

Now Here's The Plan

Maundy Thursday 2017
1st UMC Sunnyvale P. D. Schlager

Jeremiah 31:31-34

John 12:20-33

Our text opens this with Philip, a disciple of Jesus,
being recognized by someone from his home town.
He hadn't counted on that.

He thought that at **the time of the Passover,**
with **Jerusalem filled with tens of thousands of pilgrims**
he could move around Jerusalem incognito.

Andrew is with him. ... **Andrew is also from Bethsaida.**
They expected to pass anonymously in this crowded city,
because Bethsaida is way up in the north
a long way from Jerusalem.

It is on the northern most **side of the Sea of Galilee.**
Bethsaida was thought to be a city with a **large ethnic Greek population.**

In fact, **Philip and Andrew are Greek names.**
Of course, they are practicing Jews,
but part of a large Greek ethnic population
that settled in that part of Palestine.

Jesus went to those people, particularly at Caesarea Philippi
(you remember that name, a Greek city, only a few miles from Bethsaida),
because Jesus wanted to make sure
that the Gentiles were included in the Kingdom,
and recipients of God's grace.

It makes sense that somebody from their home town would recognize them,
so John begins our text with these words.

*Now among those who went up to worship at the feast
were some Greeks.*

*They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee,
and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus."*

Then the text says

that Philip went to see Andrew, and then they went to see Jesus.

But that is all that it says, and that is not enough,
so I will tell you what really happened.

These two Greeks from Bethsaida spotted Philip. They pulled him into a doorway,
looked around to see if anybody was looking, and said, "*Take us to Jesus.*"

That is when Philip went to Andrew,
who was probably buying supplies for the band of disciples, and asked,
"What shall we do? Can we trust them? Are they police?"

You see, **Jesus is in hiding now.**

This scene comes in the 12th chapter of John.

The 11th chapter is the pivotal chapter in the Gospel of John.

There are twenty-one chapters in John,
so the 11th chapter comes right in the middle.

In the first ten chapters *Jesus is teaching.*

The 11th chapter is devoted to the raising of Lazarus from the dead.
Then from the 12th chapter on he is in Jerusalem
preparing for the cross.

So, the 11th chapter tells the story of the raising of Lazarus,
the most important miracle that he performed.

In the Gospel of John, the miracles are called "signs,"
because they reveal who He is and what He means to us.

In the Lazarus story, Jesus is in Bethany,
at the home of Mary and Martha.

Lazarus is Mary and Martha's brother.

Mary and Martha are supporters of the cause.

They are dear friends of Jesus.

Whenever Jesus is in the neighborhood
he always stays with Mary and Martha.

He told Martha at the raising of her brother from the dead,

"I am the resurrection and the life.

They who believe in me, though they die, yet shall they live.

And whoever lives and believes in me shall never die."

When he brought Lazarus out of the cave, a crowd gathered to watch.

Just before he came out, Jesus turned to Martha and said,

***"Did I not tell you that if you would believe,
you would see the glory of God?"***

That could mean only one thing.

With the raising of Lazarus,

the Kingdom was about to break into the world.

The power that represents the Kingdom,

the power of new life, the power of creation,

was about to break in.

There were secret police in that crowd at Bethany.

They saw everything. They heard what Jesus said.

They went immediately back to Jerusalem

to tell Caiaphas, the high priest.

They told him everything they had seen, and heard.

As high priest, Caiaphas was a government official

in a city crowded with religious pilgrims, all hoping

that this is the year that the Messiah will come.

They came expecting

this will be the year the Messiah will finally come.

Among the pilgrims there are revolutionaries, anarchists,

and "sícarií," which means "the daggers."

They were revolutionaries, planning to overthrow the government.

They hoped that

something would happen with the crowd

that they can exploit to create a mob

which would throw the Roman oppressors out.

So for a person who is responsible for governing
in a volatile situation as Jerusalem was at the Passover,
the news about what happened in Bethany is like learning that
*a fuse has been lit, and there is only a short time
before there is an explosion.*

*The news will travel from Bethany to Jerusalem, to Rome
And Rome will come down hard, maybe even destroying the city.*

So Caiaphas, the high priest, said this.

"It is expedient for one man to die to save the people."

