

Gloria Dei Meditation March 17 & 18, 2018

Jeremiah 31:31-34, Psalm 51:1-12, Hebrews 5:5-10, John 12:20-33

The last time I preached from this pulpit, it was the Feast of the Transfiguration, the last Sunday of Epiphany. I shared several Ash Wednesday valentines just to prepare you for the not-so-frequent occasion of the sharing of those two observances. Well, we are deep in the heart of Lent- the fifth Sunday. The lectionary readings from Mark have moved us along at a rapid pace, beginning with my children's favorite sermon from all the Bible because it contains only sixteen words. "The time is now. The Kingdom is near. Repent and believe the good news." Mark's Gospel moves Jesus through ministry in a terse and swift flow. Jesus did this. He accomplished this. He said this. You can almost hear the Roman legions marching, because Mark's gospel was written for the Roman church, each gospel having a different focus. But then the lectionary readings drop us squarely in the twelfth chapter of John's gospel, at the beginning of the last week of Jesus' life.

If you reach the twelfth chapter of John's Gospel without a firm idea of who Jesus is or how he is supposed to have effected salvation, the text will more or less force you to come up with one.

First Jesus is anointed by Mary at Bethany, in an act that prefigures burial but also echoes priestly and royal consecration. Then he enters Jerusalem to the acclamation of a great crowd laying down palm branches and calling him "King of Israel."

John's Gospel is full of these moments of dramatic irony. People around Jesus- friend, foe or bystander- say and do things that end up being fulfilled in a contrary sense or an unexpected manner. When the Pharisees lament that "the world has gone after him," their inflation of the situation ends up being all too accurate. The world shows up at the start of this week's reading, in the two Greeks who ask to see him. Jesus, in that moment, makes another dramatic, demanding announcement: the time for his glorification-by means of his violent public death- is at hand.

As Jesus narrates his coming death, phrases ring like distorted echoes of other parts of the New Testament. When Jesus says that only grain that dies and falls into the earth can bring forth fruit, we hear Paul's analogy of the dying seed and the body (1Cor. 15:35-44). Jesus acknowledges that his soul is troubled but pointedly declines to pray for deliverance, in contrast to the agony depicted in the other three synoptic Gospels. And as he speaks, a voice comes from heaven, recalling those Gospels' accounts of the Jesus' baptism and transfiguration. When Jesus says "Father, glorify your name," the voice says, "I have glorified it and will glorify it again." There was some confusion. Some bystanders thought they had heard thunder. Others said that it was an angel.

But Jesus clears the confusion up with a wild and unexampled moment when he says, "Now is the judgment of this world, now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself."

As an anticipation of Jesus' crucifixion, it's fair to say that this passage goes further- making claims both stronger and more paradoxical- than anything in the other Gospels. Here the judgment is not yet come, but truly present. The demonic forces that throng the New Testament are not merely engaged more intensely; they are definitely "driven out." And this moment of trial will be summed up not as betrayal or suffering but as being "lifted up," in which Jesus will "draw all people" to himself.

John's distinctive vocabulary is showcased here. The verb we translate as "lifted up" appears twice before in the Gospel-when Jesus says the Son of Man will be lifted up as Moses lifted up the serpent (3:14) and when he says he will be revealed when he is lifted up (8:28). Elsewhere this word is used in a sense of being exalted. Only in John does this exaltation include the cross, creating one great figure of crucifixion, resurrection and ascension. Likewise, the verb translated as "draw" appears earlier, when Jesus explains that none may come to him unless they are drawn by the Father (6:44). Elsewhere the word is only used to describe as something or someone being physically hauled or dragged somewhere.

Taken together, these words create a majestic but challenging picture of what Jesus is

accomplishing. In being lifted up on the cross, Jesus will exert a sort of magnetic pull on “all people.” John's drama is genuinely cosmic, with all of humanity merely in the foreground. And the magnetism Jesus exerts in this Gospel is more than charisma or persuasion. It rearranges and reveals the world. It draws people into a new pattern.

This new pattern includes the ancient vision of Jeremiah when he longed and proclaimed that the day would come when God would do a new thing. Laws of relationship and love would be written on people's hearts, put in their minds. God will forgive their wickedness and remember their sins no more. All will know their God as they are known by God. The psalmist looked for a day when a heart damaged by sin would not be cleaned, but be renewed, transformed, restoring joy to the sinner. This new pattern suggests that we are to be about better things, the right things. We are to be people of justice, mercy, kindness and inclusion. We are to be people of banquets and wedding feasts, festivals and light.

I have wrestled with these words for years. That the crucifixion should be foreshadowed not as an injustice made good by subsequent events, or even as one of several theories of atoning sacrifice, but as **in itself** an exaltation is a hard thought. The idea that the “ruler of this world” has been in some sense overcome, despite considerable evidence to the contrary, can capture the imagination. But we can not live by imagination alone. The leap from imagination to sight to action still inspires some fear and trepidation. We are not quite sure about this 'new pattern’ stuff. We're pretty comfortable with the way things are. But perhaps our fear is a part of the drama of this passage, after which everything in John's Gospel unfolds as if by design. The descending figure of the falling grain and the ascending figure of Jesus lifted up draw us whether we assent or resist. It's an image of dying-to the world, to security, even to the power to see and understand everything-that opens into an image of life greater than any individual fate.

We walk into that wholeness together. If you find yourself in a position of being overcome and overwhelmed by life, by struggles, by dashed dreams, by fear, by division, look for a hand. That is why corporate worship is so important. We gather with our circumstances, our joys and concerns, our failures and victories and in worshipping God, we live together the new pattern, the new reality. This changes everything.

God's love is for everyone. When Jesus was lifted up on the cross, he was lifted up for all. He was lifted up for people living in bamboo or mud huts or mansions. He was lifted up for all people, regardless of nationality, race, religion, orientation, wealth or poverty. He died that the ruler of this world would be set running away from the light of righteousness. He died to remove all boundaries of God's love. And that is GOOD NEWS! Amen.