

**+ Jeremiah 31:31-34 + The Foolishness of the Cross: The Cross Means Hidden Glory +
+ 5th Sunday in Lent + 13 March 2016 +**

Have you ever heard of a “hidden masterpiece”? Basically it’s a work of art by a master artist discovered beneath another work of art. Picasso, Van Gogh, Rembrandt, and others often reused their canvasses. So the original paintings or sketches remain hidden underneath more familiar works of art for many years until restorers noticed faint lines of another picture. Soon with a little help from x-ray technology, those “hidden masterpieces” were revealed.

A couple years ago restoration work was being done in a grand room in the Sforza Castle in Milan, Italy.¹ The castle had changed hands many times in its 600 years. The room with its vaulted ceilings had once actually been whitewashed and turned into a stable for soldiers’ horses. As restorers worked to return the room to its former glory, they discovered traces of artwork beneath almost 20 layers of whitewash. As the restorers carefully removed the whitewash, they discovered a beautiful mural from floor to ceiling depicting a canopy of mulberry trees. The trunks of the trees went up the columns. The branches full of life intertwined with each other and covered the ceiling connected with uniquely delicate knots—and then the restorers realized what they had found. This wasn’t just a work of art hidden beneath centuries of whitewash, but a glorious masterpiece created by none other than the master artist Leonardo da Vinci. Da Vinci had been commissioned to do the work back in 1498, but for almost 500 years, no one realized the glory hidden right above their heads up on the ceiling.

In the midst of misery, the Lord asked his weary prophet Jeremiah to add to his millennia-old masterpiece of the coming Savior. Misery was everywhere because the end of God’s great kingdom of Israel, specifically the small, surviving portion known as Judah, was drawing near. The Assyrian Empire from faraway Iraq had already wiped out the northern kingdom that had once been occupied by ten tribes of Israel. The Lord had brought judgment on his rebellious people and scattered them to the four winds. The Assyrians had burned and pillaged their way right up to the gates of the capital city of Jerusalem, but the Lord miraculously rescued his people.

For 200 more years, the little kingdom survived...but destruction soon arrived at Jerusalem’s gates. The people and their wicked kings had rejected the true God again and again and again for false gods, giving the appearance that they followed him by going through the motions, when in reality they were nothing more than hypocrites. By this time, the Babylonian Empire had risen up and destroyed the Assyrians. The Babylonians had already come to Judah and sent the best and brightest of their people into exile over 1,000 miles away to the east. More misery was coming though. More would go into exile and Jerusalem with God’s glorious temple would be destroyed.

The prophet Jeremiah had the unenviable task of proclaiming this awful news to the kings and people of Judah. The images of God’s judgment that he proclaimed were terrifying. His messages from God that the people should give up led many to consider him a traitor. His prophetic task was to tear down and destroy, but also to build up and plant. For those who remained faithful to the Lord, the weary prophet had beautiful words of hope—not in an earthly king or kingdom, but in the Lord of grace who not only controls all things, but blesses his people no matter where they are.

So in the midst of all that misery, almost hidden beneath the broad strokes of God’s judgment, the Lord of grace had his weary prophet add another brilliant detail to the portrait of the coming Savior. You see, the Lord had started that portrait back in the Garden of Eden several thousand years before when God promised the coming of a Savior who crush Satan’s power at the cost of his own life. Over the centuries, the Lord had added to that portrait promising Abraham that through his son Isaac **“all nations on earth will be blessed through you”** (Genesis 22:18) and providing a ram as a substitute sacrifice for his son.

The Lord had made the same promise to Jacob as he fled from the consequences of his foolish selfishness. The Lord promised that all nations would be blessed through One from Jacob’s line who would come to be the lone path between God and humanity. In other ways through other people the Lord added details to that masterpiece of the coming Savior, whether that was the sacrifices of lambs and goats and cattle for the sins of the people or a bronze serpent put up on a pole to give healing and life to those attacked by serpents. A Savior would come whose blood would be shed for the sins of all. He would be lifted up to give life to those attacked by sin and Satan.

¹ <http://news.discovery.com/history/art-history/lost-da-vinci-artwork-uneearthed-beneath-layers-of-paint-131028.htm>

Centuries passed and the Lord added other details through prophets and kings, but the masterpiece wasn't complete. It still needed a few details before the Savior depicted there would come. So the Lord of grace used his weary prophet Jeremiah to add one more detail in the midst of misery.

