

Looking for Jesus
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John 12:20-33

20 Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. 21 They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” 22 Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus.

23 Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. 24 Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. 25 Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. 26 Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

27 “Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. 28 Father, glorify your name.” Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” 29 The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, “An angel has spoken to him.” 30 Jesus answered, “This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. 31 Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. 32 And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” 33 He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

SIR, WE WISH TO SEE JESUS

There’s a sign on our pulpit. It says, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” There are signs like that on pulpits everywhere.

You don't usually see those signs because the message is not for the congregation. The message is for the preacher. It is a reminder that our job is not to dazzle you with amazing oratory or regale you with funny stories.

In fact preaching is not about us at all. It's all about Jesus. You come here today to see Jesus. And if you leave here without seeing him, then I have failed as a preacher.

Someone once said that the best preacher is the one who is as transparent as glass. You should be able to see right through the preacher in order to see Jesus.

But, how can I be that way? How can I help us focus our hearts and minds on Jesus alone? I've found that we focus on almost anything else. We focus on the interruption of a cell phone. We focus on the sound of a crying child. We focus on the dress of the woman in the next pew. We focus on what we want for lunch.

Many of us come to church looking for Jesus, but we are easily distracted. How can we see Jesus? Where can we see him?

Since this is Lent you may have guessed the answer. We find Jesus when we look to the cross. If you want to see the Savior, we must see Him "lifted up from the earth" and drawing all people to himself. John tells us that when Jesus said that he was talking about the kind of death he was about to die.

AN UNUSUAL REQUEST AND REPLY

That's how our Scripture reading for today ends. But, our Scripture reading for today begins with those Greek pilgrims wanted to see Jesus.

The Greeks sought out Philip and said, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Philip was a Greek name and he came from a part of the world where Greek was spoken. I wonder if they approached Philip because he could speak their language.

Anyway, Philip understood. Philip went and told Andrew. And then Philip and Andrew went together to tell Jesus.

“Jesus, there are some Greek guys who want to see you. What do you want us to do?” Apparently this request was unusual. Greeks weren’t in the habit of asking to see Jesus.

But, Jesus’ reply is even more unusual. He doesn’t say anything about the Greeks who wish to see him. (Nor do we hear about this Greeks again.) Instead, Jesus says, “The time has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.”

What in the world is Jesus talking about and what ever happened to those Greek guys? Apparently, Greek folk asking to see Jesus is important in some way. But, what does it mean?

I think it symbolizes the fact that now the whole world now wants to see Jesus. Jesus’ fame has spread well beyond the confines of his Galilean ministry.

Even the Greeks are looking for Jesus. The crowds will increase, and that also means the danger to Jesus will increase as well.

If Greeks as well as Jews are coming to see Jesus, then this Jesus movement has surely gotten out of hand. The political and religious authorities will have to do something about it. Jesus knew that. So when the Greeks came to see him he said,
“The time has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.”

The religious and political authorities said,
“The time has come for Jesus to be crucified.” Little did they know that crucifixion and glorification were the same thing.

THE IMPORTANCE OF LAZARUS

In John’s gospel the crucifixion of Jesus is connected to one of Jesus’ greatest signs, the raising of Lazarus from the dead. After Lazarus was raised from the dead the crowds that followed Jesus were huge.

The religious leaders got together and said,

“If we let this thing gets much bigger the Romans will think that Jesus is the Messiah. They will come and destroy our holy place and our nation.”

And that's when the high priest said,

"It's better that one man be killed than a whole nation be destroyed." And from that moment on the religious authorities made their plans to put Jesus to death. (John 11:45-53)

John also adds his own commentary on their meeting. John wrote,

"Actually, the high priest was right. He was speaking prophetically and didn't know it! Jesus did die for his nation but not only for his nation. Jesus died for all of God's children. Jesus died for the world." (John 11:51-52)

The events that follow do nothing to slow down this inevitable march toward the cross.

Just before the Passover Jesus eats supper with Lazarus, the man he raised from the dead. At that meal Mary anointed Jesus' feet with expensive perfume, and according to Jesus this anointing was yet another foreshadowing of his impending death.

