

At a distance: Luke 23:1-49

by [Ted Wardlaw](#) in the [March 20, 2007](#) issue

Several years ago I attended a museum exhibit featuring the works of Vincent van Gogh. It was not an altogether pleasant experience because there was a man in my group who had a peculiar way of taking in each painting. He would stand about an inch away and then move slowly from one side to another, examining each strand of canvas, each dollop of paint. After he had scanned the entire surface of the painting, he would turn and make his way back across with his right ear about an inch away from the canvas. He examined every single painting in this manner. The rest of us, of course, could see nothing except the portion of the painting not covered by the man's considerable size.

Throat clearings and groans from the rest of us did no good. Eventually one member of our group said, "Sir, you're ruining this experience for the rest of us." Whereupon the man turned and lectured all of us. "This is the proper way to get an appreciation for the inner integrity of a painting," he said. "In order to truly experience it, you have to stand up close. If you're trying to understand it from as far away as all of you are, then you're all just lost!" With that, he returned to his microscopic scrutiny.

I think that strange moment yields a metaphor. We spend a great deal of time looking at life as that man looked at art: up close, maybe an inch or so away from its vast landscape, where it's impossible to sense any perspective whatsoever. We focus upon each strand of canvas and each dollop of paint, and thus lose any sense of essential patterns, themes and harmonies that may be right there under our noses.

To be sure, insights are gained from an up-close approach. Scientists discover worlds visible only through a microscope. Therapists help us explore a seemingly random fragment of our personal history that proves to be a key that unlocks some psychic attic door. I have preached a fairly effective sermon or two that focused upon one tiny Greek preposition or Hebrew infinitive.

But there is a great danger to such an approach. Living life without the sweep of a larger perspective can invite a certain moral numbness; some things cannot be

absorbed from up close.

This may never be truer than during Holy Week, and in the events that run from Palm Sunday to Easter. Luke understands—better, I suspect, than any of the other Gospel writers—that we can't take in these events if we stand too close to the canvas. In the text for Palm/Passion Sunday, he loads the drama with a catalog of emotions. The trial of Jesus. The complicity of the religious establishment. The contempt of Herod and his soldiers. The way in which, in the face of a common enemy, Herod and Pilate become friends. The release of a man who deserves execution. The daughters of Jerusalem weeping. The crucifixion. The prayer, "Father, forgive them . . ." The soldiers mocking Jesus. The darkness. The death.

Preachers approaching this text may be tempted to chop it into little bits—to choose one theme in order to make the task of preaching more manageable. I encourage them instead to step back, behold the whole sweep of events and attempt to articulate a drama that is larger than the sum of its various parts. This text is no longer manageable on the stage of our own deciding. It's God stuff, and God the Father is in charge here—not the disciples, not Pilate, not us, not even Jesus. Only those who stand back and experience the canvas as a whole will receive the impact of this story in the way the Creator intended for it to be.

At the very end of this sweep of events, by the way, Luke drops—like a handkerchief—what I believe is the most intriguing sentence in the whole text. "But all of his acquaintances," he writes, "including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things."

There is an important perspective that comes with distance, and Luke has a singular appreciation for this. So often in his Gospel, insight and distance go together. In the next chapter, for example, we see that it is not someone from the inner sanctum—one of the disciples—who runs from the empty tomb with the first news of resurrection. No, it's one of those same women, who from the distance that comes with being marginalized is able to believe what the disciples have trouble believing.

It often takes such distance—a certain deliberateness about standing far enough away from the canvas—to discern the hand of God in the patterns of the world. Stand too close to the canvas, too close to see anything but the minutia, and two things, paradoxically, happen at the same time. The world loses its ability to terrify, and the gospel loses its power to redeem.

Luke challenges us to find our places next to these people standing there on the edge of things, and to take in, with them, all of the events of this story, each in turn, as the powers and principalities deliver the worst they can summon upon the cross of Jesus Christ. The challenge is to stand far enough away from the canvas to overcome the numbing familiarity that attends our knowing this story backward and forward. The challenge is to see it—in both its terror and redemption—as if for the first time; and then observe that at the end of it all, God is still in charge. God's ongoing drama with history and human life is still unfolding. Hallelujah.