

March 24, Passion B (Mark 14:1-15:47)

## **We fix our gaze on the cross because if we look away we will miss something vital.**

by [Yvette Schock](#) in the [March 2024](#) issue

In ancient Greek theories of vision, sight was about physical touch as much as visual perception. Extramission theories imagined the eye sending out beams of light or streams of fire to make contact with the world. Intromission theories suggested that every object emitted tiny replicas of itself, or constantly shed minute particles like a snake sheds its skin, and that these replicas or particles entered into the eye. Whether one imagined eye fire reaching out like tentacles or pictured particles or replicas of a lion or a loaf of bread or a child entering into one's eyes, according to these theories, eyesight was a phenomenon of touch, of physical connection.

With these theories of vision in mind, one can understand the urge to look away from pain. If vision physically connects the viewer to what is viewed, perhaps seeing some things risks harm.

When Jesus enters Jerusalem during the Passover festival, he creates a spectacle that means to be seen—the humble king riding on a donkey. Soon after, some people have seen enough. They look away from Jesus, seeking other sights. The chief priests and the scribes begin looking for a way to arrest Jesus, and later, once he has been arrested, they look for testimony against him. Judas looks for an opportunity to betray him. And the other disciples fall asleep, unable to keep their eyes open to Jesus' suffering in Gethsemane.

Others in the story move toward Jesus and do not look away. The woman who anoints Jesus at Simon's house sees he is walking toward death, and she comes near to him. Mary Magdalene, Salome, and other women follow Jesus along his way to the cross and stay through the hours of his suffering and death. They are still there when Joseph of Arimathea comes to take his lifeless body down, and they follow to see where his body is laid. All of these women risk the harm of seeing Jesus' pain. In artists' depictions of the Passion, they are often in focus; you see them seeing Jesus'

pain, and they suffer, too.

The ancients may have misunderstood the mechanics of the human eye, but their theories capture something true. When we see a loved one, a friend, a neighbor suffering, it touches us, grabs hold of us. It hurts.

In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag considers the impact of seeing suffering from a distance. "Being a spectator of calamities taking place in another country is a quintessential modern experience," she writes, an experience brought to us through the advent and development of war photography. "For a long time some people believed that if the horror could be made vivid enough, most people would finally take in the outrageousness, the insanity of war." But Sontag points out that a single photograph might provoke varied, even opposing responses: "A call for peace. A cry for revenge. Or simply the bemused awareness, continually restocked by photographic information, that terrible things happen."

In the 20 years since Sontag's book was published, the available stream of images from distant calamities has increased exponentially. We are no longer confronted occasionally by a single, shocking photograph on the front pages of newspapers around the world, or a video clip played on a loop on television news over and over again. Instead we face a daily inundation of images of grief and devastation, spilling from devices we keep in our pockets, under our pillows, and constantly in the palms of our hands.

What do we do with this torrent of images that demands and dilutes our attention all at once? The technology and devices that bring images of distant calamity into our sight offer no guidance to shape our response. They do not allow us time to feel, to seek context and understanding, or to deeply consider the lives of those whose suffering we see and the ways we are connected to them.

During Holy Week, we regard the story of Jesus' sorrow and pain at a vastly different pace than the numbing speed of scrolling. We hear the whole story on Passion Sunday, then come back again on Maundy Thursday and listen as Jesus shares a meal with his friends and offers himself as the bread of life. On Good Friday we keep silence as Jesus dies on the cross. We spend time with the story of his suffering, listening in community with others, expecting to be moved and formed by the story. We fix our gaze on the cross because God is revealed there, and if we look away we will miss something vital.

In this age of streaming images, our deep reading of the Passion story reminds us to take our time with other stories of human suffering, to watch with care, and to listen in community. It is a faith practice we need, that we might be not bemused spectators of calamity but faithful witnesses like the woman at Simon's house, like Mary Magdalene and Salome and the other women at the cross and the tomb, daring to move closer and finding God revealed there.