

A Covenant Within

John 12: 20-33

Jeremiah 31: 31-34

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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 honor.

“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 judgment 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. The crowd answered him, “We have heard from the law that the Messiah remains forever. How can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up? Who is this Son of Man?” Jesus said to them, “The light is with you for a little longer. Walk while you have the light, so that the darkness may not overtake you. If you walk in the darkness, you do not know where you are going. While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light.” After Jesus had said this, he departed and hid from them.

Jeremiah 31: 31-34

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of humans and the seed of animals. And just as I have watched over them to pluck up and break down, to overthrow, destroy, and bring evil, so I will watch over them to build and to plant, says the Lord. In those days they shall no longer say: “The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.” But all shall die for their own sins; the teeth of everyone who eats sour grapes shall be set on edge. The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It 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. But 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. No 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.

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In the church where my children grew up, and I was ordained, there was a little plaque on the pulpit that only the preacher could see, and it was a powerful message. ‘Friend, we would see Jesus.’ The reminder was there that it is the task of preaching to make Christ’s life and message real and relevant for everyone who hears our words. It was both a grounding and a humbling statement reminding the preacher of the stakes that have always been high.

The stakes were high when some Greeks went to worship at the Passover festival in Jerusalem. They had approached Philip, one of the disciples, and said that they would like to see Jesus. John does not tell us just why they want to see Jesus. Perhaps this is just as on many other occasions when people had sought out Jesus because they had heard of the many amazing ways he healed people from pain and suffering, or had fed thousands of hungry people, or perhaps it is because Jesus had just recently raised Lazarus from the dead or they did not get a chance to see him a few days earlier when he had arrived in the city on a donkey and had been greeted with palms and shouts of Hosannas.

“Sir, we wish to see Jesus.”

This is the Jesus we all wish to see. We wish to see the One who heals, who loves extravagantly, who forgives, who brings good news, who radiates life. The One we lift our prayers and hopes and dreams to. The One who feeds us at the table. The One who quenches our spiritual thirst.

“Sir, we wish to see Jesus.”

Jesus not only makes himself known to the Greeks, he responds to their request with a revelation and a teaching far beyond anyone’s expectations. A simple request with a life-changing response. Throughout Jesus’ three years with the disciples he had repeatedly said it was not time, the hour had not come, for the revelation of just who he was. It was not yet time when he turned water into wine, when he had been radiant and dazzling with Elijah and Moses on the mountaintop, when he cured a leper, when he healed two blind men, or when Peter declared that he was the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. Each of these times, and more, he had always told the disciples to tell no one of the experiences. My hour has not come. Jesus carefully managed the momentum of his ministry so that things would happen according to God’s timing and not according to the will and whims of his disciples.

“Sir, we wish to see Jesus.”

And now, it is unexpectedly, suddenly, time. Jesus’ hour has now come. The desire to see Jesus was far more profound than these Greeks could have guessed. They wished for amazement in the presence of someone great. Yet no longer is it enough to come and only see Jesus, as from “this hour” forward his followers are invited to come and be with Jesus. This is the Jesus we are seeing, the Jesus we are with, as we approach Holy Week, as we approach a new heart written covenant in the bread and cup of the Last Supper, as we approach the cross and the tomb. The high stakes have gotten even higher.

And Jesus said to them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. 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.” That’s his incredible and surprising response to those who want to see him; to the Greeks, to you, to me.

That was certainly not the answer they were expecting. If they remain in Jerusalem for the week, they will soon see the most glorious, indeed the most important sight of him, devastating and overwhelming as it at first will be. They will see more than they could have ever imagined. His time has come to be “glorified” — which will not mean leading a charge to overthrow Rome as the people want, but laying down his life. They will bear witness to the depths of his humiliation that will prove to be the very height of the glory of the one who truly is David’s long-promised heir to the throne, as shocking and astonishing as it will be.

On our Lenten journey we walk with Jesus, hearing his words, “Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also.” As followers of Jesus, as those who have the vision of Jeremiah imprinted on our hearts, a covenant between God and humanity based on the quality of one’s relationship with the Divine rather than rules, we know that, as Michael Marsh says, “Seeing Jesus isn’t a spectator sport. It is a way to be followed, a truth to be embodied, a life to be lived. It’s being a grain of wheat that falls into the ground and dies so that it might bear much fruit. That’s where we see him. It’s the letting go, the emptying, the leaving behind, and the dying that makes space for new life to arise.”

In our covenant following of Jesus we have been our own grains of wheat that we have let fall to the ground, we have let go of, so that our lives will bear much fruit. Somewhere along the way we changed beliefs and values that reflect that we seek to know God. Somewhere along the way we let go of things that denied us the fullness of life we want and God offers. We let go of fear, of the need to be right and accepted, of quick anger or simmering resentment, of useless regret and disappointment, of guilt that is not ours to bear. Yes, we slip back into the old ways, and find ourselves forgiven and offered a fresh start. Friend, it is time, we see Jesus. Amen.

Works and Resources

1. Michael K. Marsh: <https://interruptingthesilence.com/2018/03/19/the-secret-to-life-a-sermon-on-john-1220-33/>
2. E. Carrington Heath: <https://www.christiancentury.org/lectionary/march-17-lent-5b-john-12-20-33>
3. David Mathis: <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/we-wish-to-see-jesus>
4. <https://hermeneutics.stackexchange.com/questions/8078/in-john-1220-26-why-does-john-include-the-account-of-the-greeks-wanting-to-see>