

Sermon, St. David's Episcopal Church, Lent 5B, 3/21/2021, Jeremiah 31:31-34, John 12:20-33  
(*Elizabeth Felicetti*)

Some Greeks came to the disciple Philip and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus."

We wish to see Jesus.

What would you do if some people came to you and said, "We wish to see Jesus?"

Philip had been called to follow Jesus back in the first chapter of John. He's the one to whom Nathanael had asked, "can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip's response was "Come and see."

We wish to see Jesus. Come and see.

I hope that if someone tells you that they "wish to see Jesus"—that is, if someone thinks that you, by word and example, have shown that you are someone who follows Jesus—my hope is that that you would say, "Hey, come with me to my church, St. David's. Come and see. Jesus is there."

The pandemic has challenged that, though, hasn't it? "Come and see" on the livestream. Not in person. Not in the church building.

The exiles in the book of Jeremiah would understand our pain. They could no longer go to their temple to find God, even though the temple had been central to their faith, because they now lived in exile in Babylon. They had lost people they loved. Everything was different, baffling. God told them a couple of chapters before today's to "seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile." That wasn't what they wanted to hear. They wanted to hear, "I will smite your enemies and you can return to your home and your temple ASAP." Instead, "seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile."

The last year has felt something like exile, hasn't it? Church was completely closed for four months, then open again in a limited way for five, then closed again for three. I also felt exiled when we were first opened back up last summer but I had to stay home on disability.

After I came back last October, I know many of you continued to feel exiled because you did not feel safe returning yet. Right now I get to be in this room when most of you can't, but even though I am physically here, it still feels like a form of exile because interacting with a camera is not the same as being in a room with parishioners whom I love.

I still see Jesus here at St. David's, but the past year has been challenging.

Some call the part of Jeremiah where we find today's passage "the little book of consolation"—that is, a few comforting chapters in the midst of a book that contains a lot of judgment.

"I will put my law within them," says the Lord in this passage in the translation we use in our bulletin.

The Hebrew word translated as “law,” *torah*, can also be translated as “teaching.” Teaching may be a better, more accurate translation. I prefer the way it sounds: “I will put my *teaching* within them, and I will write it on their hearts.”

In this consoling passage, God promises the people that even though they are now in exile and cannot go to the temple to outwardly express their faith, that they can still be in relationship with God. God’s teaching will now be written on their hearts.

Imagine walking around with God’s writing on your heart. I find the image even more profound when thinking about the way the prophet Jeremiah and those to whom he was speaking understood the heart. Today we think of hearts as the seat of emotion, like love. Red and pink hearts signal “love” to us today but in Jeremiah’s time, the heart was also the seat of “intellectual, ethical, and moral activity.”<sup>1</sup> So God’s teaching being written on our hearts is more expansive: our heart, our mind, our soul, our guts. God’s teaching is all over our insides.

I am thrilled that next week, some of us will be in this space together. It won’t be the same. We won’t be singing. We have complicated color-coded seating charts to ensure social distancing. We won’t touch each other during the passing of peace.

But we will be here, with palm branches, seeking Jesus.

I keep thinking that while I don’t believe God sends plagues to make points, I do believe that God can pull beauty and spiritual teachings out of terrible things that happen. This pandemic has been awful. A year ago, a new acquaintance—a doctor who was treating me—asked me if I loved what I do as a priest. I told him truthfully that I did not love being a priest right then, because due to the pandemic I was unable to do the things I love the most.

One year later, I’m grateful that I can again offer you all communion, as well as take it myself. I am still preaching and teaching Bible study. My exile over the summer when I was on disability showed me how much I love that: how the process of preparation, which I’ve complained about in the past, is a way for God to write his teachings on my heart. When I returned to St. David’s in October, I felt renewed in some ways.

I pray that next Sunday, you all will feel renewed, too, even though we will still be in Lent and will still have too many restrictions for the foreseeable future. If you don’t feel comfortable coming in person yet, I hope that seeing people in the pews while you’re watching at home will help you to see Jesus just a little more clearly.

Next week, we will see Jesus coming into Jerusalem, met with palms like a king. Then on Maundy Thursday, we will see Jesus presiding at the Last Supper before being arrested unjustly. On Good Friday and Holy Saturday, we won’t see Jesus here in this space. We will have a virtual stations opportunity on Good Friday, and Sheri Blume will lead a Facebook live service on Holy Saturday. Then on Easter Sunday, we will meet here again, to see Jesus. Come and see.

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<sup>1</sup> Kaltner, John, “Jeremiah 31:31-34,” in *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, Year B, Volume 2, 91.