

A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

Learning to See

Luke 19.40

April 10, 2022

In an act wildly hopeful or wildly irresponsible, certainly full of prophetic meaning, Jesus mounts a donkey for the last leg of his long journey into Jerusalem. It's all theater. He could've walked of course. He's been walking for years now all over Judea and Galilee. He doesn't need a ride for the last leg from Bethany over the Mount of Olives into the sacred and desecrated city, the home of the temple and the headquarters of the Roman occupation. Jesus mounts the donkey as a prophetic sign of his messiahship. He is fulfilling the scripture of Zechariah, echoing ancient King David. He's announcing, without saying a word, the king has returned. Can you see?

He may not be saying much but everyone else around him is. Crowds have swelled around him, laying their cloaks, waving the branches of palm trees. It seems at the top of their lungs, they are singing the old songs from Psalm 118, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest." These people, these crowds see the day as a festival, and they see Jesus as reason to celebrate. They feel alive because of what they see, the mighty works of God which they have seen in Jesus.

There's another group of people there, the very religious people, who do not see the scene, the day, or Jesus in the same way. They are the protectors, the preservers, the leaders, the Pharisees. They do not see the scene as a festival but as potential insurrection which will poke the Roman bear and threaten the thin freedoms they still have under the empire's rule. Where the people see new life, they see looming death. They see the day not as a day of celebration but a day of darkness. On top of that, God alone is to be praised, and these people are praising Jesus with God-words and God-songs. For them, it is not a day of praise but of lament, not of light but of coming darkness. And that, of course, has everything to do with how they see Jesus. Jesus is not a hope, a messiah, a healer, a savior. He's a pretender, a threat, a nuisance.

This story, then, hangs on how you see what is in right front of you. Of course, this is the great question of faith. When you see Jesus, do you see a Savior or a charlatan? Do you see a Messiah or a myth? Is he the Christ or a pretender? CS Lewis put it famously, He's either Lord, a liar, or a fool. This story is in one part about who you see when you're in front of Jesus, and it's about what Jesus sees when he sees what's in front of him.

That's a big part of faith, too. What does God see when God looks at you and looks at the world? And can we learn to see in any way with God's eyes?

I received an email last Sunday afternoon from someone far from here, someone who has never been here but apparently joins us for worship online and may be worshipping with us

today. He's someone whose friendship, mentorship, and counsel a long time ago I appreciate more and more the older I get. If you are with us today, thank you.

The subject line of the email was simply, "Lenten Sermon." I assumed it meant my Lenten Sermon, one of them. Lent has six Sundays, so it could've been one of several. I was out last week and Tiffani preached, so I wasn't sure what it was referring to from the subject line. It just said Lenten Sermon. I opened the email and read the first line, "Eric, you are good, very good." Naturally, I stopped reading at that point. I mean, wouldn't you? What else do you need to hear, but someone sees you as good, very good. Let me say those are words I hope you hear someone important to you say to you, even if you're not sure you believe the truth of those words about yourself. I suspect few of us really do, really do believe you are very good. I hope you'll remember this, that the God who made you in love, made you in His image, says this about you as His precious creature, his child. You may not feel very good, you may know things about what you've done that were not very good and things you didn't do you should have done and that was not very good either. You may think you know what's deep down inside you is anything but good. But the way God sees you, God sees those things and still says, you are so very good to me. You are my beloved child. You are beautiful and wonderful, and I want you to see yourself the way I see you and to be reborn in the joy of knowing who you were made to be.

So, this email I received began, "You are good, very good, however..." I told you I should've stopped reading. Uh oh, you're good . . .but. Which they teach you in Parenting 101 to never do and in Marriage 101, never start a sentence with "I love you, but..." But in fact what followed was solid gold. "You're very good, however, if you allow Tiffani to preach too often, you just might be looking for a new job! Hers today was a most powerful Lenten sermon." Isn't that wonderful? That's marvelous! You're good, but you're in the presence of greatness.

If only the pharisees had seen themselves that way: "We're good, but this one here in front of our eyes, he is great and worthy of praise." But they couldn't see. They couldn't see Jesus for who he is, and they couldn't see the world the way he sees the world.

That email arrived last week when I was in far west Texas with Joel Edwards and our daughters on a backpacking trip in the Guadalupe Mountains. Resting for a moment from a high place overlooking a rugged scene, I quoted Wallace Stegner, "to appreciate the beauty of the American west, you have to get over the color green." Joel thought for a moment about that, and said, "But, there's green everywhere." And I looked again. Sure enough, there was green. I just hadn't really seen it. It wasn't the green of a Shenandoah spring, but it was green sure enough for an opened-eyed artist to discern mixing just the right colors to reflect different shades. I saw green from then on. I learned to see. The desert is alive.

