

Jan Hus Presbyterian Church and Neighborhood House
March 25, 2012

Fifth Sunday of Lent: John 12: 20-36

Sermon Notes...

Festival
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The world was coming to town. It was the time of the Passover Feast. And among them were some Greeks who sought out Philip, one of their countryman from Bethsaida. They had heard of this Jesus and they wanted to meet him. He was a *rock star*, or so they had heard!

So Philip went to Andrew (the brother of Simon/Peter) and the both of them headed off to see if Jesus wanted to meet with them.

Now, picture yourself on the Great Lawn of Central Park. There is Jesus sitting with his disciples in a huge crowd of people. The Temple from Jerusalem has been magically transported to the North end of the lawn. Every path is filled with Jews traveling days to be here to commemorate the Exodus. *Pesach* as it is called, is the greatest of the three major festivals of each year, along with *Sukkot (Feast of the Tabernacles)* and *Shavout (Pentecost)*.

The crowds just kept filling in (you would think Simon & Garfunkel were here!) And, they were going to be here a while. Security measures in the Great City of New York were stretched to the max, although the crowds had been happy, friendly, other than being a little tired and stressed trying to find places to stay, settling the kids and the animals down, but the weather was great and old friends and families were making their way to one another. A great, really great festival was being expected!

It was early in the week, Pesach, which takes place on the 15th of Nisan (somewhere between March 15 – April 30 on our calendar) was still a few days away. There was much to do ahead of time, especially going through the purification rites required by the Torah. What exiting days in Jewish life. Passover's illuminating light and sanctity begin to be felt right away on arrival. There are places to go with the greatest of teachers to study the Torah, laws of Passover, and much much more. There were even classes on preparing for the Seder, with some pretty interesting recipes and ideas. There's even a Seder table with an orange in the mix.

When asked about it, the rabbi – a woman – remarked that you see an orange on the seder table about as often as you meet a woman rabbi! Both were changing!

It is a time of much light, a common theme in the Torah and one that fills the universe on these days. You should see the candles burning on the great lawn in the darkest of night, under the clearest of skies. It's easy to feel the light, the light above, below, and throughout the universe become one. God is felt to be everywhere...

Gathering, study, prayer, days of preparation, becoming deeply in tune to the universe, the light, the sanctity of it all – remembering the great heroes and forebears of the Hebrew community, the covenant with God, Moses...just amazing. Central Park, if it weren't rooted so deeply to the earth feels as though it could just lift itself up and fly away!

And in this gathering, in these masses of people – who do the Greeks from Bethsaida seek out? Jesus. The biblical rock star. They heard he was in this park somewhere and they are determined to see him. Word about Jesus has spread...

So, when Philip and Andrew approach Jesus and tell him that there are those from far away who have just arrived and are looking for him – well, he knows what that means. It means that the time is nearly up. This nice little ministry of his, preaching about preparing for the end times, all within the context of the teachings and traditions of the Torah – was coming to a head that was getting even bigger – maybe – that he imagined? And just a bit dangerous...after all, he had made some enemies...

Sure, the crowds in the past had already been oppressive at times. How often has he run / retreated to the desert, a boat in the sea, and quiet homes of friends to get some respite from those crowds pushing toward him – crowds greater than any unveiling of a new iPad from Apple; but this – the festival – this was different.

The city now swelled to four, five, or six times its normal size, the Roman soldiers *everywhere* overseeing it all, edgy as a bat in daylight – this is becoming a bit bigger than even Jesus had imagined. This is bigger than anything he has known...or even expected.

As Jesus looked around he saw it. Suddenly these tens of thousands of people, nearly 100,000 were no longer gatherings of several thousand by the lakeside, or small get to know you suppers at one another's homes – no, this crowd, festive and jovial could also be turned into something ugly if it got out of hand. The security guards knew that, the SWAT teams of the Roman military knew that, Jesus knew that. It was growing tenser with the arrival of each caravan.

There were more people here, 20,000 more than Giant Stadium can hold (which is why the great lawn was chosen) – add the Temple and all the space it took up, the vendors, animals, caravans coming and going – and, well, if you knew that it had the potential to bring all its wrath upon you...might be a little *storm tossed* too.

I wonder if Jesus looked around at those pushing in closer, wondering as I have from time to time in my life: "Friend or foe?"

Jesus knew he had choices. He didn't have to stay. Sure, he could have said "God get me out of here and I will never call anyone a viper or turn over another table again!" But he didn't. In the midst of the mobs, pushing ever closer, he tells his disciples there are times one needs to *be all in. Stay on the path*. This was the time. The time for which he was called. Perhaps they were only half-listening, pulled into the excitement of the crowd themselves, suddenly famous by extension of those seeking *their* rabbi.