Later the Christians would look back on those words, remember them, and say
Caiaphas knew only the half of it.

*For God works beneath, through and behind
the decisions that we make,
even the evil decisions that we make.
God is at work to accomplish God's salvation.*

So John writes that

*Caiaphas, without knowing it, is prophesying the meaning of the cross
when he says,*

"It is expedient for one man to die so that all can be saved."

But that is faith, looking back from the perspective of history.

At the time Caiaphas said it, it meant only one thing.

They were going to hunt down Jesus and arrest him.

So the 11th chapter concludes with these ominous words:

*"So from that day on they took counsel as to how to put him to death.
Therefore Jesus no longer went about openly,
but went from there to the country near the wilderness,
to a town named Ephraim;
and there he stayed with the disciples."*

Which brings us to the 12th chapter, and to our text.

He is in hiding now. We know where he is, he is at Ephraim.

But nobody else knows where he is.

For some reason Philip and Andrew decide
they will go into the city, into Jerusalem.

It is just their luck that someone, other Greeks from their home town,
recognize Philip. And they heard what happened at Bethany.

The verses just before our text relate
that the word has now reached Jerusalem about the raising of Lazarus.

This man says to Philip,
"We want to see Jesus."

Philip is suspicious. He says to them,
"Wait here."

He goes to find Andrew.

"What shall we do? Are they working for the police?

Will they reveal the hiding place?

Are they interested only in the reward? What do we do?"

They decide to take no chances. They go to tell Jesus.and Jesus says,
"The hour has come for the Son of man to be glorified."

It is just amazing. It reveals that
he is not really in hiding.

He is not running away from the future.

He is making plans to seize the future.

He is declaring that what is about to happen to him

is not the end of his mission, but the fulfillment of his mission.

Evidently it was the Greeks asking that question that prompted him to say,
"Now is the time..."

When they said,
"We wish to see Jesus,"

That was the opportunity to explain what the cross is for.

He said

this is what the cross will mean,

"When I am lifted up, I will draw all people to myself."

The Greek question was,
"How can we know Jesus?"

It is the question that everyone after that time will ask.
All of us who were not there in Palestine 2,000 years ago
are going to ask that question,
"How can we know Jesus?"

*How can we receive the power that was demonstrated in the raising of Lazarus,
the power to bring new life into our lives?*

*How can we experience new life
if we were not there with Jesus?*

The answer is,
you can know him from the cross.
"When I am lifted up, I will draw all people to myself."

He is not hiding from the cross out there in Ephraim.
He is getting ready, preparing himself, to take up a cross,
to demonstrate in his death, and in his resurrection,
what he had preached all his life. It is there on the cross.
You are forgiven. Be reconciled to God.
God loves you as a son or a daughter.
It is there on the cross.

*"God sent his son into the world not to condemn the world,
but that the world through him might be saved."*

He is preparing himself to bring his mission to a close.
What a closure. What a climax to his mission.

When you compare it with the other gospels: Matthew, Mark and Luke,
this is really a fascinating scene.

In Matthew, Mark and Luke,
the preparation for the cross takes place in the Garden of Gethsemane,
where Jesus cries out,
"If it be your will, let this cup pass from me."

That is what happens in the Garden of Gethsemane.

It is a soul wrenching time of agony and doubt.

It is not that way in John.

In John there is no Garden of Gethsemane agony.

There is a Garden of Gethsemane,

but it is a brief little scene where he is arrested.

The purpose of the Garden of Gethsemane in John

is to provide the opportunity for Jesus to be arrested.

It is almost as if here, when he is in Ephraim,

he is refuting the versions of his prayer in the Garden that said,

"Let this cup pass from me."

Here he says,

"Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say?

'Father, save me from this hour?'"

It is a rhetorical question..... Then He answers,

"No, for this I have come to this hour."

He sees the cross

not as a tragedy, but as a plan that is greater than our plan,

and greater than Pilate's plan or Caiaphas' plan,

both of whom had good reason to see him crucified.

But neither of their plans worked,

because their plans were against God's plan.

Oh the crucifixion took place, we know that.

But it didn't turn out according to plan. Not to their plan.

Their plan was

to make life easier for themselves.

God's plan was

to bring new life to everyone.

Their plan was

to get rid of a trouble maker.

