

“The World Has Gone After Him”
John 12:17-23; Jeremiah 31:31-34
Fifth Sunday in Lent

Jeremiah 31:31-34

³¹The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ³²It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord.

³³But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

³⁴No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

John 12:17-33

¹⁷So the crowd that had been with Jesus when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to testify.

¹⁸It was also because they heard that he had performed this sign that the crowd went to meet him.

¹⁹The Pharisees then said to one another, “You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him!”

²⁰Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks.

²¹They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.”

²²Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus.

²³Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.”

John 12:24-33

²⁴Very 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. ²⁵Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

²⁷“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. ²⁸Father, glorify your name.” Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” ²⁹The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, “An angel has spoken to him.” ³⁰Jesus answered, “This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. ³¹Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. ³²And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” ³³He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

The Sermon

Sometimes, it’s not a morality tale;
 it’s not a lesson; it’s not three main points of an argument;
 it’s not an epic or an archetype or a tone poem.

Sometimes it’s neither a treatise to be debated
 or an image to be interpreted.

Sometimes, it simply is what it is.

Mary and Martha's brother Lazarus had been in the tomb for four days by the time Jesus arrived at the outskirts of their village.

Many of us had come to be with Martha and Mary to offer consolation. We were their people; the ones called the Jews. Sometimes people use that name with respect and religious acknowledgement. Sometimes people, including evangelists, use it almost as a curse or an epithet when they talk about us; and sometimes people spit it directly in our faces as if it were an insult. That's their *fault*, but they tend to make it our *problem*. Which, when the time of reckoning comes, will be *their* problem.

But I digress.

We were there with Martha and Mary to console them after the death and burial of their brother, Lazarus.

When word came that Jesus was near, Martha went and met him first, while Mary stayed at home.

He and Martha spoke briefly, and then she came back and said something to Mary, and we, who were in the house consoling her, saw Mary get up to go somewhere.

So, we got up to go with her—I think we all thought she was going to the tomb to continue her grieving there. And of course we were all crying with her and had no intention of letting her go there alone.

But it turned out she wasn't going to the tomb; she was going to see Jesus, in the same place where Martha had just been with him.

When Mary got there, she knelt at his feet, and she said, "Lord (*Kyrie*), if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

He saw her weeping. And he saw us wiping tears from our eyes and choking back sobs.

And it looked for all the world, I kid you not, like he himself was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.

And in that condition, he asked Mary where the body of her brother, his friend, had been laid to rest.

I didn't want Mary to have to deal with that question; I figured we could walk him through the particulars. So some of us said, "Lord, come and see."

Did you know that when Jesus was first calling disciples, two of John the Baptist's disciples followed Jesus, and when he turned and saw that they were following him, he asked what they were looking for; and they asked him: "Rabbi, where are you staying?" and he said to them, "Come and see"? And then they came and saw, and stayed with him that day?ⁱ

Did you know that right around that time, Philip had also started following Jesus, went and found Nathanael, told him they had found the one about whom Moses and the prophets had written, the son of Joseph from Nazareth; and Nathanael said, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" and Philip said, "Come and see"?ⁱⁱ

Did you know that when Jesus had his encounter with the woman at the well, she ran into the city and said to everybody she could find, "*Come and see* a man who told me everything I have ever done! He can't be the Messiah, can he?"ⁱⁱⁱ

Doesn't it seem like every time someone has just had, is having, or is about to have a personal experience of being near this magnetic man, whose love and acceptance and whose very presence seem to turn this lost, disoriented world upside down—or, more accurately, right-side

up—somebody’s voice is always there issuing the invitation: “Come and see?”

And now we were saying it right back to him.

He said, “Where have you laid him?”

We said, “Lord, come and see.”

And as God is my witness, Jesus started crying again.

And we said, “See how he loved him!”

But there were a couple in our group who said, “Couldn’t he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”

We just kind of let that hang there. It wasn’t my job to come up with an answer, and that doesn’t mean that I do *or don’t* think it’s a worthy question, or a piece of in-your-face rhetoric. It was just somebody *else’s* question or rhetorical statement, and so we just left it there.

When he came to the tomb, he was, again, what the Greeks call ἐμβριμώμενος ἐν ἑαυτῷ (*embrimōmenos en eauto*), “being deeply moved within,” literally “groaning in himself.”

And we all saw it.

And pulling himself together, he said, “Take away the stone.”

Martha said, “Lord, um, I don’t think you want to do that. I mean, four days...”

He said, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?”

And in a loud voice he called for Lazarus to come out.

And the dead man came out. And Jesus said to us, “Unbind him, and let him go.”

