ve seen Him from childhood. But maybe today is the day in which we see him afresh, in a way which will lead to new spiritual growth and our eternal joy.

“Sir, Lord, we would see Jesus”

- maybe for some of us we’ve never experienced the joy of the parade with Jesus. He is the one who turned water into wine and maybe for us that’s what we need to see today – a joy in our faith and in our salvation that we have never known.
- Or maybe today we need to see the depths to which our Savior would go to show us that he loves us as if he loves no other – that he gave his life in exchange for our lives.
- Or maybe we need to see today that our discipleship has not always followed where Jesus has gone. Maybe we have joined Jesus in one part of his parade but not in another: he calls us to follow whether it’s in the Palm Sunday parade or in the crucifixion parade.

“Follow me,” trust me and I will lead you faithfully and the Father will honor you.

Let us bow before God in prayer. Let us pray.

Holy God, look down upon us, have mercy upon us as we have cried and grant us hearts that rise up in faith to you that we would join those disciples who believed you were king or were just curious or just happened to be there but find that we cannot leave you until we see you more clearly. To this end we pray through our Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.

1 Gordon, Ernest. *Through the Valley of the Kwai*. (Wipf & Stock Publishers), May 1, 1997.

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