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Sermon 21 March 2021

Title: Seeing, Serving, and Sacrifice

- Good morning church—we are so glad that you have joined us today and we hope that what you are seeing and hearing has been a blessing and an inspiration to you—we want to continue to worship and glorify God through the study of the Word—we pray that you will perceive His presence in a very real and tangible way this morning
- We are looking to the lectionary for our scriptures during these Sundays in Lent, and as we journey toward Holy Week we are taking the time meditate on the mystery of the incarnation— we are taking time to walk the road that leads to the cross. And today is, according to one way of looking at it, the last Sunday in Lent proper, the sort of common days of Lent, because next Sunday marks the beginning of Holy Week—it is Palm Sunday—so while it's not Easter, it's also not the same as the previous Sundays in Lent. So today is the last Sunday before Holy Week begins.
- Today is also something of a milestone for our church and for many other churches here in Scotland, because today is the one-year anniversary of the Sunday that our services moved from in-person to online. I went to the sermons page on largsnaz.org just to be sure, and it is true that March 15, 2020 was the last time that we met together in our church for worship—I preached a sermon called “Holiness: Moving God-ward” that Sunday—it was the last in a series based on the three areas of focus in our church's new vision statement—Hospitality, Health and Holiness—and as a church we have certainly fulfilled that vision and then some, but I am sure you'll agree that none of us would have predicted what 2020 would hold in store—we had

vision, but none of us saw fully what was coming. We did not know then that what we were experiencing would be our last chance at in-person worship for some time, the last time we would see each other in that situation before lockdown began.

- And then March 22, 2020 was our first online service—it wasn't a full service back then, it was just a sermon—Pastor Tasha preached a sermon called “Hope in a Time of Darkness” based on the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm—and it turned out that we were going to need all the hope we could get because there were some dark times ahead
- As I was looking back and thinking about all the Sundays that have passed since that first lockdown began I found myself thinking about the time right before that—before COVID changed everything—back in January and February of 2020, and I was reminded that 2020 began with the news, on January 7, of the death of one of my favourite musicians—he was a drummer and lyricist named Neil Peart, some have called him the greatest drummer ever-- and he was quite young, only 67, and I've shared this with you all before, but his death was quite a loss for the world of popular music, particularly the genre known as prog-rock, but as shocking and saddening as his death was, I was comforted by the fact that I had not waited to see Peart and the band he played with, the Canadian trio called “Rush”—I had not waited to avail myself of the opportunity to see them perform live—in fact, I don't even know how many times I've seen them in concert—I do know that the first time was in my teens in Nashville Tennessee, and the last time was just a few years ago in Charlotte North Carolina—Tasha and I went to that one together—I suppose that I've seen Rush in concert at least twenty times over the years if not more.
- There's just something different about seeing a band or a performer in person—up close and personal—that is different from enjoying a recording—seeing and hearing

them in real-life is just more powerful, more “real” somehow. And so when Neil Peart died, I did not have the remorse of wishing I’d taken those opportunities to see him, because I had, and I did not regret it.

- A few months after Peart’s death, in April of 2020, I heard that COVID had caused the death of another musical giant, the songwriter and singer John Prine, and again, his was a shocking loss, he was only 73-- but I was comforted by the fact that I had seen him in concert in August of 2018 at the Kelvingrove Bandstand in Glasgow—and it was a performance I will never forget.
- Throughout my life, if I have had the chance to see a musician or a musical group who are particularly talented or influential—somebody that folks say “if you ever get the chance to see them, don’t hesitate,”—if I have the chance I take it, because there will never again be an opportunity to see Neil Peart or John Prine in person—you can’t do it—if you haven’t done it, you never will.
- And I can think back to others whose deaths I have heard the news of and been thankful that I had seen them previously—when Ray Charles died in 2004, I was thankful that I’d seen him twice, when Chet Atkins died, I was thankful that I’d not only seen him but had a conversation with him in a music shop in Nashville—when Clarence Fountain, one of the founding members of the Blind Boys of Alabama, died in 2018, I was thankful that Tasha and I, and her Dad, had seen and heard them perform in Augusta (by the way, I like to think that Clarence and I are related—I also come from a line of Fountains from Alabama so I am sure there’s a connection in there somewhere)
- But in April of 2020, in the middle of the first lockdown, the world heard the news that Eddie Van Halen, the virtuoso guitarist, had died from cancer at age 65. Now let

