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First Presbyterian Church
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Lent 5, Year B
John 12:20-33

“Seeing Jesus”

I must admit that I often find the gospel of John a little out there, and the reason why is because of esoteric, confusing readings like the one we just heard. When I first read today’s reading, I thought “you’ve got to be kidding me.” Grains of wheat, hating one’s life, voices from heaven, drawing people to himself-what in the world is Jesus talking about today?

When our story opens, it’s Passover which means Jerusalem is hustling and bustling with activity. At this point in John’s Gospel, Jesus has already raised Lazarus from the dead, made his entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, and been anointed with oil – which is a precursor to his death. The disciples are likely to know by this point that something very unexpected awaits Jesus at the end of it all.

Observant Jews from all over the city have come to celebrate Passover, and among the observant Jews are a few Greeks who are eager to meet Jesus. We can assume they’ve heard of his miracles and want to speak with him. “Sir, we wish to see Jesus,” they tell Phillip. So Phillip summons Andrew and together they tell Jesus that there are some Greeks at the door who want to speak with him.

But instead of going to speak with them, Jesus starts talking to the disciples about his death. It’s a subject he keeps coming back to even though his disciples don’t want to discuss it any more than any one of us wants to talk about death.

But Jesus keeps insisting on talking about his death. Why?

Christianity has sometimes been asked that same question. Why do we like to talk about Jesus’ death? We’re the only world religion that holds up an

instrument of death as its symbol. Other world religions have stars, moons, and even flowers as their major symbol. But ours is an ancient form of execution. Think about that.

The Apostle's Creed leaps from Jesus' birth to his death in one fell swoop, paying no attention to his life. Think about that.

I Believe in God the Father Almighty,

Maker of heaven and earth; and in Jesus Christ, His Only Son, our Lord,
Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered
under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried.

He descended into hell; the third day He rose again from the dead.

No mention of his life and ministry, but more than 1 detail about his death.

Yet there's still a reluctance to talk about the cross and what it means. The noted preacher William Willimon told a story about an Episcopal priest friend of his who put three crosses draped in black on the front lawn of the church he served. The priest received dozens of phone calls complaining that the crosses made the neighborhood look bad.

In recent years, some churches have done away with the cross altogether. I guess it offends people. It's even been rumored that one notable church has instructed its musicians not to play anything in a minor key so people won't get too depressed. I think this is the same church whose architect said, "We do not want any crosses on the church, either outside or inside. None. We don't want anybody to think failure and weakness. Why would we want a symbol of a man slumped dead on a cross after his few friends have gotten out of Dodge and all that were left were a few women crying? You talk about weakness. What does that do?" (Craddock)

A college student was once given the assignment to write about an object, any object. The title of the paper was "The Cross I Wore." The young man

describes the small, simple pewter cross he used to wear on a string around his neck. He liked his cross. And then he learned about crucifixion; learned that it was “a form of torture for criminals, foreigners, and slaves—as a demonstration of what would happen to anyone who defied Rome’s powerful empire.” He goes into considerable graphic detail about crucifixion, how it was carried out, how the victim died. He learned about the scorn and ridicule and humiliation that were a part of it. Suddenly, his simple little pewter cross became heavier. He wrote,

“It had become a meaningless part of my everyday uniform: shirt, pants, shoes, and cross. However, I continued to live my comfortable middle-class American life with no regard for what hung from my neck. Eventually the small piece of jewelry became heavier. The harder I tried to forget about what it stood for the heavier my cross became. . . . Finally, I couldn’t take it any more. I pulled off the black string, with the small cross, and tossed it into my bag.”

He replaced the heavy cross with a string of beads that were less powerful, not as heavy, and not so cumbersome.

But try as we might, there’s no such thing as a cross-less Christianity. So why the cross?

Some people say the cross was necessary so we could be saved from our sins. This is a well-known belief that many of you probably learned in Sunday School, and heard from many preachers I’m guessing. “Jesus paid it all”, some say. He died for my sins. He shed his blood for me. The belief here is that we are sinners of the worst kind, and the only way we can be forgiven is for Jesus to die. The idea is that Jesus’ death somehow sets things right between us and God because Jesus paid the price for our sinfulness. Some people now question this theory because they don’t understand why God would want or allow to Jesus to suffer so much. But other people ache for an understanding of Jesus’ death that offers forgiveness radical enough to forgive what may seem unforgivable.

Some people say the cross is a symbol of Roman imperial terrorism. Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan argue that Jesus’ passion for the

Kingdom of God put him in direct conflict with the Roman Empire, and this led to his death, because Jesus wasn't going to compromise his beliefs just to get along with the powers that be. This understanding of Jesus' death provides inspiration for people who are oppressed or who stand against oppression to do so with courage. Think of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and the sermons he preached, and you'll understand this view of Jesus' death.

And finally, some people that the cross is a symbol of love. That in the cross we see the very heart of God who in this final moment let's go of everything, even life itself, so that we may live. At the cross, Jesus gathers the whole world and reveals the kind of God whose love can never be questioned, and is so strong that not even death can separate us from those we love.

The theologian Douglass John Hall wrote "The theology of the cross is . . . a statement about God, and what it says about God is not that God thinks humankind so wretched that it deserves death and hell, but that God thinks humankind and the whole creation so good, so beautiful, so precious in its intention and potentiality, that its actualization, its fulfillment, its redemption is worth dying for." (Douglas John Hall. *The Cross in Context: Jesus and the Suffering World*)

Why the cross? Theories abound; I've given you 3; and one may resonate more than the other. You may agree with bits and pieces of all three. Chances are good that you will probably find that throughout your life, some theories resonate more than others depending on what is happening in your life.

Why the cross? I don't know. All I can tell you is what I believe now, as a pastor, but more importantly as a wife and a mother.

What I do believe is that somehow, God climbed up on that cross him or herself because God loves us a whole lot. And when you love someone as much as I believe God loves us, that's just what you do. As a parent, I would do anything to save my children; not because I want to die, but because I want them to live. I would do that, because I love my children.

And I want them to experience life in its fullest; a life where hope and love are boundless, and where God's compassion knows no boundaries.

And this, I believe is what we see on the cross, because Jesus' death is not the end of the story. The resurrection is the end of the story.

There is an old Hasidic tale that goes like this:

"A disciple asks the rabbi, 'Why does the Torah tell us to "place these words upon our hearts"? Why does it not tell us to place these holy words in our hearts?' The rabbi answers, 'It is because as we are, our hearts are closed, and we cannot place the holy words in our hearts. So we place them on top of our hearts. And there they stay, until, one day, the heart breaks and the words fall in.'"

The cross can be seen as "God's heart broken for the sake of humankind, broken open into a love that Christ's followers are called to emulate (practice)." (Weavings Magazine)

Why the cross? I believe the cross shows us God's way in the world. The cross shows us how much God loves us and how much God cares for us. And so for me it follows that we're called to be a reflection of that love, care and concern in the world.

That's what I believe, but what do you believe? What is the meaning of the cross for you?

Lent ends with the crucifixion on Good Friday, the day Jesus gives up his life – the day Jesus dies. It's worth asking in these remaining days of Lent, "What is a life worth? What is worth dying for? What is worth living for?"

"When a friend comes to you and says, "What is the cross that you're bearing?" What would your answer be?

Amen.