

Sermon Draft

Text: John 12:20–43

Sermon: “Death and Glory”

No sooner had Jesus dismounted his donkey, no sooner had the parade of Passover pilgrims begun to wind down, than some Greeks showed up. That they were Greeks isn’t particularly important; after all, God-fearing folks from all over the world were converging on Jerusalem for the Passover. What is notable about this group of Greeks is that they were eager for an audience with the man of the hour. ***“Sir,” they said to Philip, “we wish to see Jesus”*** (v 21).

They probably weren’t the only ones with that wish. Just days earlier, Jesus had performed his greatest, grandest miracle the raising of Lazarus. Everyone was talking about it. The air was electric with anticipation. Even in an era before social media, it is safe to say that Jesus was “trending.” He had just entered the city amidst a parade of palm branches and shouts of “hosanna.” Those Greeks were probably just the first ones in a long lineup of people who really, really wanted to see Jesus.

But as for Jesus, he was past the point of press conferences and interviews. Jesus was thinking, instead, about his death. ***“The hour has come,” said Jesus, “for the Son of Man to be glorified”*** (v 23). And as Jesus goes on to make clear that his being ***“glorified”*** means his being ***“lifted up from the earth”*** to draw all people to himself (v 32). Jesus ultimate glory is His crucifixion, by which he draws us to himself.

As if there were still any question about what lay ahead for Jesus, he employs a metaphor to make it even clearer: ***“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”*** (v 24). Jesus is that grain of wheat. Try to keep it and preserve it, and we get nothing. But bury it in the earth, and it rises up to bear much fruit. So, it would be for Jesus. He would go the way of death and the grave, just like a seed is cast into the ground. Jesus will lose His life only to take it up again three days later. And in his dying and rising, he will bear much fruit; he will earn the gift of our salvation.

This is what we expect to hear at the beginning of Holy Week, Jesus talking about dying and rising. It is why Jesus came. It is why we commemorate this week as holy.

But then the unexpected. Jesus turns the Palm Sunday tables. If we thought we could glide through Holy Week safely concealed like a spectator in the stands, soaking up the Passion, pomp, and pageantry, think again. It turns out that dying and rising has as much to do with each of us as with Jesus. ***“Whoever loves his life loses it,” Jesus says, “and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life”*** (v 25). And then comes the phrase that pays: ***“If anyone serves me, he must follow me”*** (v 26). That’s you and me Jesus is referring to. We must follow him. How it goes for Jesus, so it shall go for us. Expect to get treated like Jesus got treated: trials, temptations, turmoil and, eventually, dying and rising. Follow Jesus, and that’s what we get.

We don’t much care for this way of speaking. But at least nobody can accuse Jesus of false advertising. Jesus never claimed that following him would be easy.

Yet that's the popular myth to which lots of Christians subconsciously subscribe. Popular TV preachers and televangelists often perpetuate this myth. Many of them have been known to say that following Jesus means we can expect nothing but the best, here and now, today. Follow Jesus and watch life's pressures and disappointments melt away. Follow Jesus, and we won't have depression or sickness or worry. In reality, what Jesus says is, "Follow me, and give up all control. Follow me to the cross and grave. Follow me and fall into the earth like a grain of wheat and die."

Everybody dies, of course, so what is Jesus talking about? What does he mean? Well, the New Testament tells us that Baptism is a kind of death, that in Baptism we are buried with Jesus into death (Romans 6:4) that in Baptism we died, and our life is now hidden with Christ in God (Colossians 3:3).

If you were thinking of Baptism before I mentioned it, give yourself a pat on the back. But remember, the dying and rising of Baptism isn't a one-time event. It is a daily occurrence. Baptism is a way of life: dying to sin, rising to new life with Jesus.

At one point, Paul wrote, “*I die every day*” (1 Corinthians 15:31).

What he meant was that, as Luther says in the catechism, every day, our old Adam with all his filth and sin needs to be drowned and die.

So, what needs to die in you? What part of us needs to be put to death?

In what area of life does our old Adam reign supreme? There is a very selfish way of thinking about Holy Week that goes like this: Jesus died and rose for me so that I don’t have to change a thing so that I can live complacently and comfortably, without having to do the hard work of changing my sinful life. But the opposite true? Jesus died and rose for me so that everything is changed in me so that I can do battle daily against the sin in me against everything that prevents me from following Jesus. That is what Luther says baptizing with water indicates. Holy Week is not about living complacently about watching Jesus’ agonizing prayers, arrest, trials, and crucifixion all unfold with a spectator’s detachment. Holy Week is about the urgency of putting to death every part of us that loves this life more than Jesus and the eternal life he gives.

And so, again, I ask: What in you needs to die? What needs to be buried? Is it our need to be in control and in charge at all times, or is it our utter apathy, indifference, and laziness? Maybe it's that we draw our identity from what other people think about us, that we get our self-worth from our great careers or financial investments instead of regarding ourselves above all else as a baptized children of God. Or maybe we've let ourselves be defined by our defeats and we've resigned ourselves to victimhood. What part of you needs to be put to death? What are your addictions, and do you love them or hate them feed them or starve them?

Do we lack generosity because we're holding our money and possessions far too tightly? Do we charge into every challenging situation behind a shield of anger and rage? It could be anything or everything something different for each of us. But whatever it is, it is evidence. It is evidence of how much we love our life in this world. Whatever sin has enslaved us we need to put it to death. Bury it with Jesus.

It's not easy. It's painful and difficult. But with Jesus with faith in Jesus all things are possible, including the hard work of repentance. In the world of sports there is an old adage: "No guts, no glory." We are often lacking in the guts department, but we have a Savior who is all guts and all glory. Jesus saw his impending death as his hour of greatest glory. Being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. For all the sin in us that needs to die Jesus died. And it was his moment of glory.

It is a strange combination: death and glory. You and I would never even think of using those two words in the same sentence. What seems glorious to us in this world usually means applause and accolades and compliments. For us, glory means basking in the spotlight, fame and fortune. It means winning, not losing and certainly not dying. But the glory of Jesus is centered on the cross. The glory of Jesus doesn't shine; it bleeds. It bleeds for you and me and for our salvation.

Jesus' greatest glory is to do the will of his Father, he took on human flesh to lay down his life as a sin-sacrifice for the world, to give up his back to those who struck him to raise his face to spit and shame, disgrace and mockery. We sometimes talk about the glory of Christmas or the glory of Easter. And there the glory is easy to spot. But Jesus' glory shines brightest in the darkness of death the death of Jesus for you and me. It was truly a glorious death.

Jesus said, ***“When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself”*** (v 32). By his death on the cross, Jesus lifts us up lifts us up out of our sin and shame and draws us to himself. Jesus is really undoing what Adam did. When Adam sinned, he took you and me down with him. Adam draws us down to the grave. Adam took everybody from life to death. But in the glorious death of Jesus, Jesus lifts us up from death to life. In that glorious death, God and sinners are reconciled. Our sin is forgiven. Men and women are justified. ***“If we have been united with [Jesus] in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his”*** (Romans 6:5).

Die with Jesus and rise with Jesus. Jesus is drawing us to himself, and he will not stop until we behold him face to face.

We have been crucified with Christ. His glorious death is our glorious death. We no longer live, but Christ lives in us. In Jesus, we are that grain of wheat a solitary seed dead to ourselves but alive to God in Christ. We have been buried in the fertile soil of Jesus' death so that we, too, might rise and bear much fruit. And especially on this day we encourage Glen and Alexander to bear much fruit. May this Holy Week be for you absolutely glorious!

In Jesus name! Amen