me put this into perspective for you—if you were a guy who was in high school in the 1980s—in America-- you loved Eddie Van Halen and the Eddie Van Halen Band—some people just call them Van Halen—all your friends loved Van Halen—when a song by Van Halen would come on the radio, all your friends would play air guitar and imagine that they could play like he could, which was ridiculous. Nobody could play like he could. When my friends and I first heard Eddie Van Halen play we just looked at each other sort of dumbfounded—it was not humanly possible to play like that—but he did—there was something other-worldly about the way he had mastered his instrument and perfected the sounds that he could make with it—we all drew the Van Halen logo on the outside of our school notebooks, and we had Van Halen posters in our lockers and in our bedrooms, and we all wore Van Halen t-shirts—especially if we had gotten them at a Van Halen concert—I had a t-shirt or two, but I had not gotten them at a concert, I had gotten them at the t-shirt shop in the Regency mall, but I didn't let any of my friends know that because they would have been astonished—flabbergasted-- if they thought I'd had the chance to see Van Halen live and hadn't gone—we all had the chance to see them during high school, several times, in several different places—but I had never taken the opportunity—something always stood in the way—and the truth is that over the years, every time I'd hear about a Van Halen concert, I'd put it off, because there would always be another chance in a year or two—there always had been. My friends and I sort of thought Eddie Van Halen was immortal anyway, so there was no sense of urgency—no hurry.

- But now, in April 2020, Eddie Van Halen was dead, and there would never be another opportunity to see him perform in person—ever. And I regretted my

procrastination, because I had lost my chance. I had never seen him and I would never do so.

- And it didn't make me feel one bit better when I told Tasha—I said, "Did you hear that Eddie Van Halen died?" and she said, "I did—I am so glad I saw them in concert—I remember my Dad telling me I needed to go—he said if I didn't go I might regret it someday."
- I said "yeah, you probably would have."
- But the death of Eddie Van Halen was a wake-up call for me—a cold, stark reminder that if you want to see somebody in person, or someplace, or some thing, then you need to take the opportunity when it presents itself-- or you need to seek out the opportunity-- because if you wait, you might very well miss your chance—and there will come a day when your opportunities have run out--when there are no more chances to see or hear or do what you want to do.
- In the passage of Scripture that Pastor Tasha shared with us, from the gospel of John Chapter 12, John tells us that in Jerusalem at the time of the Passover, there are some Greeks who have come to worship at the festival. Now this puts us at the beginning of the events of Holy Week, the days leading up to the crucifixion and resurrection. And they—we don't know how many there were or who they were, but we know that they were Greek Jews—we know they're Greek because John tells us and we know they're Jews because that's who comes to worship in Jerusalem at the Passover festival—and John adds this detail about them, that they are Greek to let us know that Jesus' appeal is not limited to Jerusalem, but that he is drawing attention from further afield.

- Now these Greeks “wished to see Jesus.” We know that because in verse 21 they say “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” And they say this to Philip—and that’s not surprising—Philip is a Greek name, so there’s a bit of familiarity there, wherever these folks are from, and that is pretty much all we’re told about these Greeks. Now we have no reason to think that they’re not telling the truth, and so we can assume that they do indeed “wish” to “see” Jesus. The word that is translated “wish” there simply means to desire or to want or to intend, and so we can assume that they came to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover festival, and at some point—maybe it was before they planned their trip, maybe it was after they got to Jerusalem, but at some point they heard that Jesus was in town and they realised that they might have the opportunity to “see” Jesus. And so they’re trying to get tickets—well, they’re not trying to get tickets, but they are trying to see if they can get an audience with Jesus, and they’re going through Philip to do so—kind of like we might do if we knew somebody who worked backstage at a concert—we’d say, “Hey do you think you could introduce me to so and so?”—they’re trying to set up a little “meet-and-greet.”
- It tells us a little more about the situation that these Greeks say to Philip “SIR, we wish to see Jesus.” SIR. They don’t say to Philip, “Hey buddy, you reckon we could see Jesus?” No, they say “SIR, we wish to see Jesus.” The Greek there is Kyrios—it means “Lord”—as in Kyrie eleison—Lord have mercy—the same word we use when we call God “the Lord,” or say “Jesus is Lord”—here it is a term of respect that can also mean “master” or “owner” like a landlord, so it’s clear that these Greeks have chosen to go through someone with whom they have at least some connection because he has a Greek name, and they’re being respectful in the hopes that they can convince Philip to help them get what they want—and that is to “see” Jesus.

