*Two Truths & A Lie*

A Meditation on John 12: 20 – 33

Rev. Cathy C. Hoop Grace Presbyterian Church March 21, 2021

What phrase from this story caught your attention? That Greeks were attending the Jewish Passover festival? Did that surprise you? Or perhaps, when they said, “We want to see Jesus.” Did you identify with their longing? Or was it the part about “losing your life” in order to save it…that unsettling, almost terrifyingly difficult truth. Or maybe you were struck by the confusion of the crowd as they turned to each other saying: “Did you hear something?” “Was that thunder?” “It sounded like a voice!” “Maybe an angel??” As much as we might secretly love to hear the sound of God’s voice, the thought of God speaking to us today…is, well…anxiety producing at best.

“We want to see Jesus.” There’s a truth for you. They wanted to see Jesus. These Gentiles who had come to Jerusalem for the Passover. But why? What were they seeking? The healer? For themselves or someone they loved? Were they seeking the rabbi, the teacher, the mystic, the philosopher? Were they hoping to talk about things that matter? Deep truths about the world? Or were they simply curious? Did they just want to know what the fuss was all about? This Jesus was the man who had just called Lazarus back from death to life. He had a bit of a reputation. So they approach the disciple who also has a Greek name, Philip. Someone like them. And ask him if he will introduce them…to Jesus.[[1]](#endnote-1)

We want to see Jesus. It’s a simple statement, or, at least, it was then. It doesn’t seem so easy today. We aren’t even sure who it is we seek. The healer? Is that who I need? The teacher? Won’t he leave me with more questions than answers? The philosopher? The miracle worker? Are we, too, simply curious about this man who won’t let the world go? We want to see Jesus too, but we can’t tug on his disciples’ sleeve and ask him to make the introduction. *Or can we?* Shouldn’t we be able to do the very same thing? Shouldn’t we be able to walk up to any follower of Jesus and say, “I want to see Jesus.” And shouldn’t that very disciple be able to show us? Are you prepared for that? Am I? What would I do? Open the gospels and share the stories? Would that be enough? Would I say, “Meet me at the communion table!” and trust the meal in all of its simple splendor to be its own introduction? Or would I simply take this person by the hand, and say, “Let’s go look together.”

We want to see Jesus. Is that our truth? Do we really want to see Jesus? Knowing who he really is, knowing what he is truly saying about himself and those who walk in his way, do we want to see Jesus? Because if we do, we need to be ready to see the Jesus whose hands are dirty and wounded. The Jesus who confuses? That’s too mild. The Jesus who alienates family and friends. The Jesus who is both disruption and calm. The Jesus who wounds and heals. The Jesus who dies and yet lives. Do we want to see the Jesus who can’t abide injustice? Do we want to see the one who invites us to ask ourselves what it means to lose our lives? How many times have we seen Jesus and been completely unaware because it wasn’t on the church grounds?

Here’s another truth – they heard God’s voice. They might not have admitted that they heard God’s voice, but they did. Maybe the idea of hearing God’s voice is more appealing than the thought of seeing Jesus? It might be difficult to recognize Jesus in our world today, but we would know the sound of God’s voice, wouldn’t we? I wonder…this crowd had much less distance from the days of God’s speaking than we do, and they weren’t sure. It’s a stretch to believe that God’s voice would be indistinguishable from thunder. But maybe you have to *want* to hear God speak. In this crowd there was quite a mix – some who knew it was God and understood God’s words with complete clarity. “I will glorify my name!” For those who weren’t quite comfortable believing that God could be so near, they said the voice was an angel’s voice. And for those who were totally unprepared to hear or reluctant to hear or afraid to hear, the sound was the rumbling of thunder. “Never heard thunder like that before!” They said to one another, as the hair on the back of their necks began to tingle.

I believe it is true that, like those Greeks of long ago, we want to see Jesus. I believe we are also afraid of that very thing. Afraid that he comes with judgement rather than love, no matter how many times we hear forgiveness proclaimed. I believe it is true that we, like that unseeking crowd, have no idea how to respond when we hear God’s voice. Both wise and foolish will recognize the sound. Both wise and foolish will pretend it is something other than what it is. Both wise and foolish represent the truth of our reality. We long to know God and we fear knowing God, being known by God.

And I believe *that* fear is deeply tangled with the concept of judgement. Despite what we heard in the passage from Jeremiah 31:34 – “I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more,” we believe God has a long and expansive memory when it comes to our failures. And so we continue to hold on to the belief that Jesus had to die on a cross because of the times we lied or disrespected our parents or took God’s name in vain…we go down the whole list. We remember all the ways we refused to love God, refused to love people, and are convinced that God remembers, too. Of course God could remember, but God chooses to forget! God doesn’t hoard resentment or bitterness or judgement…but frees God’s self to the immense capacity of love.

