

Rev. Dr. Bill Smutz

“Even Jesus”

First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, March 21, 2021

Psalm 119:1-8

*Happy are those whose way is blameless,
who walk in the law of the LORD.
Happy are those who keep his decrees,
who seek him with their whole heart,
who also do no wrong,
but walk in his ways.
You have commanded your precepts
to be kept diligently.
O that my ways may be steadfast
in keeping your statutes!
Then I shall not be put to shame,
having my eyes fixed on all your commandments.
I will praise you with an upright heart,
when I learn your righteous ordinances.
I will observe your statutes;
do not utterly forsake me.*

John 12:20-33

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, ‘Sir, we wish to see Jesus.’ Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, ‘The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. 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. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour.

‘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. Father, glorify your name.’ Then a voice came from heaven, ‘I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.’ The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, ‘An angel has spoken to him.’ Jesus answered, ‘This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgement 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.’ He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

Our gospel lesson takes place in the faithful chaos and confusion of Passover in Jerusalem. Now one of the things we have to know about the gospel of John is that John always orders his gospel differently so that Jesus's big entry into Jerusalem in his gospel happens near the beginning of Jesus's ministry rather than near the end, as it does in the other three gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke. But Jesus's Jerusalem debut isn't as big a deal for John as what happens next, as to what happens after Jesus gets there, which is where our gospel lesson begins.

All sorts of people have, like Jesus, come to Jerusalem for the Passover observance. Most are devout Jews who have come to worship in the temple. But some who have gathered are what we would today call religious seekers, those who have heard that Jerusalem at Passover is the place to be for a really cool spiritual experience. Some of these seekers are labeled as Greeks. Greeks in the New Testament needs to be understood as foreigners, as non-Jews, not just folks from the country of Greece. These Greek seekers find one of Jesus's disciples and then they boldly ask if they themselves can meet Jesus. That non-Jews have heard about Jesus and want to meet Jesus is significant in two ways. First, this request is a sign that Jesus's message of compassion and love for all and of all people having value. It's a sign that this message is being talked about and is drawing wide interest, not just within Judaism, but beyond. And second, this outsider interest lifts up the reality that Jesus message is meant for everyone, Jew and non-Jew alike. Through Jesus, God is declaring that all people are God's chosen people, without exception. And in Jerusalem at Passover, God's inclusiveness, God's welcome of all people, is as radical a declaration as is Jesus embracing the title of Messiah.

Now, God's radical inclusiveness remains a radical high bar today, given all the divisions that we know in our city, in our country, in our world today: racial divisions, economic divisions, spiritual divisions, spiritual divisions, national divisions, wealth divisions, gender divisions, medical divisions, fact versus fiction divisions and the like. Given all these divisions, Jesus's announcement of God's inclusiveness is a challenging, radical declaration making we who follow Jesus as radical disciples ourselves. And this reality, this title of radical makes many, including some of us, a bit uncomfortable. With the Greeks requesting face time with Jesus, it seems like His ministry might be at a turning point where Jesus and His message will explode out into all the world. But that is not what happens next. Instead, the gospel of God's love implodes a little bit. Jesus receives the request of the Greeks from His disciples. But instead of offering a yes or no response, Jesus launches into this odd monologue about it being time for the Son of Man to be glorified and of the need for a grain of wheat to be planted and then die before it can bear more grain, and of how those who love their life must lose it, and about the need for disciples to follow Jesus and serve Him wherever He goes. The first time I read through this text, I was tempted to label Jesus's rambling words as nonsensical, for they just do not seem to fit into the context of what is going on around Jesus. But as I reflect on the larger story in which our lesson is set, I've come to believe that it is personal anxiety that drives Jesus's monologue. In fact, I see this story as one of those places in all of the Gospels where Jesus's humanness is front and center and. When His humanity is most visible, we need to pay attention. We need to pay attention to what Jesus says and to what Jesus does because his humanness has real-time implications for us, for how we live our lives. So let us listen. Let us listen with our ears, but mostly, let us listen with our hearts. In our lesson, Jesus is stressed. He is trying to live and behave as He believed God wants Him to. But there is an emotional toll and a social price to be paid for such devotion. Jesus is isolated from most people. The text says the disciples have to go and search Him out. They're not sure where He is. And then His continual rambling about how he should respond to the hour before Him suggests that Jesus is also feeling isolated, even abandoned by God. Certainly, God does provide some public support near the end of our lesson. But we all know how anxiety works on an individual. We all know how anxiety works on us. Jesus's anxiety has been building for weeks over all the time. He and His disciples have been traveling toward Jerusalem. And, as He finally enters Jerusalem at Passover, Jesus is wound pretty tight.

