Second Sunday after the Epiphany

John 1:35-51

A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

St. Brendan Episcopal Church 1-17-21

We had an interesting and somewhat "unfinished" discussion in Bible study this past Wednesday as we took a close look at the Gospel text appointed for this morning from the 1st chapter of John to **see** what Jesus' first disciples **saw** when they were called to "Come and see" Jesus as a first step in their discipleship to him…

Each of those disciples, as we read in our Gospel text for this morning, **seeing** Jesus in a different way, setting the stage for the question John will spend the rest of his Gospel inviting his readers to ponder…

The question, "What do you see when you see Jesus, and how does that seeing shape your life?"

If these fifteen verses in chapter 1 of John's Gospel are an attempt to say what the disciples **saw** when they were invited to "come and **see"** Jesus, you will notice there are a multiplicity of responses beginning with John the Baptist's declaration, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world"… followed by the disciples' numerous descriptors for Jesus, including "Rabbi" (which means teacher), "the messiah," (which means the anointed one), "the one about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote," "son of Joseph from Nazareth," "son of God"… "King of Israel."

Making for a very comprehensive list, each title or descriptor resonating with images, stories and expectations from the Hebrew Scriptures, all of them together living in service to John-the-Gospel-writer's hope that over the course of his Gospel his readers would come to **see** the "truth" about Jesus' identity… his purpose, his passion, his cosmic essence and his incarnate presence, none of it easy to quantify, define, describe, categorize or put into three-ring binders for safe-keeping, especially as, on the surface of things, **most descriptors for Jesus seemed to be rendered null and void by virtue of his suffering and death…** and then, after Easter, surprisingly on the move again, but not in any physical way that made Jesus' presence recognizable to his followers.

No wonder none of the characters in John's Gospel ever did see what Jesus was hoping they would see according to John.. not even his disciples… No wonder the folks in John's late first century community struggled to see "who Jesus was" as well, even as they read John's Gospel, "hot off the press" to speak… No wonder we struggle too, two millennia later, to answer the question, "What do you see when you see Jesus, and how does that seeing shape your life?"

This is the struggle we had in Bible study last Wednesday; a struggle that had some real "real-life" urgency to it as we talked about the flags carried in the attack on our nation's capital on January 6th that read, "Jesus Saves"… Those "Jesus Saves" flags, alongside Trump flags, and American flags, and Confederate flags raising important and challenging questions for our little group of Bible study folks…

Questions like, "How do we formulate our vision (our understanding) of Jesus, and how does that understanding shape our lives?" "Is there a "right" way to see him?" "Who gets to decide?" "Where do the folks who fly the flags that say 'Jesus Saves' alongside the Confederate flag get their understanding of him?"

These were just some of the questions we were wrestling with when Bible study came to an end on Wednesday, which I why I said our time together was "unfinished." But I have spent a good deal of time thinking about these questions the past few days. And while I too still wrestle with the best way to articulate a clear concise response to the question, **"What do you see when you see Jesus, and how does that seeing shape your life?"** two things have been helpful in my wrestling…

One, a small but very significant re-write of the popular saying, "What **would** Jesus do?" (which of course can elicit responses of quite a subjective nature)… Re-writing it instead to ask, "What **did** Jesus do?"

Because really, the only place we can look for answers to that question are the four Gospels in the New Testament, and they all answer that question with great uniformity saying, "**Here is what Jesus did**… He healed the sick, he fed the hungry, he comforted the bereaved, he forgave the sinners, he restored sight to the blind, he touched the lepers, he proclaimed good news to the poor, and he invited everyone to the table, from the Pharisees to the prostitutes…

He challenged the systems that benefitted the rich over the poor and undermined every oppressive, fear-inducing policy Rome had invented to keep the marginalized in their "right" places. And he did so by way of imaginative storytelling and parable… by way of nonviolent resistance… by way of compassion and "suffering with"… by way of love…

"What did Jesus do?" All four Gospels agree; he said things that turned the "wisdom of the world" on its head… Things like,

"Love your enemy,

pray for those who persecute you,

if someone takes your shirt, give them your coat also,

if you want to save your life, you must lose it…"

Words to which he bore witness not only through speech, but through his body as well…

If we want to consider the question, “What do you see when you see Jesus?” maybe we should start by looking at what he **did** as recorded in the only place that tells the story of his “doings”… Because what he **did** was who he was…

The other thing that has been of help to me following our “unfinished” Bible study is an ancient legend about a jeweler who was known for his exquisite work in jade and for his dedication to using only the truest, most authentic pieces of jade in his work, unlike so many other jewelers who tried to use “jade substitutes” and to pass them off as real…

The legend tells of a young man who came to the jeweler one day and asked to be his apprentice… A request to which the jeweler agreed, but only upon the condition that the young man would begin his work by spending all the time necessary learning how to tell true jade from its fake counterparts…

A condition to which the young man agreed, thinking the jeweler would engage him right away in the fascinating process of testing various pieces of beautiful jade-like stone for their authenticity… But instead, on the first morning of his apprenticeship the jeweler asked the young man to open his hand, into which the jeweler placed an exquisite piece of jade, saying to his student, “Your work for today is to hold this piece of jade in your hand for an hour. Look at it. Hold it to the light. Study it. Get to know it. Then go home and come back tomorrow…”

This went on day after day, week after week, month after month, the young man growing increasingly anxious to begin the “real” work of jewelry making, and increasingly frustrated with the sole task given him every morning to simply hold the piece of jade in his hand and to “Look at it, to hold it to the light, to study it, and to get to know it.”