We experience this truth in John’s interpretation of the crucifixion. In John’s gospel, writes theologian Charles Campbell, “Jesus’ crucifixion judges *‘the world’* and drives out the *‘ruler of the world.’*” This use of “kosmos,” Campbell explains is not the created world as God imagined it, but the “realm that exists in estrangement from God and is organized in opposition to God’s purposes.”[[2]](#endnote-2) Organized in opposition to God’s purposes? Pause there for a moment. Campbell refers to this organizing model as “the System,” and we recognize it in the consumerism that drives our culture and leaves us bankrupt and empty. We recognize it in “hierarchies of winners and losers…and the Spirit that drives such a System [creating] structures and institutions that perpetuate racism, sexism, and heterosexism.” [[3]](#endnote-3)

Campbell challenges us to consider what is at the very foundation of all of this brokenness: what is the underlying principle? Is it not “the myth of redemptive violence” as Walter Wink suggests? This myth is flourishing in our culture, and we saw it played out tragically this week, as one man took the lives of eight innocent people in the Atlanta area. The justification he offered was that their businesses contributed to his lustful addictions, made his sinning possible. He thus responded with redemptive violence. By taking out the cause and/or source of his sinfulness he believed he could save himself and others. Except that it doesn’t work that way and now he has destroyed eight lives, and wounded many others who are now burdened by grief and trauma. He believed in the lie of redemptive violence.

*I do not mean to oversimplify the situation, which is clearly extremely complex and involves the dehumanization, fetishization and objectification of Asian women. We must consider the social context in which his ideas were nurtured, including possible faith-based shaming and potentially unhealthy faith-based teachings on human sexuality.*

The young white man who, six years ago this June, murdered nine individuals at Mother Emmanuel AME Church perceived African Americans as the enemy. Even though they befriended him, welcomed him. We have witnessed far too many racially driven murders to remain silent. We must acknowledge this culture which we have created, and the church’s role in it. Until we untangle the myth that violence can be redemptive, we continue to condone violence.

If we look to our criminal justice system we can see how this myth continues to maim and destroy. Incarceration’s only purpose has become to inflict suffering upon both the incarcerated and their families. Capital punishment is the ultimate example of our culture’s embracing of the myth of redemptive violence. Murdering a murderer brings no one back from the dead, nor has the threat of capital punishment ever been proven to reduce crime.

Redemptive violence. Its gentler name is retributive justice. But let’s not kids ourselves. **As long as we desire the harming of another, our hands are holding up the cross rather than participating with the angels in rolling back the stone.**

God speaks to us. Appears to us. Places her hands over ours and tries to help us untangle all the threads with which we have tied the myth of redemptive violence to Jesus’ cross. The crucifixion is not the testimony to redemptive violence; it stands as condemnation of this myth. Redemptive violence is no redemption at all, but rather the perpetuation of violence. On and on the cycle continues, violence, perpetuating more violence, death upon death. It is an endless cycle which Jesus came to disrupt by first uncovering it and then overcoming it.

Two truths and a lie. It’s not just a youth group game.

Can we do it? Can we claim the truths that we do want to see Jesus, that we do want to hear God’s voice? And in doing so can we find the strength to name the lie – the myth that violence is the way of God?

God of life, who forgets all our wrongs, who remembers our sins no more, and places us on the path to life, may your promises flourish in us, that we may forget how to desire the harming of the other. Amen and amen.

1. Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year B. Green, Joel; Long, Thomas; Powery, Luke; Rigby, Cynthia; Sharp, Carolyn, eds. (Westminster John Knox Publishing, 2020), Chen, Diane, p. 103 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Feasting on the Word, Year B. Bartlett, David and Taylor, Barbara Brown, eds (Westminster John Knox Publishing: Louisville, KY, 2008), Campbell, Charles, p. 141. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid., p. 143

   Other sources consulted:

   [What an Expert on Evangelicals and Sex Says About the Atlanta Shooter's Claim He Had a Sex Addiction (msn.com)](https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/us/what-an-expert-on-evangelicals-and-sex-says-about-the-atlanta-shooters-claim-he-had-a-sex-addiction/ar-BB1eN9Id?ocid=uxbndlbing)

   First Reading Podcast

   Working Preacher.org [↑](#endnote-ref-3)