

**First Baptist Church of Augusta**  
**Jeremiah 31:31-34; John 12:20-26**  
*Journey in the Wilderness: What Happens if I Get Lost?*  
**March 29, 2009**  
**Lent 2009**

Jeremiah 31:31 *The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah.*

John 12:21 *They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus."*

Nearly fifteen years ago, I was the pastor of the First Baptist Church of Chickamauga, GA, a small town just south of Chattanooga. The church sanctuary was a stately, Georgian architectural style, and it looked much like many other First Baptist churches dotted throughout the South. The pulpit, too, was of the same design, with a modestly imposing presence in the center of the chancel area. My first Sunday to preach, I gathered my Bible and sermon notes, proceeded from the "pastor's chair," and stepped behind the historic pulpit. Just as I was placing my Bible onto the desktop, I noticed words engraved on a plaque that was no doubt intended for the preacher. It was a quote from John 12, verse 21: "*Sir, we wish to see Jesus.*"

Each Sunday, I would see that verse – "*Sir, we wish to see Jesus*" – and look into the eyes of congregants, with their various and voluminous needs and hungers: bruised by domestic violence, struggling with addictions, caring for aging parents, worried sick about bankruptcy, filled with doubt, or just simply bored stiff. Each Sunday, no matter what I had to say, and no matter why, they kept showing up, I would be reminded by that plaque with the words of John 12:21 – "*Sir, we wish to see Jesus.*"

Whenever I come across that verse in the Bible, my mind goes back through the years, to the pulpit of the First Baptist Church of Chickamauga, Georgia. Those words are sobering words to a preacher, tempted to reduce worship to a therapeutic meeting place. Those words are arresting words, when one feels as though it is easier to give people what they want to hear, instead of what they need to hear. Those words are challenging words, when there are so many stars and celebrities out there promising quick fixes to complex problems. Yet, those are the words, the very words, that every proclaimer of Good News must heed when he or she stands behind any pulpit, facing a congregation troubled, broken, searching, or just passing time until the next event. "*Sir, we wish to see Jesus.*"

The question was first posed by men of Greece. We know very little of those Greeks in the Bible that approached Philip, one of the disciples of Jesus. They are from out of town, and, we may assume, are in Jerusalem for the Passover festival. This is a big occasion in Jerusalem, perhaps the biggest event of the year. The city is filled with strangers who have traveled a long way to be in the ancient City of David. Languages from all over the world are heard, and for many, this is a once-in-a-lifetime trip. As I think about it, this is not much different than what we see each year during the Masters. These out-of-towners, these Greeks on a tour through the city of Jerusalem, get off the bus, because they wanted to see Jesus. That was their simple request.

We don't know why they want to see Jesus. Maybe they had heard about him, and like celebrity-struck stargazers, they wanted to check out this guy who could change water into wine. Who knows, Jesus might even be willing to sign an autograph or pose for a picture. Perhaps, these Greeks were sincere spiritual pilgrims and they hungered for a guru, who could expand their minds and answer their deepest longings. We don't know why those Greeks were looking for Jesus; we only know their request to one of his followers: "*Sir, we wish to see Jesus.*:"

Isn't that the heart of all requests in each person we encounter? Imagine how strange it would be if everyone we saw today asked that of us: *We want to see Jesus*. When your boss plops down a file full of paperwork, bulging with the names of clients who need a follow up, on the way out she looks over her shoulder, stops and returns to your desk and says: *one more thing, I want to see Jesus*. Today, at lunch, as your server brings you your tea, the salad, and while serving you the entrée, looks you in the eye and says: *I want to see Jesus*. What would you do if your teacher, right in the middle of a boring lesson about some dead dude who lived a long, long time ago, stopped the lecture and said, *I want to see Jesus*?

How strange it is to imagine such a world of unhindered honesty, but this is precisely the world in which we live, the waiter, the teacher, the student, the boss, the stranger, the spouse, the child, the parent, all wanting to see Jesus. They really do not desire a lecture on the nature of atonement, complete with neat scriptural points to support the case. They are not asking for a walk through the book of Romans, so we can explain that "you are a sinner condemned to hell, but, I mean Jesus, can save you." They are not soliciting a reference or invitation to go to this church or any church. They want to see Jesus.

