

5 Lent B March 18, 2018

Lenses

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Lenses help us see things that are real and present and sometimes are actually right in front of us, but because of their size or other factors, are somehow obscured from our view. For example, the lenses of microscopes help us see cells and other micro organisms that are otherwise too small for our eyes to see. The lenses of binoculars help us see that which is too far to see clearly with our eyes. And the lenses of telescopes help us see moons, planets, and stars that are on the other side of our atmosphere. Those of us who wear glasses or contacts know what it is like to look through lenses that help us see beyond whatever weakness our eyes suffer from so that we can see the world around us clearly.

There are other kinds of lenses, too. The kind that allow us to see what others see. My husband loves to look at the photographs in National Geographic because they show him places he has not yet visited, and they let him see how one person sees a place, person, animal, plant, or thing. When we watch a movie, we are seeing a story through the lens of a director, which is why movies adaptations of books can be negatively received, because we readers of books might have a different take on the same story.

Speaking of books, they can feature special lenses within their story lines to help the characters see something vitally important. Like the glasses the character Mrs. Who gave to Meg in the Newberry Award winning classic *A Wrinkle in Time*. Those of us who have read the book might remember the glasses helped Meg find a way into a door less prison in order to rescue to her father, helped her see in total darkness, and helped her father find a safe place to escape from evil. In other words, the glasses helped Meg and her father both see what was in front of them but was obscured by the darkness of fear and evil.

It might be a lens such as these that the author of John's Gospel was referring to in our Gospel lesson today, where Jesus gave a rather peculiar and obscure sounding response to the request his two disciples brought him concerning some Greeks who asked to see Jesus. You or I might imagine at hearing their request, Jesus' face would have brightened up, a big grin spread across his face, and him saying something like, "Wonderful, bring them right over here!" But that isn't what we heard in today's Gospel. Instead of instructing his disciples to welcome or include these nameless visitors, Jesus gave one of his ethereal or other worldly sounding answers in John's Gospel that sort of sounds like he didn't answer anyone's question at all. The Gospel of John can be like that.

Often in this Gospel someone will say or do something very practical sounding, and Jesus will respond in a way that seems disconnected to what is actually going on. It's like that today; some Greeks asked to see Jesus, and Jesus went on about his upcoming death by saying now is the time, he felt troubled, but was literally going to rise above his own troubled heart because his death will glorify God and serve as judgment to the world that has definitely chosen to reject God. That's a beautiful theological reflection, but not a polite way to deal with visitors.

However, John's Gospel, like the others, is more than a play by play account of the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. All the Gospels, including John's are accounts of who the authors believed Jesus to be, and their attempts to show us who Jesus is through their particular lens. John's lens shows us a Jesus who likes to talk about things in a theological way, like we heard in today's section from John's Gospel.

When Jesus heard there were people looking for him who were not Jewish, he seemed to interpret that as a sign his ministry was over, word about him was spreading, people outside his immediate area of influence had heard of him and were looking for him. To Jesus, this meant the time had come for his death, and that is what he was sharing with his disciples. The Greek visitors meant things were going to change soon. And he was trying to communicate his interpretation of this event to his disciples. In fact, a voice from heaven, presumably God's own voice, spoke up to support Jesus in his interpretation.

Because this is John's Gospel, which is believed to have been written down at least 70 years after the events of Jesus' life, ministry, death, resurrection and ascension took place, there may be even more to it. Some scholars have suggested because the Greeks are not named, they may simply represent anyone outside the Jewish tradition that would eventually become followers of Jesus. And to these curious about who Jesus is and what it means to follow him, the author of John has Jesus tell us that if anyone is to see Jesus, that is to see clearly who Jesus is, the only lens that will show us Jesus is the lens of the cross.

Not the lens of the parables alone. Jesus was more than a speaker and teacher of wisdom. Not the lens of the miracles alone. Jesus was more than a healer of ills or a magician who could make water wine. Not the lens of activist alone. Jesus was more than a liberator of injustices. Not the lens of heroism alone. Jesus was more than the hero who saves us from our fears. Not the lens of the head of the church alone. Jesus was more than someone who started a new institution. Not even the lens of his birth alone. Jesus was more than a just a baby in a manger, as only two of the four canonical Gospels even bother recording any details about his birth. But all the Gospels show us a crucified Jesus nailed to and

dead on the cross. Even the Resurrected Jesus still has the marks of the crucifixion in his hands and side. Those marks of the crucifixion are how his followers recognized the Resurrected Jesus, and show us the Resurrection didn't undo the crucifixion, and somehow the two are forever part of each other.

Something about that cross of Jesus has the power, like Mrs. Who's glasses to help us see Jesus through all that can obscure him from our view. Remember, all lenses, whether they are for use in science or art or medical purposes exist to help strengthen our weak eyesight. They are not punishments for being bad, they are not proof of wrong-doing, they are simply ways to help us overcome our weaknesses.

So too, the cross may be a means of helping us overcome our weaknesses and allows us something we cannot access on our own, but we can with God's help. While the cross will undoubtedly show us suffering, it may also be a lens to help us see the difference between suffering that is redemptive and suffering that is merely abusive. Through that lens, we can better understand how to live with suffering, and how to stand in love against abuse and injustice. Such a stance may produce suffering, but through the lens of the cross we might see that suffering as the sort that brings redemption. It is a mysterious lens, to be sure, one that perhaps offers more to wonder about than direct answers to argue against or believe in. But isn't the journey of faith one of wonder? Isn't wonder a way to venture deeper into faith or explore faith?

Now we are coming to the time of the Church Year that offers us all the opportunity to venture deeper into faith by observing the rituals and rites of Holy Week. Beginning next Sunday with Palm Sunday that takes us from Jesus' celebrated entry into Jerusalem to the cross. Did you know that Holy Week is not a series of liturgies, but is one liturgy that lasts an entire week? This is true. Notice that the Palm Sunday liturgy does not end with a dismissal, in fact none of the services or liturgies next week will have a dismissal, which means they don't really end. They are parts of a longer liturgy: one that tells the whole story of the cross. One that doesn't end at Golgotha. But after the new fire has been lit, and new light shines as we tell the old stories of our faith and gives us the courage and faith to proclaim the resurrection of the crucified one.

Perhaps this year we can approach and enter into Holy Week not as work we have to do, but as a chance to see Jesus anew through the lens of the cross, to see Jesus beyond any weakness of our own, and with God's help strengthen us for the ways we follow Jesus into our homes, our community, schools and life every day so that God's glory can be seen by all who ask to see.