

Our text from the Gospel of John 12:20-33, takes place in Jerusalem, right after Jesus' triumphal entry, close to the feast of Passover, and in the period leading up to his crucifixion on Good Friday. Yes, you heard me correctly, today's lesson is right after the triumphal entry into Jerusalem. But David you say, Palm Sunday is next Sunday! And you would be correct but in John with the preceding verses, 12-19, Jesus has already entered Jerusalem. I invite you to listen for the word of God:

<sup>20</sup> Now among those who went up to worship at the feast were some Greeks. <sup>21</sup> So these came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and asked him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." <sup>22</sup> Philip went and told Andrew; Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. <sup>23</sup> And Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. <sup>24</sup> Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. <sup>25</sup> Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. <sup>26</sup> If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him.

<sup>27</sup> "Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? But for this purpose, I have come to this hour. <sup>28</sup> Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven: "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." <sup>29</sup> The crowd that stood there and heard it said that it had thundered. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." <sup>30</sup> Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not mine. <sup>31</sup> Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out. <sup>32</sup> And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." <sup>33</sup> He said this to show by what kind of death he was going to die.

The Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

Our text today is one of those texts where, if we're honest, I think, if we read the dialogue carefully, we're sort of confused by Jesus and we feel some sympathy for the disciples.

Jesus enters Jerusalem and is greeted by a crowd that hails him as the king of Israel. Next, two Greeks – that is two gentiles, two non-Jews – come to the disciples and ask to see Jesus. And they come to Philip, and Philip tells Andrew and together they go to tell Jesus.

And we can imagine that they were probably kind of excited. Things were going well. The Jews were receiving Jesus and seem to be hailing him as their king – to such an extent that in verse 19 the Pharisees observe what is happening and say “Look, the world has gone after him.” And then, as if to confirm the Pharisees’ fear, two gentiles come and want to see Jesus. After years of work and public ministry, things really seem to be taking off.

And, likely excited by this, Philip and Andrew come before Jesus, they tell him the exciting news, and his response is to talk about how if a grain of wheat is to bear any fruit, it must first die, and then to start speaking of his own death. And right out the window goes the disciple’s excitement.

Jesus’ response seems cryptic and morbid. And you could almost imagine the disciples getting frustrated and wanting to say “Oh, come on Jesus ... this is good news! ... Why do you have to be such a Debbie Downer!? Why can’t you just be happy about how things are going?”

It is hard to imagine them not at least thinking this way. And if we look back at the passage, Jesus doesn’t answer the disciples’ question at all! It seems like a straightforward question with a simple “yes” or “no” answer.

And we often think that way too, don’t we? Maybe as we read the Scriptures. Maybe as we hear this very passage.

Think about it, when these things don’t work out, we get frustrated, and we remind ourselves that we are not asking for that much. All we want is modest fruitfulness in life, achievable in a relatively easy and straightforward way.

And that’s why we can relate to Andrew and Philip in this text. They were starting to see some fruit in Jesus’s ministry. It was going well, it was

following a logical, straightforward pattern, and they go to tell Jesus, and he throws them this curve ball.

All they wanted was modest fruitfulness in life, achievable in a relatively easy and straightforward way. Why did Jesus have to pour cold water on their hope by starting to talk about death? “Why does Jesus have to be so negative?” “Why so morbid? Why can’t he cheer up!? Why can’t he be a bit more optimistic and uplifting?” We can often sympathize with Philip and Andrew.

But our sympathy does not reveal or confirm a problem with Jesus. Instead, as is often the case, it reveals and confirms a problem with us. Because, not surprisingly, Jesus is right.

Jesus’s response basically says that Philip and Andrew have lost sight of the scope of God’s work, and the way God works in the world. And sometimes, don’t we do lose sight as well?

What we see in Jesus’s reply is that God has much bigger plans than we imagine, and a much different way of bringing about spiritual fruit than we would even begin to imagine.

Philip and Andrew are excited with a big reception in Jerusalem and two Greeks seeking Jesus. But Jesus knows that this is just the beginning of something much bigger. This is just a hint, the tip of the iceberg, of what is to come.

Jesus remembered the promise God made to Abraham, and so he kept his sight on the true scope of God’s promise. His expectations far exceeded Andrew’s and Philip’s. In Genesis 12, God tells Abraham, “In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” “All the families.” These two gentiles are barely a taste of what God is doing. Jesus knows this. He says as much in verse 32 when he says, “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” Jesus knows the scope of what God has promised.

Jesus reminds us that God has a much different way of bringing about spiritual fruit. Jesus reminds us that God works through death and resurrection. And it is in this way that God brings about spiritual fruit.

Jesus draws this point from the lesson of the grain of wheat. In the grain of wheat, in how God has designed the grain of wheat to work, God has already written a lesson about His kingdom for His people. Jesus explains, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” In the grain of wheat, Jesus sees the pattern for how God normally works.

And so, in the image of the grain of wheat, in his death and resurrection, Christ reframes our lives.

The world around us and our hearts within us clamor for something easier. They clamor for something straightforward. And sometimes to that end, we are willing even to accept more modest goals in our life.

The same mindset existed in Jesus’ day too. But he rejected the idea of a modest earthly kingdom gained in an easier and more straightforward way to achieve an eternal kingdom attained through his death and resurrection.

Jesus also forged a new path for this life. The lesson of the grain of wheat, the story of the death and resurrection of Christ, now form the model for how we are to live our lives. We are called to take up our cross and die to ourselves daily. We are called to die to ourselves again and again, in the great and in the mundane to bring about the fruit of the kingdom of God in this world.

The path is not an easy one. We will fail again and again. But thankfully we have a savior who can sympathize with our weaknesses. We have a savior who forgives our sins. We have a savior who leads us on, down the path he has forged, as we seek one step at a time to follow in his footprints.

Wendy Johnson, this week, shares these thoughts in her D365 devotional:

One of the great ironies of life is that the more we focus on ourselves – our desires, our fears, our possessions – the smaller our life becomes. While we may get all the things we wish for, along the way we lose the purpose to which our lives are called by God.

In today's passage, Jesus reminds us that it is only through freeing ourselves of this self-focus, by "losing our life," that we become part of the greater story that God is weaving.

"Wherever I am, there my servant will also be."

Throughout his life, Jesus was clear that he could be found in the places where people were hurting, lost, dying. Even during this time when we must be physically separated, we are called to join Jesus in these places of suffering. For that is how we draw closer to our God.<sup>1</sup>

May it be so.

1. Wendy Johnson, [D365.org/devotionals](https://D365.org/devotionals)