

Lent 5B - 2018

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Hebrews 5:(1-4)5-10

John 12:20-33

Psalm 51 or 51:11-16

As I was working on this sermon, I found a paper sermon from 2003, from before I even kept my sermons on computer. It had a striking resemblance to the discussions of “fake news” which are prominent today. In April of 2003, I was in seminary, preaching in far north Manhattan. Our country was in active response to the 2001 World Trade Center attacks, with war raging in Iraq and Afghanistan. Listen to what I wrote then:

“Does what we are seeing on TV seem real to you? I try to limit my TV war news to the 6 o’clock local news and Peter Jennings. But my problem starts during the local news. The weatherman gives the sandstorm forecast with a map that is becoming all too familiar. Then, without missing a beat, he moves on to the forecast for White Plains. It seems like the international forecast on the Weather Channel might have gotten misplaced by the cable company. It just seems very unreal, like looking at a movie. Especially when they are transmitting over the “videophones” with the jerking head talking and

voice slightly off kilter from the head. It's easy to believe it might not be real."

Some of you may be old enough to remember that significant numbers of people questioned the assassination of John F. Kennedy...not whether Lee Harvey Oswald did it...but whether the president had been shot at all. The same with the moon landings – not just a few kooks, but otherwise normal people really believed (and still believe) that there had been a sound stage at Ted Turner's place in Atlanta where the whole thing was filmed, then shown on TV.

Often, Humans find it very hard to believe things that they have not personally experience in some way. White people find it hard to believe that racism is experienced by people of color. Rich people find it hard to believe that poor people really can't afford diapers or feminine hygiene products. People without health issues don't understand why people with shortness of breath need to park in handicapped parking spaces. I've never experienced violent conflict, so it is hard for me to interpret the TV news in a meaningful way.

I grew up watching the Vietnam War news on TV. But any of my real understanding of war comes from talking to combat veterans. Although many World War II veterans did not talk about their

experiences, my role as chaplain to the sick and dying gave me the special honor of hearing their stories. By hearing and seeing the reality of war memories in other REAL people, I began to understand the reality of war. Only by hearing, seeing and being with other people have I been able to comprehend or respond to war at all. The remoteness of the news does not give me enough, I need real people. Through the sight and sound of veteran's expressions of anger, sorrow, anxiety, hope and faith - I found a connection for myself. I found something real and true, not something fake and processed.

Today's Gospel depicts some Greeks who obviously felt the same way about Jesus that I felt about war. It was the time of the Jewish festival at the temple. We know almost nothing about these Greek people nor why they want to see Jesus. We can speculate. In the Gospel of John, this story takes place shortly after the cleansing of the temple story that Deacon Rich talked about two weeks back. You can bet there would have been some local news reporting around Jerusalem around that event, when Jesus strode around with a whip, driving out sheep and cattle into the street. Or maybe it was his ministry of healing they had heard about – that person who was

touched by Jesus and said, **“I was blind, but now I see.”** Whatever they were looking for, the Gospel of John reports their words to Philip: **“Sir, we wish to see Jesus.”**

The Gospel story never tells us whether they saw Jesus or not. When Philip told Andrew about the Greeks, they went together to try to see Jesus. In that all-too familiar way, Jesus did not give them a straight answer, no “OK”, “Not now”, or “How about next Tuesday at 2?”. Instead, Jesus begins to talk about death and eternal life. When he concludes his soliloquy, he says: **“Father, glorify your name.”** And God speaks from heaven!!! **“I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.”** The thing I want you to focus on for the moment was what happened to the people around Jesus. **“The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, ‘An Angel has spoken to him.’”** They were not all listening with the same ears, and they heard different things from the same sound. This is still the human condition. We interpret things based on our own experience, not always on the real facts.

Let’s think about this Gospel in terms of the people who saw and heard what happened around Jesus and how much they are like us. I cannot explain to you the full meaning of Jesus’ speech on

death and eternal life and judgment. But I can tell you that like the humans in this Gospel, we are a people who need to experience through sight and sound and smell and taste and touch SOMETHING, ANYTHING, that will lead us reflect on Jesus and to come closer in our relationship with God. At any time, especially unsettled times, we need to remain close to one another and participate in the experiences of our faith with *as much of ourselves* as we can bring. The more we can see, hear, smell and feel of God, directly or through one another, the more we will be centered in our ability to respond to the world around us.

Not only for ourselves, but for those people that we encounter here in church and through the week, we need to actively engage in “show and tell” Back in 2003, everyone in Manhattan could still remember how, in the weeks after 9/11, many strangers showed up as visitors to church and people you met were open to discussions of faith and prayer. It was true after Storm Sandy here. We need to be aware of that openness in other people in stressful times. We need to respond to make sure they see and hear Christ in action here. We also need to cultivate that openness to God’s reality for ourselves.

We worship a God who created the physical world. God came as a divine redeemer in human flesh. Jesus' birth, ministry and death were all physical acts, witnessed by people who perceived him as we perceive each other now. Even the Holy Spirit is described in the physically perceptible terms of wind and fire. Our primary sacraments, Baptism and the Eucharist involve the physically real elements of water, bread and wine.

Our worship is designed to appeal to the senses. In its fullest manifestation, The Eucharist involves all five senses: sight, smell, sound, touch and taste. In this time of the year, though Holy Week and Easter, we have worship which is even more intensely sensual than our regular services. As we move through Holy Week and into Easter, we will have the sights and smells of flowers, the touch of rough palm branches, the human touch of hand to bare foot; sounds and tastes of festive celebrations. The church responds to the human need for experience with rich worship textures, connecting with our needs for an experience of God at every possible level.

Our part, as we participate in worship, is to pay attention to what is being offered. Our culture, with its constant bombardment of sight and sound and screen, brings a numbing of our senses, a

distance from reality. In truth, there are things that we do not want to experience as reality. Do not let worship be a numbed experience for you. Participate fully – be aware of the sights, the sounds, the taste, and the smells. Be aware of the touch of your neighbor during the peace. We are embodying Christ's love for the world as we greet one another in the expectation of REAL PEACE.

If you need to shake yourself up, do something different. Instead of silently complaining that it is “quiet Sunday”, enter the silence and find new aspects of God in and around you. Try church somewhere else or at a different time. You could sit in a different seat here. You'd be surprised how change opens space for God.

Like the people in the Gospel who saw Jesus and heard the sound from heaven, our responses to worship will vary. Some will see Jesus, the teacher, and some will see the face of God. Some of us will hear thunder, but some will hear the voice of God. And for all of us, some days, we may see or hear nothing.

But be present anyway, let your whole self experience what is offered. Let your body itself become an offering. Think deeply about the things you do here. Keep paying attention as we move into the Creed and the Prayers, as we touch each other in remembrance of

the peace of God and as we taste and touch and smell the bread and wine. Then when we are done, go out into the world and this week, let people see Jesus in you, through you, a real person able to be present, really present to someone else, making God more real in your life and theirs. Make God more real in this world than what is on the screen of your phone or your TV. Make God REAL!! Make God your GOOD NEWS!! This week and always...AMEN

ⁱ Me, April 5, 2003.