

Sermon Text for March 22, 2015

by
Bailey Pickens

Good morning!

I'm delighted to be here, sharing worship with y'all this morning at the invitation of a pastor who has had more influence on me than perhaps anyone else—which I hope doesn't end up reflecting poorly on him by the time I've finished sharing this sermon! But in all seriousness: One of the most supportive and nurturing influences I've had: I am certain I would not be in seminary now if it were not for Bob Bronkema. Probably the one thing that he never convinced me of was that *John* is the best gospel—which makes it funny, I think, that the text for this morning is from John's gospel. But the thing about it is, in John, Jesus makes so many vitally important pronouncements, statements that are really foundational to much of Christian belief, things like *I and the Father are one*. But the trade-off is that Jesus never answers questions directly. WHICH I JUST FIND INTENSELY FRUSTRATING. Like in movies, where everyone is getting into hilarious scrapes that *all* could have been prevented if everyone just sat down and communicated clearly, you know? I can't even watch those movies,

They make me so cranky.

And so does the gospel of John. I can't always "fix" the frustration I feel, either; nor **should** I: it's part of the beautiful and complicated and life-giving nature of Scripture. So I sit with it. One of the best things about reading scripture is how many ways it can be read: You can meditate on a single phrase, or you can follow the trail of a whole book. The gospels, especially, the gospels are sewn together like quilts, a patchwork of stories: You can look for

the connections, what begins a story and what ends it. That can tell you what's important.

That helped me this week.

How does this begin?

“Sir, we wish to see Jesus.”

Which isn't surprising, since lots of people did. But it's **Greeks** who want to see him—Greeks, that is, foreigners, that is, pagans or maybe atheists, strangers not only to Israel the place but also God's historical promises to God's chosen people. But they wanted to see Jesus. So Philip goes and gets Andrew, and then the two of them tag-team to go get Jesus. Maybe this is the usual disciple uncertainty, or maybe Philip wasn't sure what to do about these foreign, Godless people coming to see their Master, and wanted to talk it over first. But anyway, together, they go and tell Jesus that there is someone here to see him. And instead of saying Sure bring them here, Jesus beings speaking to them really intensely about his death and resurrection.

This has to have been confusing! *The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.*—Okay but there are these guys outside—*Unless a grain of wheat dies*—wait why are we talking about wheat?—*but if it dies, it bears much fruit.* What fruit? *Father, glorify your name.*—*I have glorified it and I will glorify it again.* Which, I imagine, got their attention. I wonder what the Greeks outside thought.

The next question is mine: What glory? *Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out, and I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.* What people? The Greeks, perhaps, outside, who have already been drawn to Jesus, first fruits of the wheat soon to die. *He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.* What kind of death? The obvious answer seems to be “crucifixion,” a death that literally lifted his

body above the earth. Another answer, alongside that, is: A death that drives out the ruler of this world, and having driven that ruler out, draws all people in.

What is the glorification of Jesus Christ, the glorification of his God?

What indicates that the hour is now, that the time is fulfilled?

Outsiders are asking to come in. *Sir, we wish to see Jesus.* From the oldest prophets, the reign of God has always been accompanied by an opening up of the Kingdom. *I will draw all people to myself.*

This is a hard message, even at the same time that it's sort of a Christian cliché to say that all are welcome. What that usually means is, all who are more or less recognizable. Acts shows us, for instance, that what was required for converts to Christianity was still an active debate in the early church, apostles butting heads over whether gentiles must become Jews before Christians. That is a debate over whether **outsiders** need to shed that **outsiderness** before they are let in. And the answer was **no**. Paul is not *joking* when he says "no longer Jew or Greek," it's not just pretty language. The means by which we have always distinguished inside and outside are removed from us by Christ. And this cannot be separated from the whole of Jesus' coming. With death looming before him—and we the Church are barreling towards the end of Lent, now, we know what's coming as well as Christ does—Jesus tells his friends that he's afraid— *"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.*" *This reason:* The Greeks outside, waiting to see him. All people, soon to be drawn to him.

The easiest lesson here is that Christians must be welcoming. And that's not a bad lesson. But the coming of the Greeks is more important to us than that. On this side of Scripture, especially those of us raised in the church, we're used to knowing how it ends. We're on Jesus' side before the gospel even gets started; we don't need any convincing, we know how to interpret the mysterious sayings that bewilder his listeners, with nearly two thousand years of interpretation on our side.

But the thing we have to remember when we're reading about these encounters with foreigners, this opening of the Promise to include gentiles, is that that's **us**. Without the mission to the gentiles, without Jesus' insistence that the bringing in of the ones outside was to the glorification of God's name, we would not have been included. The lost sheep of Israel, that's not us. *All people*, that **is us**.

We're the Greeks.

Yes, of course Christians should be welcoming; that doesn't depend on who our ancestors were. But for those of us who are not descended from the Israelites, it is vital that we remember two things: That **it was our unexpected inclusion that brought God glory**; and that **it is the inclusion of the meaningfully different**, the stranger not only in name but in habit, that signaled the final hour, the coming glorification of God in heaven. We have to welcome those who don't belong, like really don't seem to belong, not only because that's the Christian thing to do but because that is how *we Gentiles were first welcomed*. A lot of rules and probably good common sense were discarded to bring us in. And I'm a good Presbyterian: I love to do things decently and in order, but the rules are not *the thing*; even our Book of Order makes that clear.

I've been a good handful of places—I grew up in the South, though you can't really tell from the way I speak anymore, and I've lived in places in the Midwest and in two very different New England cities. And this country has a lot of cultures in it, and even the places I've been which are supposed to be the most "anything-goes," or the most live-and-let-live, even they have easy ways to tell who's in and who's out. We humans, we build little walls, you know? No matter who we're trying to keep in or out. We like groups who are mostly *like us*. And I don't think it's an accident that Jesus says he will drive out *the ruler of this world* and draw all people to himself: That the ruling order of the day **changes**, and then all people are brought in. I have been in a lot of places, in a lot of churches, even, and that kind of openness to anyone who wants to see Jesus is a rare thing indeed.

Maybe we who follow the one who drives out the ruler of this world, should be looking for the outsiders who want to see Jesus: Maybe we should be looking for the Greeks who want to see Jesus and bringing them in with the same unconditional welcome that we found in the God who loves us, who would die to bring us in, for whom our very presence is glorification of the Holy Name.

Amen.