His frustration leading him finally one morning to tell the jeweler he was quitting, seeing as he wasn’t learning anything about jewelry-making, not even the very first step in discerning real jade from fake substitutes…

So, as the legend goes, the jeweler told the young man he was sad to see him go, but that he had a parting gift to give him… Whereupon he put an exquisite (but inauthentic) gemstone into the young man’s hand; an exact replica of the one he had given him every morning for the previous months. A gemstone the young man held for just a fleeting moment, and then exclaimed, “This isn’t even real jade… Anyone can see that!”

“No,” said the jeweler… “Not just anyone… Only someone who has spent so much time in relationship to the real thing, the true thing, he knows its colors, its feel, its song, its inner being, its essence, its heart… This is what you have been coming to know over the many days you have held the authentic piece of jade in your hand. And now you are ready to begin the work of jewelry-making…”

I share this story because over the past days, as I have wrestled with the questions raised in Bible study, I have come to believe that being a Christian isn't about "believing" certain creedal formulations or propositional statements **about** Jesus… Rather it's a decision to hold in our hands, in our hearts the stories about what Jesus **did,** as told in the four Gospels, until we come to know the color of them… the feel, the song, the essence, the heart, the dream, the passion of them…

It's about holding in our hands and our hearts the stories of Jesus, as the apprentice did the piece of the jade, so we can begin to sense what **authentic** love in the way of Jesus looks like and feels like…

On this Sunday when we celebrate the work and the witness of Martin Luther King Jr. and others in the Civil Rights Movement, I am struck by how true and authentic that work and witness was and continues to be to the "jade stone" we might call Jesus…

Because like Jesus, Martin and John Lewis and Howard Thurman and Rosa Parks and Ruby Bridges and countless others **did** the hard work necessary for the sake of a dream in which the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners would be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood… a dream of a time when people would be judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character… a dream of a time when little black children and little white children would be able to join hands as sisters and brothers…

A dream not unlike the dream of Jesus, who by what he **did** revealed the dream of the God made known in our Holy Scriptures… a dream where-in good news was proclaimed to the poor, recovery of sight given to the blind, freedom extended to the captives, and all God's children granted a place at the table…

Yes, all of this… all of this we see when we hold up the dream and the work and the witness of Martin Luther King Jr. and others, and find their work and their witness to be authentic and true to what Jesus dreamed and to what Jesus **did**…

But what I want to say this morning is that just as importantly we see that the work and the witness of Martin Luther King Jr. and others was authentic and true to the **way** Jesus did what he did…

A **way** reflected in these words spoken by Martin Luther King Jr. in his speech on the National Mall on August 28, 1963 when he said…

"There is something I must say to my people who stand on the warm threshold which leads into the palace of justice. In the process of gaining our rightful place we must not be guilty of wrongful deeds…

Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred. We must forever conduct our struggle on the high plane of dignity and discipline.

We must not allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence. Again and again we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force…

Words similar to those spoken on another occasion when Martin Luther King Jr. said, "*Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate. Only love can do that."*

Similar also to the words spoken on another occasion when he said, "*I have decided to chose love, because hate is too heavy a burden to bare"…*

Words very similar to those Jesus spoke when he said, "Love your enemy… Pray for those who persecute you… If you want to save your life, you must lose it"….

As we consider how we, as Christians, will live into the challenges and fears of this next week and beyond… As we, as Christians, consider how we can live alongside the neighbor who flies both a "Jesus saves" flag and an American flag on his flag pole, I really don't know how to go about it except to hold the stories about what Jesus **did** and the **way** in which he did it in our hands and in our hearts until we come to know their color and their feel and their song and their purpose and their passion…

To look at those stories, to hold them to the light, to study them, and to get to know them until the spirit of Christ within them begins to transform our lives to reflect their light, their passion for the world God so loves…

I think it's our only hope… because by so doing we will come to see the very thing John-the-Gospel-writer hoped his readers would see when they came to see Jesus… This… **That what Jesus did and the way in which he did it is what God has always been doing… what God is still doing in the way in which God has always done it…**

That is, in the way of accompanying, suffering love… the only power in the world authentic enough, true enough, to transform darkness into light, hate into love, death into life…

Which is why, for John-the-Gospel-writer, the moment when we have the clearest, truest most authentic vision of the gem-stone that is God, is the moment when Jesus is lifted up on the cross, taking into himself all the hatred and vitriol and fear and scapegoating the world has to give, and giving back only love…

Extending that love to all of God's children, without exception… to you and to me so we might **"come and see",** and despite all that holds us in fear, might reach toward that love and sing, "Precious Lord, take my hand, lead me on, let me stand. I am tired, I am weak, I am worn. Through the storm, through the night, lead me on to the light. Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me on."

In thanksgiving for the work and witness of Martin Luther King Jr. and those who walked with him. And in the strong sure name of Jesus. Amen.