

Surprise

Luke 24:13-35

CWZepp, BWCOB, April 26, 2020

I'm standing in the Agape Room at the Bridgewater Church of the Brethren. If you are a part of our community and you aren't familiar with this space, it is probably because you aren't a child or don't have children right now. This is the room where our children's choirs gather for rehearsals, where our puppets practice, and where the Agape Sunday School class meets. But it's also the place where we gather for Children's worship several times a month during the school year, at least it was before we stopped being able to meet together last month.

A little over a year ago I was standing in this same place for one of the last Sunday's of Children's worship for that season. Our scripture was the story of the walk to Emmaus, which Robert just shared with us. Our theme in Children's Worship that year was "Companions on the Journey," and this scripture was our master story in that theme.



One of the blessings of sharing in leadership with children is the way that it often makes you consider a story in a new light – to see it in a new way than you have previously as you try to see it with the eyes of a child. And that happened to me last year when I was preparing to share this story with our kids that Sunday. I don't really know why, but I hadn't noticed until then that these two unheralded disciples – one named Cleopas, and another who is never named – had spent the better part of a day walking and talking with Jesus, even inviting him into their home and to their table, but they didn't recognize him. And it suddenly occurred to me to ask – why? We assume these two had been followers of Jesus – at least they speak as if they were. So why didn't they recognize him?

As I was preparing for that Sunday in Children's worship, I imagined one of the kids asking me that question. And I realized I didn't have a good answer for them. Obviously, the main characters in the story were surprised to realize that they had been in Jesus' presence.

I recalled then a painting to which I had been introduced in seminary – Supper at Emmaus, by the early 17th century Italian painter Caravaggio¹.

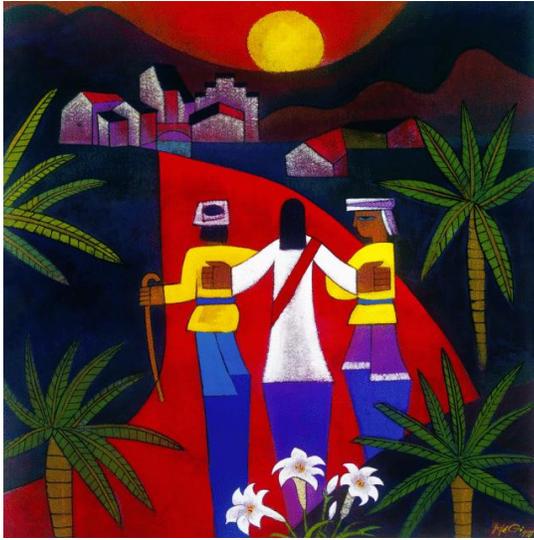


[Slide] And for some reason that guy pushing himself back from the table in shock resonated with me anew. He embodied for me what I suddenly realized was the whole point of the story. Surprise. And it likewise became obvious to me that the Jesus whom those two met on the Emmaus Road wasn't the Jesus that is shown in this picture. They weren't expecting him, true. But he must not have looked like they expected Jesus would. He must not have been like they were expecting him to be. And that was something to think about.

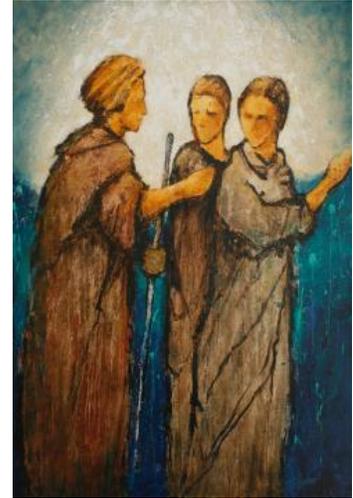
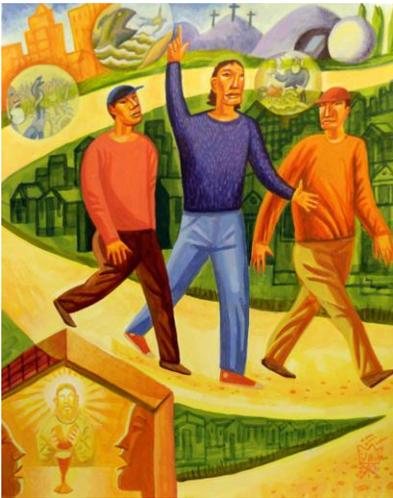
So I went searching for other art based on the Emmaus Road. And we ended up playing a bit of a game in Children's worship that Sunday with the images. "Where is Jesus?" I asked them as I showed them some of these pictures. Sometimes it was really obvious. Or at least as expected. [4 slides]



¹ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Supper_at_Emmaus_\(Caravaggio,_London\)#/media/File:1602-3_Caravaggio,Supper_at_Emmaus_National_Gallery,_London.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Supper_at_Emmaus_(Caravaggio,_London)#/media/File:1602-3_Caravaggio,Supper_at_Emmaus_National_Gallery,_London.jpg)



Other times, it was a bit more ambiguous, but we could probably still pick him out. [3 slides]



And sometimes, it was impossible to really tell. [slide] Jesus could be any one of those three.



