

Readings for Sunday March 21, 2021

Jeremiah 31:31-34 (NIV)

³¹ “The days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. ³² It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them,” declares the LORD.

³³ “This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time,” declares the LORD. “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.

³⁴ No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, ‘Know the LORD,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,” declares the LORD. “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”

John 12:20-33 (NIV)

²⁰ Now there were some Greeks among those who went up to worship at the festival. ²¹ They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, with a request. “Sir,” they said, “we would like to see Jesus.”

²² Philip went to tell Andrew; Andrew and Philip in turn told Jesus.

²³ Jesus replied, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴ Very truly I tell you, 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. ²⁵ Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶ Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me.

²⁷ “Now my soul 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. ²⁸ Father, glorify your name!”

Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and will glorify it again.” ²⁹ The crowd that was there and heard it said it had thundered; others said an angel had spoken to him.

³⁰ Jesus said, “This voice was for your benefit, not mine. ³¹ Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. ³² And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” ³³ He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die.

Sermon: Good News For Everybody!

I am no artist, but I understand and that when painting a picture, it's done in *layers*. Each layer and tint add new dimensions of richness and depth to the final image. Anyone can look at the completed painting and appreciate its beauty and style, but a fellow artist can also appreciate the contributions of those subtle layers that can easily be missed by the untrained eye that only sees a two-dimensional surface. John's gospel is known for its rich layers of meaning. He was a skillful and intelligent writer who was also painting a *theological* canvas about Jesus for the discerning. To recognize his nuance, irony, and depth, we have to read the whole gospel and see its interconnected themes, as well as its allusions to the Old Testament. While the same is true of the other gospels, John is arguably in a league of his own. Some people love John's gospel for that reason, others hate it! It's certainly a more complex gospel to understand. So please bear with me as I try to point out some of John's elegant and profound layers of meaning this morning!

The events in our reading today take place after Jesus enters Jerusalem on a donkey, which we will consider next Sunday. The Pharisees have basically given up. They recognize the wave of popularity that Jesus has in the moment, saying: "We're not making any progress here, see how the *whole world* has gone after him!"¹ And John then introduces some *non-Jews* who were in Jerusalem for the Passover festival.² We are left to speculate about their identity and motives, because they quickly disappear entirely from John's narrative and are only later alluded to. These non-Jews approach Philip, one of the disciples with the Greek name, and ask him if he could introduce Jesus to them. We might think that Jesus would leap at such an opportunity, and yet the conversation changes and becomes somewhat cryptic. Let me try and unpack Jesus' mysterious reply, which begins: "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified."³

You may recall that John had made reference to the "time" before. At the wedding in Cana, Jesus was reluctant to get involved in the lack-of-wine drama, saying to his mother: "My hour has *not yet come*."⁴ Later, mention is made of Jesus' provocative and blasphemous claims that *nearly* result in his arrest. But that didn't happen because, as John says, "his hour had *not yet come*."⁵ But now, Jesus recognizes that "the hour *has* come . . ." If, like a good Presbyterian, you're looking for biblical evidence for predestination, John provides it! He presents Jesus as working to a *divine* timetable, and even more startling, Jesus seems to know that schedule! Now, I confess that I don't believe in predestination, but I see John's language as indicating that he, with the benefit of hindsight, considers God to be *directing*

¹ John 12:19 (paraphrased). (See the clever, but subtle, link between "whole world" (v19) and "Greeks" (in 20)?!)

² See John 12:20. The use of "Greeks" is not specific to those actually from Greece, but to all who were not Jewish. Recall that the New Testament was written in Greek (not Latin), as that language united the Roman Empire. See also Gal 3:28; 1 Cor 1:22.

³ John 12:23.

⁴ John 2:4.

⁵ See John 7:30; 8:20.

in all the events of Jesus' life, including his death, and that Jesus is *willingly* cooperating. In other words, it was *no* tragic accident that Jesus died at the hands of those in power. No, God was working through Jesus. And that is *no surprise*, if you think about it, because John proclaims in his opening chapter that Jesus is the "Word made flesh," or God among us in human form.⁶ And I do believe that!

So, the time has *now* come for the for *the Son of Man to be glorified*.⁷ I mentioned that last week when I spoke about Moses *lifting up* the snake in the wilderness to provide healing and hope for the Israelites in the wilderness. John tells us that in an analogous way, "The Son of Man *must* be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him."⁸ (Incidentally, note that the word "must" also points to that divine timetable.) For John, Jesus' "glorification" comes in three stages: him being *lifted up* on the cross, him being *raised* from the dead, and his *ascending* to be with God the Father. These three are to be seen as one continuous "event." The scandalous irony, then, is the *humiliation* of cross reveals the *glory* of God!⁹ And that is truly shocking, then *and now*.

