

## BEYOND DEATH PREPARATION

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. Thus begins the Gospel of John. Although our passage this morning takes up much later in the story, we need to remember the beginning in order to understand the ending. John's Gospel is radically different from the synoptics, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Unlike Matthew and Luke, there is no birth narrative with wise men and shepherds and a swaddled baby wrapped in bands of cloth. But also, unlike Mark, there is a prologue – something that precedes “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ” and the abrupt entry into Jesus' adult ministry. In John, we start with God's eternal Word, bound up with God part and parcel: “... the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” It is a very incarnational theology in which the Word of God comes to us fully human in Jesus. “And the Word became flesh and lived among us.” So what are we to do with an enfleshed Word that's headed for death?

By the time we get to chapter 12 in John's Gospel, we've caught a few glimpses of what this might mean and portend. Leading up to our passage this morning we witnessed the raising of Lazarus, a resuscitated dead man that Jesus calls forth from the tomb. We also been in the home of the raised Lazarus when his sister Mary, much to the chagrin of Judas, anointed Jesus' feet with costly perfume and shockingly, then wiped Jesus' feet with her hair. The hints of what is to come continue:

[And] Jesus said, ‘Leave her alone. She bought it (i.e., the perfumed ointment) so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.’

And then, right before the words we heard this morning, Jesus enters Jerusalem greeted by palms and hosannas. But three verses after our passage this morning concludes we are told, “After Jesus had said this, he departed and hid from them.” His public ministry concluded, Jesus journeys onto to arrest, trial, and crucifixion. In between arriving in Jerusalem and going leaving the limelight we have this morning's encounter with some Greeks, some puzzling words about a grain of wheat, loving one's life but losing it or hating one's life in this world but gaining eternal life, serving and following something about “coming to this hour,” a voice from the heaven's speaking a word of judgement, and something about Jesus being lifted up and drawing all people to himself. It's a lot packed into a few verses in a portion of one chapter.

This morning I just want to look at the last bit and offer some things for us to ponder together as we approach Holy Week. One of the challenges of Holy Week for mainline Protestants is that it is relatively easy to essentially skip the whole week and go straight from Palm Sunday Hosannas to Easter Alleluias. Part of the reason for this is that we tend to have relatively few Holy Week observances. For First Church, we've traditionally held but one service – Maundy Thursday. For while, there was an ecumenical Good Friday experience in town but that's been missing for some time now. All of which allows us to avoid the cross – the crucifixion, because, let's be honest, we're not quite sure what to do with it.

We're not alone in this. Scholars, theologians, religious leaders and people of faith have struggled over the years to settle on the meaning of the crucifixion. It's shocking to say the least – I mean, this was God's plan to set things straight? killing God's son in a truly horrible fashion? Attempting to figure this out has led to various theologies of atonement or reconciliation. Traditionally, as several commentators note, there have been essentially three ways of looking at what happened on the cross and what it means for us:

the ransom or “classical” theory, in which Jesus' death is understood as the act of ransom (payment) that bought the world its freedom from sin and death; (2) the substitutionary or sacrificial victim model, in which Christ's death is understood as the sacrifice necessary to atone for human guilt and sin; and (3) the “moral influence” theory, in which Jesus' death is understood as a model of moral behavior because it reveals to humanity how much God loves them.

Each of these understandings has implications for the life of faith. None of them fits neatly into what John is attempting to convey in his gospel.

For starters, the portrait of Jesus in John is markedly different from the other gospels. As New Testament Professor Audrey West notes:

John's Jesus would never ask for this cup to pass (John 18:11) but willingly lays down his life in the events that are to come... In the Gospel of John, Jesus does not need confirmation of who he is (John 12:30). He is perfectly aware of his origin, his relationship with God, and his identity (John 1:1).

John's Jesus enters Holy Week with eyes wide open. He is a man on a mission. And his mission is to draw all people together in him. As one Lutheran pastor comments:

Jesus does not force, bribe or dazzle; he draws people to know and love him. ... From his uplifted cross, the place where suffering love put him, he draws to himself all who will come... He brings us to God. He brings God to us.  
We're drawn into the healing community of the forgiven—not yanked or cajoled or sweet-talked.

But Jesus does not just draw us to the cross, he pulls us beyond it to his resurrection and ascension; it is all bound up together – a single piece. When Jesus says in John, “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” and when John comments, “He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.” John suggests

that the “the sort of death” includes also that that death leads to his resurrection and ascension. When Jesus is lifted up from the earth to draw all people to himself, that lifting up is simultaneously all three events: crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension.

As Audrey West also notes:

During this season of Lent we follow Jesus all the way to Golgotha, all the way to the cross, where we will stand beneath it, together with those followers who asked at the

beginning of his ministry, “Where are you staying?” (1:38). It is there, in the face of the world’s many ways of death (e.g., poverty, economic collapse, hunger, sickness, war) that we are drawn even closer to Jesus. It is there, in the light of the stark reality of life at its end that we begin to catch a glimpse of life at its fullest.

But the story doesn’t end there – it continues, through Good Friday to Easter and beyond. As Lent moves to its conclusion and we approach Palm Sunday, Holy Week, and Easter can we imagine a path forward that not only realizes the implications of the crucifixion but also gives witness to what comes next — the resurrection and ascension? Not in an attempt to minimize Good Friday or skip over it but to acknowledge that the Jesus of John is preparing his disciples and that means us for more than his death. We know death. This past year in particular we’ve come to know it all too well. Dare we imagine the truth of resurrection and the comfort of ascension – God’s Word moving full circle through birth to death, to constant companionship?

AMEN.