So then we talked together about the question – “How would we recognize Jesus if he were to come among us?” And I finally confessed to them my answer to that question – We probably wouldn’t. At least not until after the fact. That’s what happened to those two disciples on the road to Emmaus.

One commentator on this scripture related that one of his pastors in seminary was fond of saying, “God’s other name is Surprise.”²

How fitting. Because in truth, that is probably how we meet God most often today. Maybe we were expecting something bad or blah – or weren’t expecting anything at all – and we suddenly realize that we were in the presence of the divine. Or maybe a familiar person, place, or situation yields a surprising glimpse of Jesus. Or maybe we only realize in looking back that Christ was present in a particular moment or in a stranger.

I’ve asked some friends to share their own stories of such surprising “God Moments” in their lives – times when like those two who had walked along the road to Emmaus with Jesus – they unexpectedly realized that they had been on a journey with Jesus. I trust that you will find their stories as heartening as I did...

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

With Hymn #353

Lord, listen to your children

*Lord, listen to your children praying,
Lord, send your Spirit in this place;
Lord, listen to your children praying,
Send us love, send us power, send us grace!*

God, like your followers so long ago in the days right after Easter, we are an unsettled people. So many thoughts and emotions compete for attention in our hearts and minds – we are often overwhelmed and we don’t know what to do. We are restless and anxious, worried and afraid, grieving and bitter, confused and disillusioned. The journey that we are on right now is so different from the one we imagined only a few weeks ago. Our plans have been shattered, our “normal” has been upended, our sense of balance shaken. Our world has been turned upside down. And we struggle to know how to continue with our daily lives. What are we to do, God? How are we to be in this time?

*Lord, listen to your children praying,
Lord, send your Spirit in this place;
Lord, listen to your children praying,
Send us love, send us power, send us grace!*

² Roger A. Paynter. *Feasting on the Gospels. Luke, Vol. 2.* p. 355.

So many things occupy our thoughts and prayers, O God:

We pray for the health and safety of ourselves, our friends, families, and loved ones near and far

For neighbors and strangers and loved ones who are hurting from the effects of the coronavirus – whether from disease or death, loss of jobs or livelihood, loneliness or isolation, depression or addiction, ruined plans or dashed dreams, stress or overwork

For health care professionals, grocery workers, custodial staff, first responders, and all those essential workers who are braving the front lines of response, care, and continuance of services

For those who must journey now through sickness or hospitalization or death alone and cut off from their loved ones, and for those who want nothing more than to be with those they love and cannot

For local and national leaders who are making decisions with the health and well-being of so many in the balance

For students and educators and social service providers and so many others who are needing to discern and learn new ways of fulfilling their roles

For the businesses and nonprofits who are struggling to make ends meet, many wondering if they will even make it through this crisis

For our connections to our global community, which seem to have both expanded and shrunken in the last few months as we have come to be aware of how very much we are all connected and bound together.

For all of these God, and so many others which remain unspoken – hear our prayers...

*Lord, listen to your children praying,
Lord, send your Spirit in this place;
Lord, listen to your children praying,
Send us love, send us power, send us grace!*

But God we remain grateful.

We give thanks for those precious few with whom we are still able to share hugs and hold hands

For the beauty and bounty of the earth – for the sun that rises each day; for the plants and animals that give us pleasure, companionship, and food; for the passing of the seasons, and the rest that comes with the night

For the wonders of technology that can connect us even now, letting us hear the voices and see the faces of those from whom we are separated

For the efforts of our neighbors, our nation, and our fellow global citizens to provide for our continuing needs, address our concerns, provide security, and search for solutions

For this family of faith, which is somehow able to comfort and sustain us even though we are apart, and in which we have an ever growing appreciation for the ties that bind us one to another.

For the surprising ways that we experience grace and love, that we find ourselves in the presence of Jesus, and that we are reminded of where to find hope and joy

O God, we could keep on praying, even though in truth, we don't really know how. But we take comfort in knowing that you know our hearts and minds even better than we do ourselves, and that the Spirit intercedes for us with those sighs that are too deep for words. And so we trust it to be...

*Lord, listen to your children praying,
Lord, send your Spirit in this place;
Lord, listen to your children praying,
Send us love, send us power, send us grace!*

Amen.

Benediction

Some of you are aware that today is the last Sunday that our Youth Ministry Intern, Kasey Carns, will be with us. She has now completed her last final at Bridgewater College, and is set to "virtually" graduate. After spending the better part of the last eight months as an intern with us, her last day serving our congregation will be this coming Thursday, April 30.

This is certainly not the way that any of us imagined Kasey would conclude her service with us. And like so many other seniors today, this is just one of many rather anticlimactic ends to this season of her life. Perhaps sometime in the future we will have the opportunity for Kasey to be back among us so that we can extend our blessings and best wishes to her in person and in a more fitting way. But for now, this will have to do.

So Kasey – thank you. Thank you for sharing yourself with us in ministry and service over this past year. We wish you the very best and pray God's blessing upon you in the next stage of your life journey. Don't be a stranger...you'll always have a special place among us.

And now to all of you, as we conclude this time of virtual worship together –

May the Lord bless you and keep you.

May the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you.

May the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace...as we travel down this road...