- Now that word “see” doesn’t tell us a whole lot about their intentions. The Greek there is “*eidó*” and it means “to see, to look upon, to experience, to perceive.” So these Greeks want to get a look at Jesus—to have the experience of being near him and seeing and hearing him. We are not told, however, why these Greeks WANT to see Jesus. They may simply be curious—maybe they want to see what all the fuss is about—maybe they haven’t formed an opinion, good or bad, and just want more information. Maybe they’re hoping to see some spectacle like restoring sight to someone who’s blind, or turning water into wine, or raising the dead—which Jesus has just done to Lazarus in the previous chapter, and people are talking about it—a lot—so much so that in verse 19 John tells us that the Pharisees are saying to each other that “the world has gone after Jesus and there’s nothing we can do about it” and John also tells us that the chief priests are planning to put Lazarus to death because the fact that he’s alive is causing people to desert THEM and believe in Jesus. Jesus has become something of a rock star in Jerusalem. So there’s plenty of reasons why these Greeks would want to lay eyes on this teacher who is causing such a stir.
- It could be that they want to learn from Jesus. Maybe they have questions about the meaning of life, or maybe they need help—maybe one of them is sick—or someone back in their hometown, maybe a mother or a son or daughter is ill—maybe even dead—and they want Jesus to change that. Maybe they don’t like what they’ve heard about Jesus—making a mess of the temple and driving out all the hardworking businessmen—it could be that they, like the religious authorities, think that Jesus is going to destroy not only the temple, but their most cherished traditions and their way of life.

- It could be that they want to see Jesus so that they can worship him—or it could even be that even they don't know WHY they want to see Jesus—maybe they'd say they were just drawn to want to see him.
- Whatever the reason is, John doesn't share it with us. We are only told that these Greeks tell Philip that they wish to see Jesus. And Philip doesn't say "well, come with me, let's go see him!"—no, Philip goes and tells his fellow Bethsaida native, Andrew, he's from the same hometown as Philip—Andrew's brother Peter came from there too—and then the two of them, Philip and Andrew go tell Jesus.
- And it's here that the unexpected happens. We would expect that Andrew and Phillip would tell Jesus that there are some Greeks who want to see him, and Jesus would tell them to bring them to him, and then they'd have some sort of a conversation or interaction.
- But that isn't what happens. Andrew and Philip go to Jesus—just the two of them—and tell him that the Greeks want to see him. And Jesus answers them. But his answer seems to have nothing to do with whether or not those Greeks can see him. In fact it has a lot to do with his impending death. And so we might wonder--have these Greeks missed their last opportunity to see Jesus in person?
- Jesus says that the hour has come for him to be "glorified" and talks about a seed dying and bearing fruit and about loving or hating your life—and then Jesus says that his soul is troubled because of the situation that lies before him, but he's not going to ask the Father to save him, to rescue him, but he says instead "Father, glorify your name" to which a voice from heaven replies "I have glorified it and I will glorify it again."



- Then John tells us that there's a crowd there who thinks that the voice from heaven was either thunder or an angel, and Jesus speaks of the judgement of the world, and then talks about being "lifted up from the earth."
- You'll remember that we heard this language in last Sunday's sermon—John told us way back in Chapter 3, in that conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus, that just as Moses lifted up that serpent on a stick in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.
- And Jesus uses those same words here in chapter 12—he says "when I am lifted up" and John tells us in verse 33 that Jesus says this to indicate the kind of death he was to die—being lifted up on a cross—and the crowd that is there seems to understand what he's talking about because they question him about it, saying in verse 34 "We have heard from the Law that the Messiah"—the Greek word they use is Christos, the Christ—we have heard that the Christ remains forever, but you're talking about being lifted up—how can that be? And of course what they mean by that is this—we thought you were the Christ, the Messiah, and if you were the Christ you ought to be immortal—so we thought you were immortal, and here you are talking about dying? How does that work? You're not going to be here forever?
- And I want you to notice one more interesting thing here in these verses—if you look at what Jesus says here about being lifted up—he never uses the term "Son of Man" with the crowd and yet the crowd answers him saying "We have heard from the law that the Messiah remains forever. How can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up? Who is this Son of Man?" (*note: Jesus has used the phrase "Son of Man" in Chapter 12, but only with Philip and Andrew in verse 23, not in response to the crowd*)

