

**Believing is Seeing
Mark 15:1-39 (40-47)
Palm Sunday
Sunday, 3/24/24
St. James Episcopal**

Let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my Rock, and my Redeemer. Amen!

My Friends in Christ: Grace and peace to you this morning from God, our Father, and from our Lord Jesus Christ; the great Shepherd of the sheep.

You have all heard the phrase “seeing is believing”. Sometimes it means that the actions of a person betray who they claim to be and what constitutes their values. At other times, it may refer to our insatiable need to be able to see the results before we commit to believing whatever it may be that we are contemplating putting our faith in.

I would like you to think for a moment about the crowds who greeted Jesus as He entered Jerusalem five days before He was put to death. Jesus was not riding a big warhorse, the kind of animal typically ridden by a king into battle. Instead he rode the foal of a donkey, a very humble means of making an impression. He entered Jerusalem as the Suffering Servant rather than as a conquering hero. And it is possible that some of those in the crowd who shouted, “Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord.” were part of the crowd who just a few days down the road, shouted along with the rest of the mob, “Crucify Him.” Unwittingly, they contributed to the ultimate sacrifice of God’s Son, whose death on the Cross and subsequent resurrection would mark the beginning of God’s kingdom; a kingdom with no boundaries, other than faith in Jesus as the atoning sacrifice for your sin and mine.

A Gospel text of this size forces a preacher like myself, to make choices. There is too much material to digest in a 15 minute sermon. So in light of the size of the text, I would like to focus on the taunts of the Chief Priests and the crowd watching the spectacle before them, as Jesus hung on the cross awaiting the inevitable death which He knew was one major part of His mission.

In V32, we read the crux of the position taken by the Chief Priests and Pharisees in their belief that Jesus was not who He claimed to be; Dripping with sarcasm and irony they called out loud enough for Jesus to hear, “Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe.” In other words, “Prove to us that you are who you say you are, and we want you to do so on our terms. If you are unable to step down from the Cross, that only proves our point, that you are a charlatan and a deceiver.”

Having preconceived beliefs about how God should act often becomes an obstacle to being open to faith in the God that we certainly do not fully understand. The notion that

God should fit our perception of how God is supposed to act goes to the core of unbelief. We expect God to operate based upon our terms, not His. That certainly was the case for the Crowds surrounding the Cross. They thought that by killing Jesus, His influence over humanity would be broken. But they couldn't have been more wrong could they?.

Doubt is a shirt tail relation to unbelief. However, having doubts is very common to those who walk by faith, including pastors. I don't know if that admission shocks you or not, but in the interest of full disclosure, I need to admit to you that there have been periods in my life, where I have struggled mightily with my own questions and doubts, imploring God to show me what I need to see in order for my faith to be strengthened.

One of those periods has been over the past year. When I contemplate the vastness of the cosmos, I have struggled with the idea that one Spirit could create all of this, and build into the system the concept that the cosmos is ever expanding. At times, it has seemed to me that the Cosmos is too big for God. A second part of my struggle has had to do with heaven. There are those among the faithful, who seem to be so sure of what to expect when they reach heaven. Part of my struggle has been the uncertainty of what to expect when I pass through death into a new life. Scripture portrays Heaven as the believer being with Jesus in a way which we have not experienced before. In other words, where Jesus is, that is where one finds Heaven, and the veil between our reality and the heavenly reality may be thinner than we think.

I suspect that you are wondering about the question which remains; what have I done or not done when I have experienced spiritual uncertainty and even spiritual despair? Over time I have learned that especially in those moments of intense questioning and doubt, I need to remain in God's Word. I still need to read and study daily what God's Spirit may have to say to me in the midst of my bewilderment. This spiritual discipline to continue to remain in God's Word has proven to be helpful as I walk through what Luther called "the dark night of the soul." I read and I pray, giving my doubts and uncertainty to God as honestly as I possibly can. In a sense it is a confession, but it is also an appeal for God's help in seeing what previously I have not been able to see.

Recently, the situation reached its apex as I was reading God's Word and praying early in the morning. I finally said to God that I would continue to study His Word, not necessarily looking for the answers to all of life's questions, but to have my wavering faith strengthened and supported by the God who dwells within all people of faith. This was a turning point. No longer was I asking God to prove Himself by answering all of my spiritually perplexing questions. I was simply appealing to God to increase my faith despite not having the answers which I was so intent on receiving. I no longer expected God to do my bidding, but instead I asked Him to help me see what I need to see to be a more effective witness for Him in my personal and professional life.

Perhaps the phrase seeing is believing should be inverted to "believing is seeing." Belief comes first, which enables us to begin to see God's reality. I must confess that

Chaplaincy helped me to begin to peer into God's reality. On several occasions in my four year ministry at PioneerCare, a resident was on my mind as I arrived at work, or throughout the day. In those instances, I took it to mean that the Spirit was nudging me to go visit a particular resident. Sometimes I would discover that their health was in rapid decline. At other times I realized that they were lonely and needed me to spend a few moments with them. There are several experiences that I could share with you regarding the thin veil between heaven and earth. But rather than doing so today, let me assure you that as I attempted to minister to people near the end of life and their families, I began to realize that there many things which I could not explain rationally. And the more that I was confronted with the ruminations of those who were dying, I became more comfortable accepting that if I don't know something, it does not make it any less real.

Regarding my first challenge to my faith; the immensity of the Cosmos. I happened across a short discussion by a scientist on Facebook. Normally, I avoid Facebook to help me prepare for sermons. But as I was perusing Facebook late in the evening while watching TV, I heard this scientist say that the vast majority of scientists believe that the Cosmos had a beginning, not that it has always been, but that the scientific signs point to an actual event which bore the Cosmos. He said that realization helped him to come to faith. Our God is bigger than we could possibly imagine, but He is also personal. He loves us down to the very minute details of who we are. He is concerned about our present and He walks with us into our future.

The God who sees you and me is that same God who has saved us all, despite our attempts to make Him act the way we think that He should act, or those nagging doubts which seem to plague us from time to time. My prayer for all of us today is that we believe despite the inability to understand everything we feel we need in order to believe. May we believe so that we can begin to see reality as God sees it. But most importantly, may we believe so that we don't have to face our inevitable death with fear, but with the confidence that only God can give us through faith in Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God. Amen!