

B Lent 5 3.17.24

John 12:20-32

Focus Statement: Jesus lifts the whole world up.

Lent five, it's go time friends. I've spent the week pulling together bulletins and liturgies for Palm Sunday, Holy Week, and Easter, because we are full-bore into it now. Easter is coming whether the bulletins are printed and the lilies ordered or not, we are in the waning days of getting ready for its arrival.

John twelve is a great text for go time, because it meets us with the same sense of urgency. Jesus said right in verse twenty-three that "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified." Which is an important shift, because prior to that, Jesus had said multiple times, "my hour has not yet come," but now it has. From here on out, Jesus is in a single-minded journey to the cross that cannot and will not be stopped. He has completed his mission on earth, the work he was to accomplish in the incarnation, and he is on to his glory which, seemingly inexplicably, will be found on the cross.

We're jumping, a theme this Lenten season seems to be the lectionary jumping, the committee never asks my opinion, from John 3 to John 12, so let's recap. Last week we heard Jesus speak about how "For God so loved the world, that God gave God's only Son." And world, remember, is a word that in John's Gospel specifically refers to those who would traditionally be seen as those who were against, or at least outside of, the ones considered to be the people of God. Keep that for God so loved the world line in mind, for this next part. The story just before this one is Palm Sunday, Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. An entry which in John's telling ends with the Pharisees, concerned about Jesus' increasing

popularity, remarking to each other, “[we] can do nothing. Look, the world—there’s that word world again—the world has gone after him.”

And then, as if to prove the Pharisees concern, our passage for this morning opens, “Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks.” The festival is the Passover, a time in which it would have been customary for Jews from all over the world to travel to Jerusalem to worship at the Temple. But what the Greek makes clear here is that these are not Greek-speaking Jews who came to see Jesus, they were Greeks. Like Greek-worshipping Greeks. They were there for Passover, so one could wonder if they were considering conversion, but the point is, they would have been, in the eyes of the Pharisees, “the world” that they were so concerned were going after Jesus. So the Greeks come to Jerusalem, find Philip and say to him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” And if your “I’ve heard this before” senses are tingling, this is an echo of John chapter one, where Jesus called his first disciples, Philip and Andrew included, with the invitation to “Come and see.” And it is when Jesus heard that, heard that “the world,” represented by these Greeks, had made this request, it was like a switch was flipped within him. Remember John three sixteen, “For God so loved the world that God gave God’s only Son, that whoever believes in him—and believing in John’s Gospel, remember isn’t intellectual ascent, it’s relationship—whoever believes in him, is in relationship with him, knows him and is known by him, may not perish but have eternal life,” when the thing for which God had given him to the world starts to happen, Jesus immediately was like, this part of my work is done, time for part two, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.”

So then we get this metaphor. “Very truly I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” So I was thinking about this metaphor, and at first it seemed off because grain doesn’t die when you bury it, it germinates. In fact, seeds die when you don’t bury them in the ground. You keep them in their little seed packet in your desk draw for long enough, and you no longer have seeds, you have bird food. You can plant them, but nothing’s going to happen. But if you plant them, then you have an abundance of food to feed all sorts of people. I can’t speak to grain; I’ve never tried to grow it. But I’m pretty good with zucchini, so I’ll speak to that. One zucchini seed in a seed packet is small, it’s not even a good snack for a bird. But one zucchini seed planted in the ground will make more zucchini than any one person or household can eat. The seed is just the thing that gets it started.

Teasing out this metaphor, I started to see how the incarnation, the Word becoming flesh and living among us in the person of Jesus Christ, was the seed of God’s redeeming power. It was the piece to get things started. Crucial and important and world-changing, but not the fullness of God’s glory. Because, think about it, in the incarnation, Jesus the divine-human one, was time and space bound in all the ways that we as humans are time and space bound. The Word became flesh could only be in one place at a time. He only had twenty-four hours in his day, and he had to sleep for some portion of them. In fact, this was two-thousand years ago, meaning he was even more space and time bound than we are, he did have cars or airplanes, or Facebook Live, Zoom calls, or any calls at all. In fact, most people at that time were illiterate, and there were no printing presses anyway, he couldn’t even write a letter and get it to the masses. It’s a weird thing to say that God was limited,

but in the incarnation, in the person of Jesus Christ, God kind of was. Limited by the same constraints that limit all of humanity. Limitation was one of the sacrifices Christ made in order to become incarnate with us. Christ's presence in the flesh gave God's creative energy that spark, but for it to catch flame it had to be bigger than one person, even if that one person was Jesus Christ, God's Son, the Beloved, in whom God was well pleased. Even that human was not enough to contain the scope and scale of God's love for the world.

So, when Jesus saw in the arrival of the Greeks that the spark of his ministry was beginning to catch, he took the seed that was his very self out of the metaphorical seed packet and buried it in the ground. He died, back to our Gospel reading, "so that when [he is] lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to [him]self." The seed in the packet remains a single seed. But the seed died and resurrected pulls all of us into this relationship with God which Jesus came to bring to fruition. Because of Christ's death and resurrection, the mission is not dead, it can never die, because it lives on, Christ lives on, in each and every one of us.

That is both the incredible good news and the terrifying challenge of the resurrection. In dying and rising again, Jesus lifted us up into eternal life, into this current and future reality of life lived in the unending presence of God. And there's this too. Remember this was Jesus speaking before his crucifixion, we're reading it after. So when Jesus said, "when I am lifted up," that I am is past tense now. It already happened. For us, in this place at this time, that text is better read, "When I was lifted up, I drew all people to myself." It's too late for us guys. We're post-resurrection people already, we have been for some two thousand years.

Anticipating this thing is not our reality. We are the fruit which sprouted from the burying of the grain that was Jesus' own body.

Dear people of God, you have been lifted up through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. You can't stop this promise any less than I can stop Easter from showing up in two weeks. In fact, I'd have a better chance of stopping Easter, because that actually hasn't happened, whereas your being lifted in Christ is very much a past tense action. This is the love God has for you. You already live in the presence of God. The trick for us now is leaning in and falling more deeply into the promise that has already been true, of God's great love for us, the world, God's good creation. Thanks be to God. Amen.