- That “Son of Man” language is from way back in chapter 3—and so by having the crowd ask about the Son of Man, John is making a connection between chapter 3 and chapter 12—and the connection of course is the image of Christ’s being “lifted up” on the cross, like that snake on a stick in the wilderness who brings healing and in Jesus’ case, eternal life.
- Now look at the way that Jesus answers the crowd—he doesn’t say, “Let me define what “Son of Man” means for you”—no, he gives them what sounds like a warning that time is short, that he is not always going to be with them in his present form—Jesus says: “The light is with you for a little longer. Walk while you have the light, so that the darkness may not overtake you. If you walk in the darkness, you do not know where you are going. 36 While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light.”
- But John tells us in the verses that follow that not everyone chose to walk in the light, but chose instead to remain in their darkness—this is once again exactly the same language that Jesus uses in chapter 3, where in verse 19 he says: “And this is the judgment,”—remember what Jesus says here in Chapter 12 in verse 31—“Now is the judgement of this world”—chapter 3 verse 19 says : “this is the judgement that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.”
- I can’t tell you how many times my Dad used that verse on me when I was a teenager and wanted to stay out past my curfew—I’d say, “why can’t I stay out late? Everybody else does.” And he’d say “they love darkness because their deeds are evil”—and I’d have to be home by 11 o’clock.

- Now it would be easy to read these verses here in Chapter 12 and to think that here is a demonstration of the truth of what I was talking about at the beginning of this sermon—that these Greeks waited too late to see Jesus, that their chances have run out, and also that Jesus is warning this crowd that their time with him is limited, that the light is only going to be with them for just a little while longer, because pretty soon he’s going to be killed—pretty soon he’s going to be glorified, pretty soon he’s going to be lifted up from the earth.
- But while John tells us that Jesus said this in order to indicate the kind of death he was to die, crucifixion is only the beginning of Jesus’ being lifted up from the earth—because after he is lifted up from the earth on the cross, he is lifted up from the earth in resurrection, he is lifted up from the earth when he is raised from the dead, and thirdly, he is lifted up from the earth when he ascends into heaven.
- And so unlike the deaths of Neil Peart or John Prine or Eddie Van Halen, Jesus’ death—his being lifted up—doesn’t mean that the opportunity to see him, and to hear him, to have an experience of him and to interact with him, is lost—far from it—it remains, it even enlarges—notice what Jesus says in verse 32: And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself. They will be drawn by the cross, drawn to the cross.
- It is the cross to which Jesus points when he gives that rather strange answer to Philip and Andrew when they tell him that the Greeks want to see him. Jesus is reminding his disciples, and reminding us, that anyone who wants to “see” Jesus—to really perceive and experience his presence and power—sees not only the one who works miraculous signs and wonders, not only the supernatural healer, not only the great teacher, not only the activist and critic of the status quo, not only the target of

the long arm of the authorities, but to see Jesus, to truly see Jesus, is to see the one who is lifted up from the earth, the one who is glorified on the cross—and to see Jesus is to see the glory of God.

- But Jesus' response to his disciples doesn't stop at just "seeing." Now that the hour has come, Jesus, who has said to his disciples, "follow me" since the beginning of John's gospel, now makes it clear just where his disciples, those who would follow him, are destined to go with him—as he tells us in verse 26: Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also.
- Jesus does not mince words here—he is on the road to the cross and the time has come for him to be lifted up—and he calls his disciples to follow in his footsteps, saying "where I am, there will my servant be also." Verses 24 and 25 let us know the depth of what Jesus is asking of his followers. Jesus says "Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life." This is what it means to serve the Lord. "Whoever serves me must follow me," Jesus says. Those who would follow Jesus are called to no less than the giving of their lives, the sacrifice of themselves, the crucifixion of their sinful and selfish identities that lead to death in exchange for the promise of eternal life for those who would bear much fruit for the Kingdom. We bear much fruit because when Jesus is lifted up, He draws all people to Himself.
- Jesus is asked about "seeing" but he responds with "service" and "sacrifice."
- It's one thing to see, and even to hear—even to "believe"—but Jesus calls for service and sacrifice from His followers—Jesus calls us to follow Him to the cross, that where he is there will we be also---we are called to be lifted up, and to lift up the cross of

Jesus with our lives every minute of every day—to follow in Jesus’ footsteps, to proclaim that “I no longer live but Christ lives in me” so that when people look at us they see Jesus—when they want to see Jesus and they look at the church, they see the cross lifted up, they SEE the Body of Christ—because we, the church, followers of Jesus, those who call themselves Christians, we are to be the Body of Christ—the Body of Christ—and what that means is nothing less than this—now hear this church, this is a message for each of us and for all of us today:

- we are called to be the Jesus that people see.
- WE ARE CALLED TO BE THE JESUS THAT PEOPLE SEE
- What a calling, what a responsibility, what a privilege—with God’s help and the power of the Holy Spirit I know that the Church can be the Jesus that people see—and I believe we will be—I believe we’ll bear much fruit and draw all people to the cross of Jesus.
- The hour has come—and there are exciting times ahead. We hope you’ll be a part of the glorious work of the church in these days.
- God bless you this week, and we’ll see you next time.