The crowds that had been following Jesus found out he was eating at Lazarus' house, and they flocked to see not only the man who could raise the dead but also the dead man who had been raised from the dead.

At that point the Jewish authorities decide that they would have to kill Lazarus as well as Jesus.

The next day, Jesus enters Jerusalem. It is what we call the triumphal entry. Like the other gospel accounts of the entry the people shout their hosannas. They cry out, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord."

But, in John's gospel there is something more. In John's gospel the hot topic of conversation as Jesus enters Jerusalem in triumph is once again the raising of Lazarus. There are people in the parade who can personally attest to the truth of this miracle.

And the crowds increase so much that the religious leaders cry out in despair,

“Do you see what’s happening? The whole world is going after Jesus. We have waited too long. There’s nothing that we can do to stop him.”

That proved to be prophetic as well because after the triumphal entry that’s when the Greeks come looking for Jesus. These Greeks symbolize the truth of what the religious leaders had said. The “whole world” had gone after Jesus.

And that meant the time had come for Jesus to be glorified. Jesus would soon be lifted up on the cross.

TAKE UP A CROSS

Jesus uses an analogy to get his point across. Jesus said that his glorification would be like a grain of wheat.

If you plant a grain of wheat it “dies” so to speak. But, what comes from that one grain of wheat is a bountiful harvest. The death and resurrection of Jesus will bring about a great harvest. In fact the whole world will be changed by the glorification of Jesus.

And glory of this event will rub off on Jesus’ disciples. Just as Jesus died and rose again so the disciples of Jesus will die to the old way of life in order to follow him. This is John’s way of talking about taking up a cross and following Jesus. The glorification of Jesus is just the beginning of a great harvest.

And this is also the answer to the request of the Greeks.

If you want to see Jesus, you look to the cross. But, more than that, if you want to see Jesus you must take up your cross and follow in the way of Jesus. You have to turn lose of the old life so that you may receive a new life.

The word Jesus uses sounds very strong. The NRSV translates, “Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” (25)

That's probably too literal an interpretation. The word translated "hate" means something like "love less" or "disregard." Compared to our new life in Christ the old life seems pretty insignificant.

I like the way Peterson in the Message connects the analogy about the wheat with this command to leave the old life behind. He translates verses 24 and 25,

"Listen carefully: Unless a grain of wheat is buried in the ground, dead to the world, it is never any more than a grain of wheat. But if it is buried, it sprouts and reproduces itself many times over.

In the same way, anyone who holds on to life just as it is destroys that life. But if you let it go, reckless in your love, you'll have it forever, real and eternal."

I have seen the truth of this passage play out in many different ways.

It is true from a job standpoint. If you are unwilling to leave the old life behind and seek employment in a new place, quite often you will not be able to advance in your vocation.

It is true from an emotional standpoint. If you are unable or unwilling to leave the pain of the past and embrace something new, you will always be emotionally stunted. Your life will not be what it could be.

And this is especially true from a spiritual standpoint. Following Jesus is not about getting more of what you already have. Following Jesus is about leaving everything behind so that you can become a part of something new. Following Jesus is about traveling light so that we can travel far. As Jesus put it in another place, "What good does it do us to gain the whole world and lose our soul?"

A man was jogging in the cemetery and saw a tombstone that caught his eye. It had so much written on it that he just had to stop and read it.

It was in essence the man's resume, a long list of the man's degrees, awards and achievements. It was as if the family wanted his stone to stand out among all the others.

His tombstone may have stood out, but his condition was the same as everyone around him. He was buried and his achievements didn't mean a thing.

As the apostle Paul put it,
"If for this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied." (1 Corinthians 15:19)

But, Jesus tells us that it doesn't have to be this way. If we understand the message of the cross we are freed to live as citizens of eternity. We are given a hope that allows us to leave the old way of life behind.

