

“We Want to See Jesus”
A Sermon for the Second Sunday after the Epiphany
and the Weekend of the Commemoration of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
Sunday, January 16th, 2011
Isaiah 49:1-7; 1 Corinthians 1:1-9; and John 1:29-42

O God, let your light so shine in our lives that others may see your good works in us and give glory to you as your kingdom comes and your will is done on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.

I am told that on the pastor's side of many pulpits there is often an inscription placed in such a way that the preacher will see it just before beginning the sermon. Inscribed in these pulpits is a verse from the Gospel of John, chapter 20, where some Greeks come to Philip at the Passover and say to him, “Sir, we want to see Jesus.”

The message is clear to the preacher who dares to step into the pulpit: “We want to see Jesus. We did not come here to see you. We’re not interested in your personal opinions. We don’t need to hear a recitation of your views on current events. We didn’t come here to listen to your interpretation of the political world. If we had wanted that, we could have stayed home for *Meet the Press*, *Face the Nation*, *This Week*, *Chris Matthews*, *Fox News Sunday* or a host of other Sunday morning talk shows. And honestly, Pastor, we’re really not so interested in your private life (not that a pastor has one), as it may seem, unless, of course, you have something really scurrilous and scandalous to tell us this morning. Finally, we don’t need to hear what you think of the Bears, the Bulls, the Black Hawks, the Fire and the Sox. . . We just want to see Jesus.” (Oh, did I miss somebody? Well, all right, then, maybe I will tell you just what I think of them sometime.)

Today we need to see Jesus. The Greeks’ request of Philip is a reminder that when all is said and done, we come to church *to find our Lord*, or better said, *to be found by our Lord*, especially in the turmoil of our personal and public sorrow and confusion, again and especially during the days of this past week. I have often thought that the gospel of Jesus’ cross and resurrection is most effectively preached and heard at funerals when people are prepared to listen.

And Jesus turns, sees us, and says to us, “What are you looking for?”

Well, we don’t quite know what to say because we don’t know exactly what we’re looking for, and so, we sort of mumble under our breath, “Rabbi, we’d like to know where you’re staying.” And he invites us to “come and see.” Not just the house he’s living in, not just those among whom he is living, not just his neighborhood, but we’d like to know where Jesus is *remaining*, where he is *dwelling*, where he is *abiding*. “Rabbi, we’d like to know where you’re living.” We need to know this. Especially today, we need to know that “because he lives, we too shall live.”

Remember, at Christmas, just past, “The Word became flesh and dwelt (tented, encamped) among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.” You may know that the word “glory” in the Gospel of John always points us toward the cross. When those Greeks arrive at the Passover in John, Jesus says to Philip and the others, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified,” referring to his crucifixion.

In his memoir of Auschwitz entitled, *Night*, holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel tells how he lost his childish faith in the brutal nightmare of a Nazi death camp. In a gripping scene, as the inmates are forced to watch an execution, one of the prisoners asks: “Where is God in this?” Wiesel recalls that another answers:

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“There. . . there is God, hanging on the gallows.” As theologians of the cross have insisted throughout the ages, “Here is the God of the Jewish and Christian scriptures, the real God who is with us in the thick of tragedy, even in the hour of deepest darkness,” that we may see his light in this Epiphany season, and be raised anew, like the apostles, prophets, martyrs and saints of every age, for the great tasks of His Kingdom (as cited by Paul R. Hinlicky in *Preaching God’s Word according to Luther’s Doctrine in America Today* in a sermon following the Virginia Tech massacre).

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Jesus’ gentle invitation for us to “come and see” where he is abiding (living, remaining) stands in such stark opposition to the politically charged rhetoric of our day that persistently pierces us even in the grip of public tragedy and national heartache.

“But listen to me,” Isaiah cries out to his people. And the strength of Isaiah’s convictions is revealed when he says “my mouth is like a sharp sword” which will slash through all the other blather that deafens your ears. The prophet’s willingness to pursue his mission, even in the face of deaf ears and blind eyes, is demonstrated when he says that God made him like a “polished arrow” that will penetrate the heart like no other. “And he said to me, ‘You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified.’”

“Come and see.”

“Listen to me.”

Speculation runs rampant about why Jared Loughner allegedly “planned ahead” and ultimately carried out a shooting at a suburban Safeway supermarket.

And Jesus turns and asks, “What are you looking for?”

Maybe we are not first of all “looking for” what caused the tragedy in Tucson, or the Virginia Tech massacre, or the Columbine shootings, or the Oklahoma City bombing or the countless other horrific outbursts of unspeakable evil in our land. Maybe we are not first of all “looking for” who’s to blame for such senseless suffering from which we may never completely heal as a nation or draw meaning as human beings. Maybe what we are “looking for” is some

meaning in the madness, some glimmer of light in the thick cloud of darkness, some Easter hope amid this Good Friday world.