“The time is coming,’ declares the Lord, ‘when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah.’ A new covenant? Now you and I don't use the word “covenant” all that often anymore, but to Old Testament believers, that word was huge! The Lord had established a “covenant” or agreement with Abraham that the Savior would come through his family line. It was a one-sided agreement through which God would do everything, including the saving.

About 800 years before the time of Jeremiah, the Lord made another covenant—a two-sided covenant with the Israelites. If they obeyed his commands and remained faithful to him, God promised to bless them and be with their nation, but they failed...miserably...often—in spite of the Lord's constant faithfulness. Finally after 800 years, their time of grace had come to an end. God said, “Enough!” and removed his blessing and presence from Israel. Yet for those who remained faithful to him, the Lord promised, ***“It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them.”***

The Lord himself was going to do something glorious for his faithful people through the coming Savior. ***“This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time...I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest... For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”*** In the dark depths of their misery, the Lord of grace poured out his forgiveness and mercy. He himself would change lives and make them holy through the One who would restore them to God.

...But how would that happen? What would the masterpiece look like when it was done? That wasn't Jeremiah's task. About a century later the portrait was finished with the final words of the prophets, but then 400 years of silence followed. Many forgot. The promises gathered dust while many focused on other things and other so-called messiahs. Soon the true glory of the coming Messiah, who would bring the forgiveness of sins, was hidden to most.

By the time Jesus arrived, many were looking for a savior from sin, but from the hated Romans, one who would establish a mighty Jewish kingdom to rule the world. Although the One portrayed in that magnificent masterpiece of God's Old Testament promises was right there in front of them, many didn't notice. They thought Jesus was another great prophet or teacher, an amazing miracle worker, someone who could take care of their wants and needs. After all, he wasn't much to look at. He wasn't all that impressive. He was always on the move, living in poverty going from town to town teaching the Word of God. He raised a few people from the dead. He cast out demons, and healed the sick, but those were glimpses of who Jesus really was—the almighty God, the long-promised Savior. So his glory remained hidden beneath human flesh like yours and mine.

Even though his glory was so hidden, it was still there the whole time. Jesus came to do what the Lord of grace had promised over 500 years before. He had come to make that ***“new covenant”*** between the holy God and all humanity. He had come to be the only pathway between the holy God and us. He had come to bring God's eternal blessings to all nations, but to do so he had to be your substitute sacrifice and mine.

So you find the Savior bloody and battered and bruised—betrayed by one of his own, abandoned by his closest followers, suffering injustice at the hands of those who should've recognized him and the representatives of the government he had established. You find Jesus beneath the humiliation and misery of a very real, heavy, wooden cross. You find him dragging it out to Golgotha and then his arms and legs stretched out on that cross. You see his blood pour out as soldiers pierce his hands and feet, before they lift him up with a crown of thorns pushed into his head. He suffers terribly for three hours on that cross with all the guilt and pain and sorrow of every one of us who have ever lived crushing down on his shoulders. You find him enduring the punishment of hell, the very punishment we all deserve, in the thick darkness, and yet he cries out victoriously, ***“It is finished.”*** (John 19:30) In that moment, hanging dead on that cross while the earth shakes and rocks shatter, you see the most beautiful masterpiece in human history finally revealed. You see there on the cross the hidden glory of God's forgiveness.

You see God's love in all its glorious beauty in the bloody body of your Savior. You see why God forgives your wickedness, your sin, your guilt as timid friends place his lifeless body in the tomb since God has judged him in

your place. But then three days later, you see why the Lord of grace remembers your sin no more. The tomb stands empty. For a brief moment, you see that hidden glory as you with his disciples touch his nail-pierced hands and feet. You see the spear mark in his side. Through his Word, you see him very much alive. You see that glimpse of glory, and you know that the Lord of grace has kept his promise to you and me and many others.

The church season of Lent is really for sinners, and the bottom line of Jeremiah's prophecy is the bottom line for sinners like you and me. ***"For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."*** There's been hidden glory all along the way as we've followed Jesus to the cross, but it all comes together in that fulfilled promise of forgiveness. That glory remains hidden beneath the cross and even in the empty tomb. Yet that hidden glory makes bearing the crosses of this life worth it when the Lord allows you to carry one because he bore his cross for you. That hidden glory proves that there is nothing foolish about the cross. That hidden glory is God's masterpiece that he painted for sinners long ago like you and me.

In these last days before we follow Jesus to the cross and empty tomb, don't go looking for great outward glory in Jesus. Don't expect great outward glory in his Church either or in your life as a Christian. Don't look for any of that. The cross means hidden glory. Instead keep your eyes of faith fixed on the glory of God's "hidden masterpiece" in the Savior who lived and died and rose for you. Amen.