God's plan was

to give the world a savior.

So God

took the plans of politicians and used them for the plan of salvation.

It's amazing.

"Don't think that anything is done with, until God is done with it."

This principle was formulated a long time before Jesus,

1000 years before Jesus.

It is throughout the Bible,

and is manifested in a glorious way on the cross.

But it was manifested as early as a thousand years before Jesus

in the stories of Esther and the story of Joseph.

Esther, was a beautiful Jewish Girl

who through a fluke in history ends up as the queen of Persia.

All this happens just in time

to see a pogrom planned against the Jews.

Her Uncle Mordecai comes to her and begs her

to intercede with the King on behalf of the Jews

who are condemned to death.

"Do not think that in the king's palace

you will escape any more than all the other Jews.

For if you keep silence at such a time as this,

relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter,

but you and your father's family will perish.

Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity

for just such a time as this."

"Don't think that anything is done with, until God is done with it."

Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers.

They hate him, so they get rid of him.

He applies himself in Egypt, rises to be prime minister.

With a diligent administration

he manages to store enough food for seven years,

so when the famine comes to the world, only Egypt has the food.

Now Joseph's brothers come to him
asking for refuge from the famine.

They don't recognize their brother. But Joseph recognizes them. He says to them,

"I am Joseph, your brother.

They fall on their knees,

ask for forgiveness for what they have done.

He says to them,

*"Get up, it's all right. You meant it for evil,
but God meant it for good."*

*"Don't think that anything is done with,
until God is done with it."*

It's the message of the cross.

What's so amazing about this passage is that when Jesus says,

"When I am lifted up, I will draw all people to myself,"

The implication is that

it is not necessary to do anything except lift up the cross.

You don't have to say anything.

You don't have to explain anything.

You don't have to have all those theories about what the cross means.

Those are called the theories of the "atonement."

There are several of them.

The Ransom Theory, Substitutionary theory, Existential death theory

The Angry God Theory, The suffering Servant Theory

And more, and I tell you

none of them really explain the cross very well.

I am reluctant to say this

because of the e-mail I think I am going to get on this,

because some of you are going to think that

David doesn't understand the cross.

Believe me,

I understand the theories of atonement pretty well.

*But the doctrine conceals much more than it reveals,
because God cannot be captured in a doctrine.*

There is a depth to God that will never be comprehended by us.

We call that "*mystery*."

It is why we can approach God better through a relationship
rather than theology,

*through the non-rational, rather than through the rational,
through worship, rather than doctrine.*

God is not something you understand.

We will never understand God.

God is not something you grasp.

God is someone who grasps you.

I know all of those doctrines, of the cross and I understand them all.

But none of them satisfy. None of them come close.

They all raise more questions than they can answer,

because once again it is God who is at work here on the cross.

That means, we will never fully understand it,

but we will come close, if we see it. If we could just see it.

"When I am lifted up, I will draw all people to myself."

If we could just see that there is a man on that cross,

the Son of God, who is there so you would have life.

In the presence of that cross, we don't say,

"According to the theologians..."

In the presence of the cross, the real cross, with a man on it,

you can't say anything, anything that comes close

to what people have felt for 2,000 years

in looking at the man on the cross.

For that reason artists are the best expositors of the cross.

I especially like the medieval artists.

They all show Jesus on the cross in the center of the painting.

Mary Magdalene is there.

Why is Mary Magdalene there?

Well, he literally saved her, forgave her,
saved her from those who would stone her.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, is there.

She is there because she is the model of faith.

From the very beginning she said
*even though she could not see or understand,
she would believe.*

"Let it be to me according to your word."

She also has suffered with him. She has followed him with her cross.

Simeon told her,

"A sword will pierce your soul also."

Mary is there at the cross.

John, the beloved disciple, is there.

Jesus tells John to take care of his mother.

In the Gospel of John, John represents the Church.

In the other gospels, it is Peter.

In John, it is John who heads the Church.

So Mary belongs to the Church as the model of faith.

There is one more person there in those paintings, John the Baptist.

His old crooked finger pointing at Jesus.

Often all he does is point, doesn't say a word.

In some paintings they have painted in the words,

"Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world."

That is all that is said.

That is all that can be said.

That is all that needs to be said.