“Scattered Seed”

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

The Greeks in Jerusalem ask the same as all of us gathered here today. We want to see Jesus. True, whether to dispel our doubt or to give us the opportunity to praise him, on this fifth Sunday of Lent, we want to see Jesus, and so we listen to the words of scripture to teach us something of how to do that, and we may not like what we hear. Like the disciples, there are ways in which we simply are not prepared for Jesus’ last words to us. This passage begins what are Jesus’ final words to those who followed him during his ministry, and what the crowd hears is nor the story of immediate power, not the story of present light and goodness that they had imagined. Maybe our reading of the Gospel text challenges us in similar ways, because we want no mention of the “Prince of this world to enter into our movement toward Easter. We don’t want to hear about judgment, or service or death, because those are not easy topics. Maybe we also don’t want to hear the psalm from David, acknowledging that there is such a thing as sin. Sin isn’t a word we want to sully our celebrations, but David knows that without such acknowledgment, there is no cleansing. Jesus knows that without his death, there can be no life.

So, you want to see Jesus? Know that the Jesus we look for *will* be found here, whether we want to find him in the darkness or not. And so, happy spring! Maybe I should first say Happy St. Patrick’s Day, as we look for spring in just two days. As much as I want very much for March 19th to marshal in warm soil with buds bursting through, the reality of climate change makes wishing for an early spring feel like something of a curse as well as a blessing. With incredible snow landing on Colorado this week, even while it warms up here on the coast, we know better than to count on a continuation of the early harbingers like snowdrops and rushing creeks. We know better than to fast forward to colorful blossoms and lasting, balmy temperatures. We still may move through a period of chilly expectation laced with lingering feelings of frustration and twinges of backache more reminiscent of a winter that will not leave. There is no hurrying ripening. So, you want to see Jesus? Know that the Jesus we look for will be found in his suffering through the sharp contrasts of Holy Week that would end with his death if the devil had his way. There is no hurrying ripening, and the grace we know in our lives today is revealed through the whole of Jesus’ human journey, which like ours ends in an earthly death, though a death God wishes for no one.

“Father, glorify your name.” It was just three chapters ago in the telling of Jesus’ life from the Gospel of John, that we learn of another moment in which God’s glory is revealed. “As he went along, Jesus saw a man blind from birth. **2**His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”

**3**“Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” said Jesus, “but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him. **4**As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work.**5**While I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” Jesus goes on to heal the man’s blindness as he applies mud to his sightless eyes. So, you want to see Jesus? Look at what is revealed in the light Jesus shines.

Paired with our Gospel lesson this morning is a psalm of David. It is spoken when the prophet Nathan came to him after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba. We hear a lot about David’s faithfulness, about David’s vanquishing of the Philistine, Goliath. We know David who was raised up from shepherd boy to king. For some, that may be all we know, and we never hear of David who in his covetousness had Bathsheba’s husband Uriah killed in battle. David then takes Bathsheba as his wife, who bears him a son. David’s prayers for forgiveness make a lot more sense when we know the depth of his guilt. David’s faith in God’s willingness and ability to bring him to righteousness is also more significant when we know what he asks as he prays, “**7**Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.”

We may feel as though it is too bad to have David’s faith revealed on the back side of sin, but I believe it also is as realistic a model for our own redemption as we can understand. No one of us is perfect, though we may believe the depth of our sin varies. Even so, God desires that we keep trying to become the best persons we can be; that we love others and in so doing love God. By no means is our sin necessary for God’s glory, but God can turn even the worst of situations into the opportunity for new life.

Thomas Long is a professor at Chandler School of Theology, and is one of the foremost Christian preachers of our day. He writes, “It was not pain and violence that God desired. It was human life as God created it to be, summoned it to be. The pain and the violence were already out there on the path; they had been there since the blood of Abel soaked the earth and cried out for vengeance. No one can walk this human path in faith and obedience without encountering suffering. In the midst of that suffering Jesus cried out with tears, not for revenge and not in hate, but "with prayers and supplications ... to the one who was able to save." The human being each of us fails to be, he was, and he is "not ashamed" to call us his brothers and sisters” (Heb. 2:11). No, Long reminds us, God does not want us to suffer; God does not want violence or sin of any kind. Still, when we see Jesus, we have to see his suffering in order to know his resurrection. Without suffering, our own salvation holds no glory.

Because I am a former English teacher, or hearing me say that I love Shakespeare, I can’t tell you how many times someone has asked me what my favorite play by him is. Nearly everyone is surprised when I say *Henry IV, Part I*. It may not be on the top of many lists, but having taught it to high school students for six years, I learned it well, and to love it. This isn’t the first time I have thought of it during Lent, maybe because one of its main characters, Falstaff, is a great symbol of temptation. The young Prince Hal, who goes on to become Henry V, equally is a symbol of redemption. Early in the play he tells the audience that his giving in to the kind of behavior Falstaff is known for is a conscious decision on his part. “If all the year were playing holidays,
To sport would be as tedious as to work;
But, when they seldom come, they wish'd-for come,
And nothing pleaseth but rare accidents. . . .

My reformation, glitt'ring o'er my fault,
Shall show more goodly and attract more eyes
Than that which hath no foil to set it off.
I'll so offend to make offense a skill,
Redeeming time when men think least I will.

Prince Hal knows that his goodness will shine far more brightly because he had grown a reputation for his offenses. Is it necessary that he be offensive in order to be good? No, of course not. Still, I know that generations of Kent School students have recognized in Hal their own youthful missteps, and take comfort in seeing the heights to which he climbs later in his life. Karoline Lewis, another seminary professor, says of equally familiar experiences, “Let’s be honest. We know death. We know it all too well. Much, much harder is to imagine the truth of resurrection and the comfort of ascension.”

So, you want to see Jesus? Maybe for some of us it actually is easier to recognize him in the suffering he experiences during his last weeks of life than it is to believe in the resurrection. Maybe part of our difficulty in making the journey through Lent is not in holding off the joy of Easter, but in ever believing that God’s power to raise is as powerful as evil’s power to kill. Too many of us have known the death of hope, the death of relationship, the death of physical prowess or mental agility. Too many of us know too intimately the *pain* that comes with living, and too little of the *joy* of it. When we see Jesus, we see only words on a page and no living presence today.

Still, as surely as David’s sins were forgiven; as surely as David did become an example of faithful strength and forbearance, our own lives can be redeemed. In faith, we follow Jesus, servant to his call to follow and in so doing to lose our lives. We set our sights on Jesus, and we begin the journey again today, walking toward the kind of life that asks of us service to others. We ask forgiveness for the things we have done that do not glorify God, and we seek a life that does. Then, in letting our own lives blossom from these early seeds of faith, we make room for an even fuller growth. May it be so.