Jesus continues: "Very truly I tell you, 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."¹⁰ There is no Parable of the Sower¹¹ in John's gospel, but there *are* resonances here. John portrays Jesus' death as a *single* seed "dying," and as the *means* of bringing about a much *larger harvest*. What initially looks like tragedy and failure is the surprising way to abundant life for all. Earlier, as the plot to kill Jesus was being hatched, the high priest, Caiaphas, said: "Don't you realize that it is better that *one man die* for the people than the whole nation perish?"¹² While Caiaphas was being expedient and thinking only of preserving the status quo, John later repeats that phrase as a commentary on the death of Jesus. Ironically, Caiaphas was unknowingly speaking the truth: the death of Jesus will save *all* of Israel, but *more* than that - the *whole* world. As discussed last week: "God so loved *the world* that he gave his one and only Son, that *whoever* believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."¹³ And that mention of "*whoever*," of course includes those

⁶ See John 1:1-5, 14, and 1:51; 3:13.

⁷ John 12:23; 17:1-5 (cf. Isa 52:13; Dan 7:13-14, esp. "He was given *authority, glory* and sovereign power; *all nations* and peoples of *every language worshiped him*.").

⁸ See John 3:14-15; 8:28; 12:32, and: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/The-Cross-Love-Medicine-and-Justice.pdf> .

⁹ See also 1 Cor 1:22-24; Gal 3:23 on the scandal of the cross. Another of John's themes is *the temple*, the place where the glory of God traditionally resided (See Exod 40:34-38; 1 Kgs 8:10-11). John understood the divine presence to be embodied in Jesus the Messiah. The locus of worship was no longer the temple in Jerusalem but in Jesus himself; in other words, no longer in a *place* but in a *person* (John 2:21-22)! Earlier in John 1:14, John writes: "Now the Word became flesh and took up residence among us. We saw his glory—the glory of the one and only, full of grace and truth, who came from the Father." The "took up residence" phrase is literally "tabernacled" in Greek and alludes to where the *Shekinah*—the visible glory of God's presence—resided. The implication being that the divine glory is now to be seen in Jesus, and they had witnessed it (see John 7:39; 12:16)!

¹⁰ John 12:24. See also John 15:1-8 for the image of fruit/harvest.

¹¹ See: Mark 4:1-20; Matt 13:1-9, 18-23; Luke 8:4-15.

¹² John 11:49-50; 18:14. See also John 11:51-52 for a commentary on the saving scope of Jesus' death.

¹³ John 3:16. Note "eternal life," a key John theme (see link in [9]) is mentioned again here in John 12:25; cf. Mark 8:35; Matt 10:39; 16:25; Luke 9:24; 17:33.

non-Jews who John introduced earlier as wanting to see Jesus.¹⁴ A little later Jesus says, “When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw *all people* to myself.”¹⁵ Again, *all people* is mentioned, and that includes non-Jews – you and me! All this reminds me of what John tells us Jesus said earlier, “I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me. . . and *I lay down my life for the sheep*. I have *other* sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.”¹⁶ For John there is *inclusivity* that arises from the death of Jesus, and that’s good news for *everybody* who wants to join in with God’s party! There is, then, to be a *world-wide* harvest resulting from the “death” of a *single* seed. Can you see some of these rich layers that John has painted with his interwoven metaphors?

I mentioned earlier that the hour has now come and of John’s understanding of the divine orchestration of events. Because of that perspective, John doesn’t present a Jesus who is troubled by his impending death. There is *no* agony of the Garden of Gethsemane on John, *nor* is there cries of him being forsaken by God on the cross.¹⁷ The closest we come to that is in our reading, where it says: “Now my soul 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.”¹⁸ This is an echo of Psalm 6:3, written by David when he was in dire trouble and crying out for God’s deliverance.¹⁹ In contrast, Jesus - the son of David - is deliberately *not* asking for rescue here, since Jesus knows this is *why* he came. Instead, he proclaims: “Father, glorify your name!” John tells us a voice responds from heaven, “*I have glorified it, and will glorify it again.*” The crowd that was there heard it and said it had *thundered*; others said an angel had spoken to him.²⁰ John’s Jesus understood his destiny and he saw himself being lifted up on the cross as part of a bigger, divine drama that would reveal God’s glory, or presence, to the whole world. John underlines his distinct “glorification” theme with a divine voice from heaven heard reverberating through the crowds. This particular divine endorsement is not mentioned in the other gospels, yet they do present their own divine affirmations following Jesus’ baptism and at the Transfiguration, which John does not relate. The crowd’s reaction is mixed, possibly confused.²¹ Even so, thunder was a commonly understood to be a

