

Glorious Death

John 12:20-36
Sermon by Dan Schrock
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²⁰Now among those who went up to worship at the festival [the Passover] 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. 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. ³⁴The 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?” ³⁵Jesus 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. ³⁶While 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. (NRSV)

Death is a wonderful, glorious event. I do not say this lightly, as if I know nothing about death. I do know something about it—and I have seen that the details of dying are rarely pretty.

In 1971, my grandmother died in a messy traffic accident. I was on the scene within two hours after the accident happened, where I watched her blood mingle on the asphalt with spilled engine oil. I was twelve years old.

Early in my years as a pastor, I watched a young man slowly die of AIDS in his own home. First the fat disappeared on his arms and legs, and then his muscles wasted away. His face became gaunt. His hair dried up. In the last days he was too weak to get out of bed. At the moment when this young man exhaled his last breath, his dog let out a mournful howl.

I have since seen others die of cancer or of sheer old age. I have heard that some people die gracefully and peacefully in their sleep—without pain—after a long, healthy, and well-lived life. But I have not yet witnessed that kind of death in the moment that it happens. The deaths I’ve seen have been tragic, violent, painful, or excruciatingly long.

Ever since I was a child, dying has been a vivid, visceral part of my living. I have seen something of how difficult dying can be.

Nevertheless: in spite of how difficult dying can be, death itself is a wonderful and glorious thing. We can say this because in the gospel of John, the death of Jesus is the crowning moment of his life. It is the most honorable of all his actions. It is the most glorious of the many glorious things he did.

John's interpretation of Jesus' death is very different than the interpretations we get in Matthew, Mark, Luke, or Paul. For example, in the gospel of Matthew Jesus is portrayed as an *innocent man* who gets unfairly shafted by jealous opponents; and his death causes upheavals in the temple, the earth, and the cemeteries (27:51-52). The gospel of Mark emphasizes the terrible *suffering* of Jesus, suffering so intense that Jesus even accuses God of forsaking him (15:34). In the gospel of Luke, Jesus is portrayed as a royal son of God whose *agonizes* on the Mount of Olives over his *destiny* to die on the cross (22:39-44).¹ Paul emphasizes in his letters that it was the *Messiah* who was shamefully and scandalously crucified (cf. 1 Cor 1:23). For Paul's fellow Jews, this would have been an offensive claim because a crucified and cursed Messiah was a contradiction in terms.² In one way or another, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and Paul all describe the suffering and humiliation of the crucifixion.

John is different. John portrays the death of Jesus as an exaltation. Four times, the gospel of John says that Jesus is "lifted up" at his death (3:14, 8:28, 12:32, 34). Let's ponder that for a bit. To lift something up usually means to give it a place of honor and respect. In the ancient world, for instance, people generally carried statues of goddesses and gods high above their heads during religious festivals; and when they put these statues of gods and goddesses in temples, the resting place or ledge was usually higher than people's heads. In other words, people lifted up these statues to positions of honor.

During the New Testament period, Roman soldiers did something similar with their standards. You might remember that a Roman legion had up to six thousand soldiers if it was at full strength. Each legion in the army had a standard which consisted of an emblem, such as a boar or an eagle, mounted on the top of a pole that was then lifted up

over the heads of the soldiers. Each legion treated its standard with great reverence. If the standard bearer was killed during a fight, another soldier in the legion would immediately snatch the fallen standard and once again lift it up for everyone to see. And if an enemy captured their standards, Roman legions would sometimes start a fight just to get the standards back.

Even today, people still lift up objects that they wish to reverence. In every nation I know about, the national flag typically flies at the top of a pole, high above our heads. Nations deliberately do this to stir up feelings of patriotism in their citizens. For many centuries in many different cultures, lifting something up is intended to convey respect, admiration, and devotion. Therefore when John says that Jesus was “lifted up” on the cross, it’s a way of saying that we’re supposed to look upon his death with respect, admiration, and devotion. Picture it in your mind: Jesus, the light of the world, lifted up high on a cross in Golgotha, perched above your head, a visual feast of God’s glory.