Henri Nouwen described the way of the cross. He wrote,

"It would be just another illusion to believe that reaching out to God will free us from pain and suffering. Often, indeed, it will take us where we would rather not go. But, we know that without going there we will not find life."

GLORY AND THE CROSS

Now the way of the cross is not an easy path to take. We all love the old life. In fact there is ample evidence that this was not easy for Jesus to take up the cross.

In the next section of our lesson for today Jesus laments the loss that will soon come his way. He says, "Now my soul is troubled."

This is John's version of Gethsemane. Jesus knows that the hour has come. It will be the hour when he is glorified, and yet it will also be the hour when he will lose his life. He is troubled to the depth of his being. He wonders if he should ask his Father to save him from this hour.

But, in John's gospel the struggle seems relatively short lived. The glory of God's purpose overwhelms the threat of the looming cross. Jesus ends this soliloquy by saying, "No this is why I have come to this hour."

And then Jesus reaffirms his sense of purpose by saying, "Father, glorify your name." In other words, Jesus is ready for the final act of the salvation story to play out.

A voice from heaven proclaims, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." In the cross and resurrection the power of God will be displayed on earth as it was when God delivered His people in the past.

When God speaks not everyone is able to hear the message. Some thought that it was thunder. Some thought that it was the voice of an angel.

But, some remembered this voice from heaven as being like the sound of that final trumpet proclaiming the beginning of a new creation.

Indeed, the cross in John's gospel marks the beginning of a cosmic conflict, the beginning of a new heaven and a new earth. This voice from heaven marks the time when God's kingdom come to earth.

The powers that be will be defeated and the evil one, the ruler of this fallen world will be vanquished. Jesus, will be lifted up from the earth and will draw all people to himself.

THE POWER OF CONVERSION

Jesus was lifted up in three ways.

1. He was lifted up on the cross, dying for the sins of the world.
2. He was lifted up in the resurrection, offering hope for eternal life.
3. And he was lifted up in the ascension, and at this time His Spirit came into the world changing the hearts of men and women.

But, it all began when Jesus was lifted up on the cross. On the cross the world was offered new life. On the cross God made it possible for people to go in a new direction.

We sometimes speak of this as conversion. I believe that the greatest power in the world is the power of conversion.

And in this passage conversion is not limited just to our people. Conversion, the opportunity to repent and believe is offered to all people.

Last Sunday we read the most famous verse in the Bible. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.”

That verse didn’t say, “God loved me and my close friends and those who think and believe like me.”

That verse said, “God loved the world.”

And this week we hear what that means. Even the Greeks are seeking Jesus. Those outside the faith are now being welcomed in. Those who were far off have now come near.

If the goal of God’s kingdom is to draw everyone into the kingdom by means of the gospel, then that is our goal as well. We must find ways to open our arms wide enough to welcome the world.

That’s a tall order. There are some in the world that we do not want to welcome. But, remember that enemies are only one conversion away from being a friend.

Last week I referred to Peter’s first sermon as recorded in the book of Acts. The people who heard that sermon had in some ways participated in the crucifixion of Jesus. You’ll remember that Peter ended his sermon by saying, “You crucified the one God sent to save you.”

But, by the power of God’s Spirit these former enemies become the first converts. Christianity spread because those who were partially responsible for the crucifixion of Christ became the first evangelists.

The power of the gospel is the power of conversion. On the cross God in Christ draws all people to himself. That is the glory of the cross.

It is the glory that comes when Jesus says on the cross, “Father, forgive them.”

And when the Jesus says that on the cross He draws all people to himself, and that also means you and me.

No matter who we are or where we are, in a sense we are always like those Greek guys.

We are looking for Jesus. We are trying to understand who He is. We are seeking salvation and forgiveness.

Jesus' one sentence answer to those of us who are seeking is this: Look to the cross.

On the cross we see forgiveness.

On the cross we see the glory of God.

On the cross we see a Savior whose sacrificial love reaches out to all people.

On the cross we see hope for eternal life that begins now and lasts forever.

If you're looking for Jesus, look to the cross.

That's where you'll see Him most clearly.

Amen.