The same kind of thing happens when you walk a prairie with Robert Creech, which I had the opportunity to do last month. The whole thing looks like tall weeds until you see it through Robert's eyes. That's big blue stem, and that's Indian grass, and that over there, that

wildflower, that's Black-eyed Susan. And look for the critter prints around the clumps of grass. The prairie is alive when you have eyes to see.

The same kind of thing happens when you see an old mansion through the eyes of Melinda Creech, who has researched every aspect of the structure, the family, the history, the lifestyles of its inhabitants over two centuries. The house and its stories come alive, when you learn to see.

Learning to see is everything. Being with someone who gives you new eyes to see is a terrific gift. Faith is learning to see Jesus as the Christ and learning to see yourself and the world as Jesus sees. This is the long journey of faith. It takes a life time.

The Pharisees neither saw Jesus with the eyes of faith or saw the world through the eyes of Jesus. "Silence your choir," they told Jesus, "Keep them quiet."

"Keep them silent?" he replies. "Keep them silent? Can't you see: it's far too late for that. They are the voice of a universe about to burst wide open with new life. And you can't see it?"

"It's too late to keep them silent. If they are silent, the winds will blow. If they winds are stilled, the light will shine. If they light is put out, the rivers will dance. If the rivers run dry, the birds will sing. If the birds are chased away, the dogs will bark and cats will purr, and lions will roar and fish will jump, and flowers will bloom even in the desert. And if all of this ceases to be, if all the life in this world somehow were silenced, well then, if these are silent, the rocks will cry out."

Jesus saw a world pulsating with the presence and praise of God. Even the stones: from the pebbles on the road under the clip-clop of the animal to the mountains against the horizon. The whole world is singing the canticle of praise.

Not everyone sees the world this way. Some people have too much pain, have been hurt too much to lift their hearts, they think. There's plenty of folks who see very clearly the darkness and death and trouble and war and can only conclude the world must be hopeless. But then they see Jesus, riding in again into the heart of darkness even unto death, bearing within him the light of the world.

And there are those for whom God is way up in the sky, way up there or way back then, a distant memory to be preserved, a nostalgia to be carried on, but not a living and active presence. For some people God is the God of rules for life, but not the God who gives life. But then they see Jesus, coming into to their lives again, restoring the joy of their salvation, breaking open hearts grown cold.

And then there are those who are ready to see, but just need someone to show the way. To point the way. And here's Jesus, in this exact moment in his life, entering Jerusalem for the last time. This dark, sad moment, that soon will lead to tears over the city. This moment in life when

he is not just aware of the darkness of the world, but about to enter the heart of it; not just aware of history's travails, but about to endure them, not just mindful of the hard news, but soon to become the subject of shouts of violence and whispers, whispers of resurrection. He, even in this moment in his life, sees the world pulsating with the presence and praise of God almighty.

They saw a world dying. He knew something they didn't know yet. They thought he would awaken the dangerous empire and couldn't yet see he was inaugurating the new reign of God. They thought he was a threat to life and couldn't yet see that he was the hope of life. The world they were trying to preserve was already done for. The world is going to be reborn. By his death, the power of death would be destroyed, and all will be made new. A new world was about to be born. The Lord of Life would enter death and then rise and bring the world to new life with him. Not a world absent of danger or pain or death or destruction or tears, nor a world absent of war and violence and trouble and suffering, but a world where hope reigns.

This is what he sees as he enters the city. The rocks will cry out. Which rocks? All of them.

Jesus sees the rocks strewn on the rugged ground under the clip-clop of the animal, as old as time, rocks that will sing praise of our creator.

Jesus sees the stones that build city walls, to separate friend from enemy, insider from outsider. They cry out to all those in and out of the walls: peace to you.

Jesus sees the stones of the temple, carved to construct the sanctuary of the Lord. Those rocks cry out to all who walk with God and to all who want desperately to come back: God is Lord of heaven and earth.

Jesus sees even the stones stacked to make a palace for Pilate, and those stones Pilate will ascend to condemn to death messiahs who ride into Jerusalem to the soundtrack of the songs of God. The stones used to oppress and destroy and kill. They will cry out from under his feet: justice.

Jesus sees a stone rolled in front of a tomb. It's a long, hard journey from here to there, but that stone cries out still, for all who have eyes to see and ears to hear—he is not in here in this crypt of rock or tomb of history. He is risen to new life. Look around beloved, look again, look within, the Lord of life is with you and within you. Let those who have eyes to see say, "We do see Jesus." Let all creation praise.

Amen.