Many of us who were there and saw what had just happened believed in him.

But some who had been with us went and told the religious authorities what he had done.

Later it was said that the chief priests and Pharisees called a meeting of the council, and they were saying, “What are we going to do? We let this guy go on like this, *everybody’s* going to believe in him. Then the Romans are going to come and destroy both our holy place and our nation.”^{iv}

But those of us who were there that day, when Jesus successfully called a dead man back to life, couldn’t help telling the world about what we had seen.

When others heard about it—about the sign that he had done—they came out to meet him: a huge crowd.

And that’s when I heard the Pharisees saying to each other:

“You see that? And you can’t do a thing about it. Look, the world has gone after him!”

The world. κόσμος (*kosmos*): It’s the whole world, which as far as we knew was the whole created universe as we knew it: everything and everybody under heaven; the inhabitants and the affairs of the world.

The very same word John used four times in a row, when he said: “The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the *world*”—not

just the place, but all that we are, all that happens, all that is in the world—“He was in the *world*, and the *world* came into being through him; yet the *world* did not know him” (John 1:9-10).

John the Baptist saw Jesus coming toward him and said, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of *the world*” (John 1:29).

“God so loved *the world* that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (John 3:16).

“God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that *the world* might be saved through him” (John 3:17).

Jesus said, “As long as I am *in the world*, I am the light of *the world*” (John 9:5)—not just the physical planet but the people, and the lives, and the realities that exist on it—

the light of everybody under heaven:

you, me, the people we love, and the people we fear;
 the light of everything that exists in the world;
 the light of everything about the world
 and everything that happens in the world;
 the light of the totality of the world.

And the Pharisees saw that people were flocking to him because of what they had *heard* about him, and what we had *seen* with our own eyes.

They said, “You see that? And you can’t do a thing about it. *The world* has gone after him.”

It’s almost as if he had waited until everybody was on board—till people from all walks of life, and from cultures and backgrounds beyond his own family, his own culture, his own people—was on board, before he could do what he knew he had to do.

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. Not his own people, the Jews, but some who came from outside the tradition of the Covenant People, the People of God who had been led through the wilderness for forty years and had settled in the Promised Land.

The Greeks were not part of that family.

But some Greeks now came to Philip, the disciple, and they said to him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.”

Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus.

And Jesus said back to them: “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.”

It was time. Now it was clearly not just about the salvation of one person, but the salvation of all people.

The whole world.

When you wonder if God remembers that you exist;
or when you are hoping that God is not watching you;
when it feels like everybody else is in on the big secret
and you alone are left in the dark;
when even your closest friend seems distant;
when the stress of homework and expectations
and bills and relationships
and medical insurance and doctor’s reports
stacks up around you;
when your only companion is an aching loneliness;
when everything is just too much to handle:

that’s you being part of the world.

That is the world in which God is undistractedly interested.

That is the world that Jesus came specifically to save.

You are not only in the world that Jesus came to reach out for;
you *are* the world that Jesus came to reach out for.

And those Pharisees were right:

The world has heard the news,
and they can't do a thing in the world to stop it.

You can distract the Church with divisive issues
that have practically nothing to do with Christ's love for the world,
but that won't stop it.

You can ignore God's demand for love,
and justice for the poor
and hospitality for the immigrant—
commands which permeate both the Old and the New Testaments—
but that won't stop it.

You can store away the good news,
like canisters of nuclear waste buried under tons of concrete,
in decaying institutional structures that worked fifty years ago
but mean practically nothing to anyone under 25,
but that won't stop it.

The whole world—the *cosmos*—is going after him.

The only thing left that they could think of to do was to try to get rid of
him altogether.

Put him on a cross. Affix him so permanently and make it so sordidly, repulsively aggressive—nail him to it if we have to—that everyone will know that this guy is never coming back from crucifixion:

Put him in a tomb with the largest stone you can find to go right in front of the door, so that people know he is never getting out, and that death will be the final word.

Let's see, they will say, if he can turn the world upside down now.

Maybe we've finally found a way to stop the world from going after him.

Sometimes, it's not a morality tale;

it's not a lesson; it's not a three-point argument;

it's not an epic or an archetype or a tone poem.

Not a treatise to be debated, or an image to be interpreted.

Sometimes, it simply is what it is.

And the people of God,

and the people who call God by other names,

and the people who don't believe in God,

and the people who don't know God at all—

in a word, the world—

is simply invited to come and see.

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ⁱ John 1:35-39

ⁱⁱ John 1:43-46

ⁱⁱⁱ John 4:29

^{iv} John 11:17-48