I think one of the most remarkable scenes in the Bible is when Job’s friends first come to see this man “who was blameless and upright. . . who feared God and turned away from evil,” soon after he experiences devastating loss and illness. Do you remember what happens? His friends “sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, *and no one spoke a word to him*, for they saw that his suffering was great.”

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“. . . Like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is *silent*, so he opened not his mouth,” so writes the prophet Isaiah of the Suffering Servant.

Words cannot address some circumstances of life. Only the poets, not the politicians, only the poets can sometimes come close to saying anything meaningful. Sometimes there is no solution for this present aching but to endure it in faith, to share it with each other in love, to learn from it in hope that it will never happen again, and in time by the grace of God to heal.

Job’s friends were doing just fine until they had to open their mouths and try to explain the reasons for his suffering, until they could no longer resist laying the blame on somebody, namely Job himself, making his suffering all the more unbearable.

Rather than rushing to blame someone all the time, maybe we need to sit on the ground day and night in sackcloth, ashes and lamentation over the consequences of our collective and individual human sinfulness and suffering that has infected each and every heart. There is nothing more dangerous than an adult who has never learned to see behind or beyond his own desires, nothing more dangerous than an adult who has never learned to confess his sin and selfishness. We all must confess the places where violence creeps into our own lives, into our own relationships with our spouses and children and families and those with whom we work and share the roads.

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We all possess what the prophet Isaiah calls mouths as sharp as swords that slash and wound the souls of others. And as violence once again strangles our nation's soul, the words of the Prince of Peace remind us to put away the sword, "for all who take the sword will perish by the sword."

We can use our mouths to inspire hope, as did Martin Luther King, Jr. Or we can use our mouths to poison others' lives with fear. And, for too long now, people of faith have simply propagated the cancerous violence of our society's language and life. Just listen to the way we carelessly and harmfully use our mouths, even in the church.

Athletic opponents are told to go out there and "kill" each other. Political opponents are "targeted." We draw the lines between who's in our group and who's in the other group; who's with us and who's against us. We seem incapable of disagreeing with each other without demonizing the other.

In late March of 1967, about a year before his assassination, during the sweltering heat of the Civil Rights Movement, and with the Vietnam War raging, Dr. King concluded a lesser known speech in New York City by stating, "We must work unceasingly to uplift this nation that we love to a higher destiny, to a higher plateau of compassion, to a more noble expression of humanness."

There is a war being waged in this land worse than any on foreign soil. It is not a war of politics or ideologies or even religions but the age-old battle for the human soul. "For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood," as Ephesians says so starkly, "but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places."

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Yes, Dr. King, "we must [continue] to work unceasingly to uplift this nation that we love to a higher destiny, to a higher plateau of compassion, to a more noble expression of humanness."

This is a candle that we in the church keep lit.

"Behold, the Lamb of God." Not the lion of Judah, not the great eagle of Rome, but the Lamb of God.

". . . Like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is *silent*, so he opened not his mouth."

"Come and see."

When was the last time you invited someone to "come and see" where Jesus the Christ lives through the Word and the Sacraments of the Church?

Come and see the sort of love that St. Paul has for that very troubled group of believers in Corinth where there are sectarian divisions (cliques, groups, factions, as we call them), bragging about incest ("and of a sort that does not occur even among pagans!" he exclaims), lawsuits between fellow Christians, eating

food sacrificed to idols, disarray in worship services, preachers as predatory super-apostles. To these people, many of whom despised Paul as pathetic and weak in public appearance and rhetoric, the apostle wishes “grace and peace.” He writes that he hopes they will be “enriched in every way.” He wishes them only good.

Following the example of Jesus, we are told in the Book of Acts that the first Christians broke down social barriers. They disregarded religious taboos that judged people as clean or unclean, worthy or unworthy, honorable or dishonorable. “Truly I understand that God shows no partiality,” Peter and Paul preached to us last Sunday.

And a century after the apostles, the apologist Justin Martyr writes of the appeal of the Christian community: “Those who once delighted in fornication now embrace chastity alone. . . we who once took most pleasure in accumulating wealth and property now share with everyone in need; we who hated and killed one another and would not associate with men of different tribes because of their different customs now, since the coming of Christ, live familiarly with them and pray for our enemies.”

And another church father by the name of Tertullian concluded that “Our care for the derelict and our active love have become our distinctive sign before the enemy. . . See, they say, how they love one another and how ready they are to die for each other.”

Dream. Dream with Dr. King and the saints throughout the ages of what our world might be like, what our nation would be like, what our church would be like, if others could say about us, “See. . . how they love one another and how ready they are to die for each other.”

“Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”

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—Dennis J. Lauritsen
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