In the very last sentence of our lesson, John reminds us of the source of Jesus's anxiety that Jesus's impending death is looming over all his words and all his actions. Because Jesus is so humanly vulnerable in this story, so like us in our humanity, so like us in our vulnerability, I believe we can draw parallels between his behavior in the text and our behavior today for most of our deepest seeded anxiety is like it was for Jesus related to our fears, especially our fears of being abandoned. As we talked about last week, our fears of abandonment often come from early in-life experiences, experiences that stay with us, experiences that shape our behaviors long after they actually occur. And because of these deep fears, all of us in every setting and at some level want others to help us, to help us feel more secure, to feel calmer, to feel satisfied, to feel happy, or feel whatever we need in the moment.

I think Jesus is stuck in this kind of emotional place for all his rambling words seem to be expressing a sense of abandonment and of wanting someone, anyone, to help him escape his present anxiety. The voice of God that erupts from heaven near the end of the lesson is something we must not miss. For while God's voice by itself does

not provide specific answers for moving beyond anxiety, just the fact that God is present assures Jesus that he is not completely alone, that he is not and never will be totally abandoned to those who want to kill him. And this is precisely the place where I think this story hits home for us.

Whenever our anxiety is chewing us up, chewing us up individually as it is in these days of coronavirus, chewing us up in our families, chewing us up in our work, or chewing us up culturally, and even chewing us up as a congregation this morning, facing a future today that is a bit more unknown than it was just last week, just as God's voice reminds Jesus that he is never alone, so God's presence reminds us that we are never completely alone, that we are never totally abandoned. God's presence reminds us that anxiety may last for a moment, even a moment that seems like it will go on and on forever, but that our anxiety does not have to control us. Our anxiety does not have to define us, does not control or define us individually and altogether if we will only trust, trust that the God who promises never to abandon Jesus is the very same God who promises never to abandon us. Now says that the words that come from God are not for Him but for the rest of us who need them to believe. He may be right as He said this. But I think it's mostly a bit of bravado on Jesus's part. In his humanness, Jesus needs to know He is always loved and will never be abandoned. It is this never-ending love on God's part which allows Jesus to stay engaged, stay engaged with the world and stay engaged forever beside us, allowing us to lay down our anxieties and to lay down our fears as individuals and as a community and seek the new life, the transformed life which God has in store for us. For our spiritual homework this week, I invite us all to think about and then work on one or two very practical ways to lay down our anxieties and fears before God, one or two ways that will help us clear our minds and our hearts from our worries and from what makes us afraid so that we can focus on and then act on the purposes and priorities of God. Jesus is a good example for us. Jesus prayed a lot, and I think this could be a good suggestion in our journey. And Jesus engaged with others, talking to them, healing them, trying to address their needs in any way He could. When Jesus is about trying to do what He believed God wants Him to do, Jesus never focuses on abstract ideals or esoteric theological conversation. But instead, He is all about making a practical and tangible difference in the lives of those God loves, which is everyone everywhere.

As we try to lay down and let go of our anxieties and fears, Jesus is and always will be our faithful guide. My friends, we have choices to make every day. We can make them frantically and as we are paralyzed by anxiety, or we can trust that God is surrounding us and will provide a future, a future especially when death, when anxiety, seems overpowering and eminently present. Even Jesus can be overwhelmed, but He trusts in God that He will never be defeated. Our invitation this day, our invitation forever is to this same trust.

Pray with me. Help us, O God, to trust you as Jesus did, fearfully sometimes, uncertainly sometimes, but completely always, for it is in this trust of you that we know hope. We pray in the name of that hope, Jesus Christ. Amen.