Which brings us to John’s other word for the death of Jesus. In addition to this language of lifting up, John talks about Jesus’ death as a “glorification,” especially here in chapter 12 (vv. 16, 23, 28; cf. 13:31-32). To understand this business of glorification, we need to understand the context in this passage. At the beginning of our passage, a few Greeks come to Philip, asking to “see Jesus” (12:21). As you know, most of the first followers of Jesus were Jewish in origin, but as time went on, more and more Christians came from other ethnic backgrounds, whether Greek, Roman, Egyptian, or something else. As the church developed in the first and second centuries, it became an exciting mixture of different languages, ethnic groups, and social classes.

The Greeks who want to see Jesus in chapter 12 represent this new and growing part of the church. The fact that they want to “see” Jesus is a decisive clue that they are beginning to believe in Jesus, that they are beginning to be converted. In the gospel of John, seeing Jesus is a first step—usually a necessary first step—in coming to faith. As we noticed on July 27 when we talked about the story of the man born blind in chapter 9, the main problem that human beings have is blindness. We can’t see God because God is far away, above and beyond us. And so in this gospel, Jesus comes from God to show us

God. We can now see Jesus, and through him, we see God. Seeing inaugurates our salvation. Seeing Jesus saves us from blindness. Therefore the Greeks in chapter 12 are in the process of being saved. They want to see Jesus, and that desire opens a door into the Christian community.

Now that we've taken this short detour into the world of the Greeks and how we are saved by seeing Jesus, we're ready understand the business of glorification in its proper context. As soon as Jesus finds out that these Greeks want to see him, he says, "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" (23-24).

Jesus is talking here about his own death. He's explaining what his death means and why it's important. Jesus is the grain of wheat who has come down from heaven to earth. In his incarnation, Jesus has come from heaven and fallen down into our world, where he will die and be buried in the dirt of the earth. But his death will bear much fruit. I lived on a farm when I was a teenager, and we used to plant wheat every fall. By the following spring, those single grains of wheat germinated, grew, and in the glorious days of summer produced a whole head of grains. One grain of wheat might grow much fruit, perhaps thirty, fifty, or even sixty grains of new wheat. The fruit that Jesus will grow is, of course, the church. The Greeks who come to see him are the fruit he will grow. You and I are the fruit he grows. Every Christian across time and space are the fruits he grows. We the church are in part the glory of Jesus.

Therefore in the gospel of John, the death of Jesus is a wonderful, glorious event *because of the fruit that it creates*. To be sure, the way that Jesus dies will not be painless. As we'll see later in the crucifixion story, Pilate will order his soldiers to flog Jesus, and dying on a cross is even worse than flogging. Nevertheless, there is a certain noble quality in John's passion story. In this gospel Jesus is the real person in charge—not Pilate, not the soldiers, not the Roman empire, and most certainly not the religious fuddy-duddies in Jerusalem. Nobody forces Jesus to die. No, in this gospel Jesus goes to that cross standing tall and straight; and other people, in spite of their screwed-up motives,

proclaim a king seven times. And oh my! When he is lifted up on that cross and dies, it is the crowning moment of his glory. It is the moment when all people can see him. It is the moment when at last he will draw all people to himself (v. 32). It is the moment when his life will bear fruit. It is the moment when Jesus calls forth respect, admiration, devotion, and honor. His death, in short, is about glory.

If death was wonderful and glorious for Jesus, it can also be wonderful and glorious for us, his followers. You and I may go through a process of dying that is tragic, violent, painful, or excruciatingly long. Yet that is unremarkable, because dying is simply part of the human condition. At this very moment, many people scattered across this globe are dying painfully. Some of them are followers of Jesus and some are not. However, the death of Jesus has now decisively changed our understanding of death itself. We now see and understand that death can be a glorious, wonderful event. For Jesus, death was the apex of his life, the moment he lived for, the event which revealed his true identity.

So it can be for us. If we have lived our lives seeing and believing into Jesus, our death will give glory to God. It will be an opportunity for anyone with the willingness to look and the eyes to see that death bears the possibility of fruit. No matter how tragic or quotidian the circumstances, the death of a Christian believer always contains an element of glory. It shows to anyone who watches, notices, and perceives that fruit follows death.

I leave you, then, with an opportunity. The next time you see a follower of Jesus die, look for the glory. Watch for the fruit.

Notes

1. Frank J. Matera, *Passion Narratives and Gospel Theologies: Interpreting the Synoptics through Their Passion Stories* (New York: Paulist, 1986), 192-219.
2. James D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 209.