How did you come to see Jesus? This past week, my article in our church's newsletter began with the question, "How did you get here?" Well, how did you? Car? Bus? Cab? Horse? Train? Mule? How did you get here? Throughout my childhood, until I was old enough to own my own car (a 1969 Mustang fastback, 3 speed, straight six - for those of you who are curious,) I went to church in my daddy's pick-up. On the dairy, there was little need for a car, so our family of five, which included my daddy, sister, two younger brothers and myself, would squeeze into his '73 Ford pick-up to go to church each Sunday. By the time we arrived in the parking lot, we sort of looked like a "DeLoach explosion" once the doors of the truck flew open.

I guess you could say I have come a long way. Now I come to church in a 2005 MINI Cooper. Well, to be fair about this, Amy and the boys come later in the station wagon. How do you get here?

The question is not about modes of transportation. It really doesn't matter to me if you came in a station wagon, minivan, walked or rode a mule (although you have to be careful where you park a mule). To ask, "How did you get here," is really a spiritual question. Who were the ones in your life that taught you about faith, that loved like Jesus, and inspired you to do the same? Someone loved you into the faith, not simply by what they said, but how they lived. Someone embodied – here the theological word is "incarnate" – the presence of God in their life, and you saw Jesus.

When the Greeks requested "...*we wish to see Jesus*," Philip and Andrew were asked to help the Greeks "get there."

As a "City on a Hill" we have been entrusted to teach, share, and be the presence of Christ, that all might "see Jesus." Jesus is not an idea, a pleasant and polite construct, so that we can all be better boys and girls. Jesus is not, a "get out of Hell free" card, that we play at the end of our life, crossing our fingers that God will overlook our selfish ways. Jesus is not the CEO of the Church Inc., whose sole function is to add to the membership roles.

Jesus is the Son of God, who became flesh on this earth, and becomes real in us, not by what others say about Jesus, but what they see. In our gospel reading this morning, we don't know if the Greeks ever got a chance to meet Jesus. All we know is that Philip told Andrew, and together they go to Jesus, and what does Jesus say? I like how Eugene Peterson paraphrases verses 24-26 in The Message:

*Listen carefully: Unless a grain of wheat is buried in the ground, dead to the world, it is never anymore than a grain of wheat. But if it is buried, it sprouts and reproduces itself many times over. In the same*

*way, anyone who holds on to life just as it is destroys that life. But if you let it go, reckless in your love, you'll have it forever, real and eternal.*

People really do want to see Jesus and they are looking everywhere for Jesus. They want to see Jesus in you. They cannot see Jesus in us, however, if all they see is how we are desperately clinging to things for our own survival. How can they see Jesus, if our fears and anxieties are in the way? How can they see Jesus, if greed defines us, instead of the One who said, make investments in heaven? How can they see Jesus, if our only interest in life and church is what is in it for me, my wants, my needs, and my benefit?

They cannot see Jesus, if our Gospel has been adulterated with a doctrine of “me” and scrubbed clean of giving, emptying and sacrifice. As Eugene Peterson paraphrases verse 26: *anyone who holds on to life just as it is destroys that life. But if you let it go, reckless in your love, you'll have it forever, real and eternal.*

*We wish to see Jesus.* They really do. And I want to show them. And I want you to show them. And I want this Church to show them. Not simply tell them, but show them. And how will they see? How will they get there? It all comes down to relating and connecting, to engage the world, because we, too, are in this world. That is how God saves us, is it not? God came to dwell with us as a babe in a manger, as a fellow pilgrim along the way, as the one who laughs and weeps and dies among us, but who also lives, even now. Think how far God goes just to abide among you and me and get us there.

### **Invitation**

Some of us this morning, need to stop preaching the sermon and start living the sermon. Some of us this morning, need to stop fretting about what to say to their neighbor, and just start loving their neighbor. Some of us this morning, need to stop worrying about what happens on Wall Street and start living as if they actually trusted God. Some of us need to stop going to church and start being the church.

*We wish to see Jesus. “You are the light of the world...a city on a hill cannot be hidden...let your light shine...”*

Teaching, sharing, and being the presence of Christ here in Augusta and around the world: it is our mission and the world's need.

As we travel through Lent and prepare for Easter, know that you are surrounded with those making the same request of those ancient Greeks. I ask you to be faithful in your attendance, in your participation, and in your living as a traveler after Jesus.