

Lent 5 2024
Rev. Dr. Les Martin
John 12:20–36

For I know nothing among you but Christ Jesus and him crucified in the name of the living God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today is a preview of Passion Sunday, when lent begins its painful and dramatic conclusion. By focusing on the final trials, sufferings and acts of Jesus, it's kind of a peek ahead into the days of Holy Week, and especially to the theological meaning underneath Good Friday. It's a peek ahead into a very hard time. Let's look at the context like I like to do our reading today.

Jesus has been anointed by Mary at the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus. The same Lazarus who was recently raised from the dead. He has made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, what we will observe next Sunday with the liturgy of Palm Sunday. There's the crowds, the shouting, the spectacle, the Jews pulling their hair out and saying the world has gone after him. And whether it's Matthew, Mark or Luke tell us the cleansing of the temple happened in Holy Week or not.

It is clear through the first few days of Holy Week that Jesus is deliberately in increasing conflict with the Jewish hierarchy and the temple leadership. No more vanishing. His criticisms are harsh, direct, clear, day after day. Then after that comes our story today. And right after that, the last supper, and right after that. And after that. Our story tucks in right there between Jesus temple fight, and the Jewish leaders fighting back big time, indeed dealing a deadly blow. So at first thought it seems out of place and big a bit odd. We've got all this star wars like action with conflict and battle and intrigue. And right in the middle of it is a story. Some Greeks showed up and asked if they can see Jesus doesn't seem to fit at first blush. But let's look at it deeper.

It's likely in the courtyard of the Temple. Most likely in the courtyard of the Gentiles where the unbelievers those who were not member of the Covenant community hung out. These Greeks go to Philip wanting to see Jesus, and Jesus gives the strangest answer. He doesn't say yes or no. He talks about wheat dying, and how it's his hour and how his soul is troubled. It's unclear to me whether or not the Greeks actually get to see Jesus. Although I suspect they do.

The Greek say, Sir, we would like to see Jesus. Now I have a question underneath that. What is it they were looking for? What were they looking for? Well, it depends on who these Greeks are. There are a few possibilities. They could be wealthy Greeks living in the area up by the sea. That's why they went to Philip. He's from Bethsaida. Maybe they're wealthy Greeks who have come into town to do some shopping and watch the Jews do their thing. thing. And here's this troublemaker. Well, that would be a nice selfie. Sir, we'd like to see Jesus, Jesus as tourist attraction. Or perhaps these Greeks are from one of the many schools of Greek philosophers, the Stoics, the cynics, they abounded at this time, and were throughout the Roman Empire. If they're Greek philosophers, perhaps they're looking for a lively debate about who God is, what the meaning of life is, and what is the virtuous way to live it. We'd like to see Jesus and test his thinking. But most likely, given the location, these Greeks are part of the group who are known as the god-fearers, the process lights. There are people who have adopted some of the Jewish practices, they have a belief in the Jewish God, but for perhaps cultural or perhaps just physically understandable reasons. They haven't gone so far as circumcision. They haven't joined the

faith, but are deeply sympathetic to it. Those are the kinds of people who would be in the court of Gentiles. And so what they would be asking is, Who are you, Jesus of Nazareth, in relation to all of this, to this temple we're standing in to Jerusalem itself to the Judaism we are attracted to? We would see you Jesus. And I asked, What do you mean?

What do you mean? What were they looking for? It's hard for us to see Jesus today. One reason is we don't see too well anymore. Thanks to the advent of screens and modernity, even before that, we are too busy, too distracted, to see. Even when we do get a glimpse of Jesus, if we're honest, if we're humble, even after years of following him or looking at him, there is so much that we don't understand. And so being inquisitive and creative creatures, we're tempted to fill in the blanks. Now, some of that filling in the blanks is okay, it's born out of a desire to identify, to participate to understand. That's what Fr Doug was getting at. Some of it's okay like this, this beautiful image.

What do we see in this image of a Native American Jesus, it's not syncretism could be used for that, perhaps. But it's not syncretism it's the Native American people looking at Jesus and looking at the fact that he's not just God, but that he's human. And he's like, they're saying, I'm that too. I see myself in him. Because we have a child and we are raging introverts, not many of you have been in our home. But those of you would notice that I have a wall of crucifixes for much the same reason. What I'm fascinated by is how cultures incarnate themselves in the Incarnate Word. This one's from Colombia. You see a lovely Latina or Latin American Jesus on the cross. Hope for the fact that if you are of Latin American descent, it's your humanity hanging there. It's not someone else's. It's when comes from the Mcoli region of Uganda. It's one of my favorites because they just carved it out of a branch is the branch grew. And you can see a Jesus who has hope for the people of East Africa because they look like him. And he looks like them.

Fr Doug and I were talking it's why neither of us can get too excited about people who say, "Oh, I don't like about white blond Jesus. That's not who he was." No, it wasn't who he was. But it's who he is. Just like he's Native American and Latino, and East African. Last time I checked, the old song was true red and yellow, black and white. All are precious in his sight. And so we fill in the blanks on this blank slate, that is Jesus. And some of it is good, like I suggested, but some of it can go too far.