"Look around, he might have said, not all those who have ever lived are here, but look at what the lives of those who have come before us have produced. All of us, we die, like a seed needs to die to flourish, and when we die, we – you - too will flourish. Don't hold your love back from God. Give your love yourself to God. Then give yourself to God's glory!

He might even have quoted The Beatles, one of his favorite groups to be, who in their song "The End" - the last song on the last album they ever made (Abbey Road) sing: "In the end, the love you take is equal to the love you make." I can hear Jesus telling the disciples, "Take the love God had given you, placed in you, placed in me in the presence of you and go make this elsewhere. Spread this Good News to the ends of the earth."

Perhaps there was a premonition of just a few days hence what he would say at that last dinner he would have with his friends. Maybe he said it. Maybe he thought it. Maybe the disciples missed it. Or perhaps he looked at them, children in many ways, offering a prayer and a hope: "And when you do these things...when you make this love with others, when you create this light – do it in memory of me. Remember me always, as I will remember you."

It was a time of preparation, and no one knew this better than he. These next two weeks will show just how much he was right, how much was building.

Years later when Jesus, would look back on the "Thirties" and read what was written about him – he would wonder where some of the things people wrote came from, how some of the stories read thousands of years later got started. He understood that there were those who would elevate him like John to "a high Christology" (he always got a kick out of that expression). There would be those using his teachings and wisdom to guide radical movements of every kind (he really liked that). And others looking for a icon who would try to persuade others to follow sometimes painted him to be stoic, gleefully walking into his execution, without anger or fear, knowing all things to come. His faith was rock solid, and he would do it again – but there were moments, tough moments that no one but he could know.

Still, his compassion for the human family was great. He saw so many who were in such dire straights make this journey, faithful, hoping, sometimes hobbling, being carried, or being led. It's hard to imagine how much he loved them all, even those about to cause him great harm. He was a Son of God as well all are, but he was different – a holy man, a healer unlike any other.

Years later, Jesus was heard to comment over a latte, “there was just no way for everyone to know what I had been given, and how I so desperately wanted everyone to know to know all about God in the way I knew God.”

Once in recounting some of this for one of the cable channels, he chuckled a bit when he said, “I felt God everywhere. It was so strong. My body felt like it was being powered by cosmic forces beyond the universe and times we knew – and it was! In fact, I was so sure that everyone else felt it or could feel it, so sure that it was building to this great kerygma this truth that it was about to explode! I was sure the world could not sustain it and the end was coming near, days away in fact - as this presence of God grew and grew. But I had the timing a little wrong. It will end, but not as soon as I first thought!”

He got quiet then, calm, but suddenly you could see the lines of pain on his face from long ago, almost in a whisper he said: “I had it wrong. All those things I had been saying about the end of the world, it wasn’t coming to the world as I thought -- it was coming to me. I remember thinking that at the festival. Sensing it more, really. It was powerful, and the only way I could stop it was to step off the path. I thought about it, but I couldn’t. After all, saving my own life was giving up everything I believed in and knew in God. How could that have ever been a choice.

So the forces were coming into a great collision, on that would lift me onto the cross. Funny, all those years as a carpenter with my earthly dad, I never once made a cross.

It would be on that cross that God’s great love met head on with all that was wrong and lost in this world. Just like that seed flourishing once dead, a new explosion of love would be born. It changed the world. It’s still changing it. It’s just taken a little longer than I thought.”

When asked what he would like people to most remember, he said what he had said so many times before. “Know that I am always with you. God and Spirit and I are with you in many ways. And when we speak to you as one from beyond your number of three for us (there is no *number* to us that you could ever really understand), listen. Please. Call upon us. Listen. Pray. Act. And know that you are loved. You are and always have been my beloved.”

And then, almost as if thinking about the confusion of interpretations, opinions, studies, critiques and guides, chuckling again that so many have thought that the answers are in the words on a page – millions and millions of pages, reminding those there the only words recorded that he ever wrote were in the sand and then wiped away...

“Keep it simple. Remember the Great Commandment, the schema:

To love God and to serve God with all your heart and all your soul and with all your mind. And the second greatest, “Love your neighbor as yourself?”

Remember that it still holds, remember that I taught you of this, and look for me. I am always with you.

Thank you, Jesus, for your time – both kronos and kairos

And Jesus said, “Just follow me in these things and you will be fine. Trust me. I know.”

Yev ar ekh Ot k ha Ha-Shem