

Lent 5, March 21, 2021 (Jo 12:20-33; Jer 31:31-34; Ps 51:1-12) SERMON

The holy gospel according to John, the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter.

*Now there were some Greeks among those who went up to worship at the Passover Feast. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, with a request. "Sir," they said, "we would like to see Jesus." Philip went to tell Andrew; Andrew and Philip then told Jesus. Jesus replied, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. Those who love their life will lose it, while those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me.*

*Now my heart is troubled; and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name!" Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and will glorify it again." The crowd that was there and heard it said it had thundered; others said an angel had spoken to him. Jesus said, "This voice was for your benefit, not mine. Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die.*

*What is God up to in today's Bible passages?*

In Jeremiah, God is performing open heart surgery, writing his law on the hearts of his people. That's his law of *love*, not wrath.

What used to be a set of laws handed down from one generation to the next will become so much a part of God's chosen ones, they won't even have to teach it. Each one will know, in her heart, that the Lord is her God. Each one will know, deep inside his own being, that the Lord will **forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more**. This is the *new covenant* God promises through Jeremiah.

We just sang of how Israel trusted in the Lord when they approached him with openness and repentance: **Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love** (Joel 2:13).

*What is God up to in the gospel reading for today?* He's explaining that the time has come. The glory prepared from the beginning of time is about to dawn: the glory when God will overturn death, and overpower sin, and open the way to eternal life for **all people**.

And God will do this by dying. By hanging on a Roman cross between two thieves, suffocating to death because his blood can no longer circulate to the upper part of his body. The gravity of human sinfulness will combine with the gravity of the earth's pull to prevent the flow of blood to his heart and lungs and brain.

That's the scientific explanation of Jesus' death. But the truth is, he'll die of a broken heart. Because he—*God*—loved the world into creation and cared for it as tenderly as a mother cares for a newborn babe. Because—well, that's the story of Holy Week.

In today's gospel, Jesus knows his time has come because he's now being sought out by gentiles. In Jerusalem, where the Jews are gathered for the Passover, there are **some Greeks**. The pattern Jesus has set of ministering outside his own faith and nation is complete. It's no longer a matter of running into gentiles and meeting their needs. These Greeks have come specifically to him

**We want to see Jesus**, they tell Philip—and as soon as Jesus hears this, he knows that **the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified**—now that the gentiles are actively seeking him out.

You can tell it's not what he wants to do. There's no excitement in his words when he talks about the need for a seed to die in order that it may rise again and bear much fruit.

I hear resignation when he says, **And what should I say—"Father, save me from this hour"? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour.**

How heavy his heart must be as he continues, **Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out.**

The Greeks ask to see Jesus. And what might Jesus say to them, and to us? *If you really want to see me, first you have look down into the dirt—the dust of the earth, the clay of the ground from which God created all humankind. The foundation of the world which has become broken, wasted, and polluted through greed and carelessness.*

Jesus might say, *Look into your prisons, which house too many people who could have productive lives “outside.” Look into small apartments where large families are crammed together because there’s not enough work, or there are too many medical bills, and they can’t afford a larger home.*

*Next, he might say, look into the dark corners of your ghettos, the back alleys of your cities, the streets of your slums. There you’ll see me as I seek to minister to people you don’t want to see. People you’d like to forget. The last, the least, the little, the lonely, the lost.*

*Then look at the news or read the paper. As you learn of brutality and cruelty, persecution and injustice in all parts of the globe, remember my broken heart and let **your** heart be softened and stirred.*

*And finally, he might say, look into the mirror. See there a person whom God created, and for whom I will die. See there a lost sheep of my pasture, a forgiven sinner, a child of God sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with my cross forever.*

At the end of today’s gospel Jesus says that when he’s **lifted up from the earth, he will draw all people to himself.** *Draw.* Not push or pull, force or bribe, or terrorize with threats. And *all* people will be drawn.

When we look to Jesus on the cross, we see God himself hanging between two thieves because he loves us so much. He couldn’t get the message through to us in any other way. He tried judges, and kings, and prophets; and scribes and Pharisees and teachers of the law.

But all we got out of that was *religion*. God made the Old Testament covenant with his chosen people when he delivered them from Egypt, 1500 years before Christ’s birth.

That covenant collapsed under the weight of an external, corrupted religion that was all form and no content. There was no room for *faith*, only a law of obedience—obedience to commandments that had been divorced from God's love, justice, and mercy.

So 700 years before Christ's birth the Prophet Jeremiah, speaking for God, foretold the *new* covenant that would come to them in the time of their salvation. A covenant of such deep, passionate, abiding love that it would be inscribed on their very hearts.

Do you want to be reminded of this new covenant? Do you, like the Greeks, want to see Jesus? Come to the Palm Sunday service and hear the beginning of his passion—the last week of his life.

Come on Maundy Thursday and be part of his Last Supper with his disciples. Come on Good Friday and experience with him the bitterness of betrayal and denial, the brokenness of death.

Then come on Easter and celebrate the new covenant: Death is not the end of life, because Jesus, like a grain of wheat, has been buried in the ground. The cross of crucifixion is the garden tool used by God to break the ground for others. The soil of the grave can no longer hold us when we believe in Jesus!

Thanks be to God!