When what we are looking for, is not so much a god we can identify with. But a God who is like us, a God who we can control a god made in our own image, we begin to distort his image. What are we looking for? Do we like Marx? See, and Jesus the first communist? Do we like Charles Sheldon? Find the original self-help guru. He's the guy who wrote the book in his stats that popularized that phrase, W.W. J. D. Are we looking for someone who just wants to coach us a little further you can do it you can do it. Put on a put on a little bracelet. And heaven is yours. Or maybe we're looking for a strong American capitalist man. Like the one that ad executive Bruce Barton wrote about in his book The man nobody knows. If you haven't read it, it's from the 20s. You ought to read it. It's a trip that Jesus fits right in the old TV show madmen? We could go on. Are we looking for a wandering Jewish mystic like John Dominic Crossan did? Are we looking for an ancient Near Eastern social justice warrior? As so many progressives do? Are we looking for the first Aryan man like the Nazis? Are we looking for a Viking battle chief, as in the Old Norse point, the heel young, whatever we're looking for the temptation is to take our desires and place them on Jesus.

Success, freedom from pain, affirmation of our own beliefs, victory of those who don't believe like we do. Justice, retribution. You can find it in Jesus, if you want to. Whatever we are looking for, however,

whatever creative or destructive games with who Jesus is, there is only one Jesus we can ultimately see, however, dimly and that is the Jesus who is there. And he wants to tell us who he is today. In this reading today, he references another reading where he talks in language much like he did to Nicodemus. In John three, in our reading today, he says when he is lifted up, he will draw the whole world to Himself. And back when he's talking to Nicodemus, in John chapter three, he says, as the serpent was lifted up by Moses, so must the Son of Man be lifted up. It's interesting, isn't it? Talking to the Jewish Sanhedrin leader, the ultimate inside man, and talking to the Greek proselyte, in the court of the Gentiles, the ultimate outsiders. Jesus uses the virtue virtually the same language about this serpent that was lifted up.

You remember the story, don't you? Don't you? In Numbers 21 verses four through nine. The short version is this, Moses and the Israelites are out in the wilderness, and they have displeased God they are sinning. And so he sends what are called fiery serpents to bite them and these fiery serpents are poisonous. And as they're biting the Israelites, the Israelites are falling ill and dying, and they're crying out to Moses. They're crying out to God. Moses says, or God says to Moses, here's the solution, make a bronze serpent, the image of the fiery serpents and put it on a pole, and lift that pole up in the middle of the camp. And when someone gets bitten, rather than dying, if they will just look, if they will just look at that bronze serpent, they will be healed. And live. The serpent on the pole is the sign of the problem, the sign of the suffering, the sign of the death. And yet when raised up under God's mighty power, the sign of the problem becomes the solution, the sign of the suffering becomes the healing, the sign of death, becomes life.

And twice not once, but twice to the Jews and to the Greeks. When Jesus is asked who he is, he says, Well, I'm that pole. I'm that pole that Moses raised up, that's me. That's me. I want to suggest this is Jesus choosing the interpretation of who he is when he is being asked by those who are seeking Him. He is God Himself lifted up, bearing our sins, bearing our death, bearing our alienation, and providing in his own flesh, our forgiveness, our reconciliation, our life.

The serpent lifted up, this is what he would have us see. When we look at him. What was our original problem or at least the instigator of it? The serpent. The ultimate consequences lifted up high, become the source of life for those who can see. Now this may be beyond our complete comprehension. But that's okay because on the cross, God's love has comprehended us brought us all together, even if we can't comprehend it. As the great Swiss theologian Karl Barth reminds us here is a truth we cannot understand. We can only stand under this truth. Here is the Savior who came among us with loud cries and tears, a Messiah who although he was a son learned obedience through what He suffered.

John's Gospel implies that the cross is not to be understood, it is simply to be seen. It is to be lifted up high, forced upon our myopic view of the world placarded before any procession, which attempts to move toward God under its own string. The point being, we can't get to him. He came up for us. And in seeing that we are free. That's the gift for us this passion, tide and Holy Week, then not to do anything. If you still have those old WWE J D bracelets, you can throw them away now. See, we're not supposed to do anything all together other than to see what God has already done. In the words of next week's liturgy, the Palm Sunday liturgy, our Lord invites us to enter with joy upon the contemplation of those mighty acts, whereby he has given us life and immortality.

Writing in the fourth century, the bishop of Alexandria Athanasia says, it is only on the cross, that a man dies, with his hands spread out. And so it was fitting for the Lord to bear this also. And to spread

out his hands, that with the one he might draw the ancient people in with the other he might draw the Gentiles and unite both in himself. For this is what He himself said, signifying by what manner of death he was to ransom all. When I am lifted up, I will draw all unto me. The Lamb of God slain from the foundation of the world reigns in glory high upon his throne making atonement for all our sin and defeating death in the promise in the in the process. This act will draw all people, all people to the foot of the cross to see just who Jesus is: Nicodemus from the Jews; the Greeks in our story today are the first fruits of that calling and in a sense, so are we. God is making a people for Himself.