¹⁴ John then tells us Jesus said, “Whoever serves me must follow me . . . My Father will honor the one who serves me” (John 12:26, see 13:1-20). And this echoes Jesus’ well-known phrase in the other gospels, “Take up your cross and follow me,” which I also spoke on a few weeks ago (Mark 8:34; Matt 10:38; Luke 14:27),
<https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Take-Up-Your-Cross.pdf>.

¹⁵ John 12:32 (and v33 provides John’s commentary linking this saying explicitly to Christ’s death.)

¹⁶ John 10:14-16, and this needs to be seen in the context of Ezek 34 and Jer 23:3-6. See:

<https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/I-am-the-Good-Shepherd.pdf>.

¹⁷ For Gethsemane; see Mark 14:32-42; Matt 26:36-46; Luke 22:39-46, and for Jesus’ anguished cry on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me”; see Matt 27:46; Mark 15:34.

¹⁸ John 12:27.

¹⁹ See to Ps 6:3-4 (LXX) where the Greek for “my soul is troubled” is *identical*. (Jesus is not only the Son of David, he is the rightful King of the Jews – a theme John mentions in the trial and crucifixion of Jesus.)

²⁰ John 12:28-29.

²¹ That they heard it is evident in John 12:30.

manifestation of the voice of God,²² and they witnessed this epiphany, even if they were unsure as to what it all meant.²³

We too can be understandably confused by these cryptic words of Jesus. Words that when we understand them are audacious and even presumptuous! Earlier, when Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd,” he went on to say: “No one takes [my life away] from me, but I lay it down *of my own accord*. I have authority to lay it down *and authority to take it up again.*”²⁴ There are hints here of the resurrection, which we can recognize after the fact, but Jesus’ Jewish audience were divided. John says, “Many of them said, ‘He is demon-possessed and raving mad. Why listen to him?’ But others said, ‘These are *not* the sayings of a man possessed by a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?’”²⁵ Reading John’s gospel can result in us having the same dilemma. Despite Jesus being widely perceived today as a “good teacher” and a “holy man,” was he ultimately deranged? Was his crucifixion merely a tragic end to a misguided, but well-meaning, man? Some have certainly come to that conclusion. I suggest that is what happens when we merely *glance* at the painting that we call “John’s gospel.” When we do that, we fail to see the rich layers and nuance to his portrait of Jesus. However, if the resurrection and ascension actually happened – those two latter elements of the “glorification” of Jesus - then that forces us to think again, and to examine John’s painting in greater depth. And when we do that, including the evidence of his miracles too - which no one at the time doubted really happened, then maybe we will come to the same conclusion as John and the other New Testament writers.²⁶ Namely, that Jesus is the Messiah, God’s Chosen One, and that God was *uniquely* at work through him revealing God’s loving purposes to the whole world.

In conclusion, the non-Jews asked at the beginning, “We would like to *see* Jesus.” The simple question is, “Would we?” *Really* “see” him, I mean, not simply acknowledge he existed, but to carefully examine all the evidence. Curiously, the gospel writers *all* spend a disproportionate amount of space considering the *last week* of Jesus’ life. That’s odd, I think, and points to the lifting up of Jesus on the cross as somehow being a crucial aspect of his “*good news*” message. Consequently, if we want to *see* Jesus, we too must not neglect the cross and be prepared to gaze on the One who was “lifted up from the earth” in order “to draw *all* people to himself.” As we do that, may we say with John, “We have seen *his* glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”²⁷ Amen.

²² See Exod 4:23; Ps 29:3-9, and angels were commonly understood to be God’s messengers. In Greek culture, thunder was also associated with the ‘voice’ of gods.

²³ See John 12:34.

²⁴ John 10:18. The intimate Father-Son relationship is a key theme in John, a relationship of love, unity, purpose, and trust.

²⁵ John 10:20-21.

²⁶ See John 20:30-31 for John’s intent with his gospel.

²⁷ John 1:14.