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## The Fifth Sunday in Lent

March 17, 2024

### The Battle For Us

#### Jesus Overcame Satan by Carrying Out the Father's Plan to Save

The Son of God might have recoiled at the divine assignment and even refused it: To descend to a sinful world, abandon his godly prerogatives, endure poverty and rejection, and then bear on his back the punishment for sins he had never committed. Jesus dreaded the assignment but he did not refuse it. He honored his Father by carrying out the divine plan to save the world. With the work completed he overcame Satan and gained life for all those who believed in him.

#### Sermon

John 12:20-33

**Now there were some Greeks among those who went up to worship at the festival. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, with a request. "Sir," they said, "we would like to see Jesus." Philip went to tell Andrew; Andrew and Philip in turn told Jesus.**

**Jesus replied, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me.**

**"Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name!" Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and will glorify it again." The crowd that was there and heard it said it had thundered; others said an angel had spoken to him. Jesus said, "This voice was for your benefit, not mine. Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die.**

Introduction - I was a freshman in college when George Tiefel died. He was my grandfather and he had been a pastor for 61 years. We were all there for his funeral. When the funeral director closed his casket just before the service started, he placed a sheaf of wheat on top of the coffin—not flowers but wheat. I had never seen anything like that before and I asked about it later. One of my aunts told me that's what he wanted and he wanted it because of what Jesus said in today's Gospel: **Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains a single seed. But if it dies it produces many seeds.** Well, that was interesting. My pastor grandfather wanted to share a symbol that reminded all of us that we don't gain the eternal blessings of God unless and until we die. The sheaf of wheat was all about death and resurrection. I've thought about that sheaf of wheat over the years and I've thought about it more these last weeks.

So what does today's Gospel say? It was Tuesday of Holy Week and it seems as though it was late in the day. Jesus had been talking to and debating with hundreds of Jewish people for two days. He warned his Jewish

followers and he denounced his Jewish enemies. All at once some Greeks showed up. They were in Jerusalem for the Passover festival and they wanted to see Jesus. So standing there in front of Jesus were both Jews and Gentiles: representatives of all the people of the world, the people of every nation and every language, all the people Jesus had come to save. Jesus had said again and again that his hour had not yet come, but with that crowd in front of him Jesus said this, **The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.** With that picture Jesus introduced and described the most important event in the history of the universe. God forecast that event in the Garden of Eden and God finalizes that event in the Garden of Paradise. The event itself would have a gorgeous finale, but it had an ugly beginning: **the kernel of wheat had to fall into the ground and die.** And three days from this day, this Tuesday, Jesus Christ, the Son of God and the Son of Man, died.

There's plenty to think about and plenty to do in the next two weeks: groceries to buy, news to watch, doctors to see, plans to make. But during these next two weeks we need to be thinking about that perfect, precious seed that fell into the earth and died. Worship will guide us, of course, but the death of Jesus should be in our thoughts and prayers, too. What happened when Jesus died? What does it mean for us and what does it mean for others that Jesus died? Those are questions Jesus is answering in the Gospel for today. And those are the answers we want to hear.

### **When the Kernel of Wheat Falls to the Ground**

They say that death and taxes are the only things you can count on in life. The truth is we can get out of taxes but we can't get out of death. Everybody dies. But even when we expect death and maybe even when we hope for it, death always makes us shudder and catch our breath. And so we shudder and we catch our breath at the thought that Jesus died. He didn't faint or go into a coma. He took one last breath and he didn't take another. His heart stopped beating and his brain waves stopped waving. **The kernel of wheat fell to the ground and died.** We don't blame Jesus for saying, **Now my soul is troubled.** Jesus wasn't a robot when it came to pain and death. But what troubled Jesus was not only the end of his heartbeat and his brain waves; what troubled Jesus was the end of his life with God. He became a sinner in our place and God punished him as the worst sinner who ever lived. God turned away and separated from his Son. Losing life was bad enough, but losing God was horrendous, unspeakable. **Now is my soul troubled.** He said that again in Gethsemane two days later with sweat like blood: **Take this cup from me!** And so he said, **What shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour.** Jesus died. Jesus died to save us; that's why he came to earth. He gave up life and he gave up God so that you and I could live with God forever. That's what happened when his kernel of wheat fell to the ground. He died for us.

We have an incredible God. He made the sunshine in the sky and the trees that grow so high. He made people with brains and eyes and fingers. No leaf falls to the ground and no hair falls from our heads without God knowing. But nothing God does is greater than that he sent his Son to die for us. Nothing gives God greater honor, nothing deserves more praise, nothing affords him more glory than that he sent his Son to save us. Would you sell your house to bail out one of your kids? Would you empty your savings to help a friend? Would you jump on a grenade to save a buddy? Maybe you would. God did more. **God made his Son to be sin for us** even though we were not his children or his friends and certainly not his buddies. God sent his Son for Ahab and Nero and Hitler and Putin and Tiefel—and you—even though they all and we all doubted and disobeyed and disrespected and denied and despised him. And he did it because he loved us. Jesus looked to heaven and cried, **Father, glorify your name! Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it and will glorify it again."** And that's exactly what God did. He brought the greatest glory to himself when that divine kernel of wheat fell to the ground and died for us and the world.

**The crowd that was there and heard it said it had thundered; others said an angel had spoken to him. Jesus said, "This voice was for your benefit, not mine."** And so this is for our benefit. The glory God displayed at the death of his Son turned the story of the human race around. Jesus said that his hour had come and then he said **Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out.** Jesus stands at the center of human existence. Without Jesus there is only sin; with Jesus there is forgiveness for sin. Without Jesus

Satan controls; with Jesus Satan is crushed. Without Jesus the future is hopeless; with Jesus the future is certain. Everyone on the face of this planet, you and I, our sons and daughters, our husbands and wives, our relatives and friends, our neighbors and our co-workers, people across the street and people across the globe must come to grips with this reality: Without Jesus there is nothing; with Jesus there is everything. **When I am lifted up from the earth**, Jesus said, when I climb up on my cross and when I rise out of my tomb, **I will draw all people to myself**. Everyone will have to face the truth that **salvation is found in no one else for there is no other name given to mankind by which we must be saved**. Jesus said this then and he says this now to show how important his death was and is, to show us what happened when the kernel of wheat fell to the earth and died.

**Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.** You and I are those seeds and so is everyone who believes in Jesus. We were baptized into Jesus' death at our baptisms, we've heard and read about his death promised in the Old Testament and proclaimed in the New, and in the sacrament we receive the body he gave for us and the blood he poured out for us when he died. We have staked our lives and pinned our hopes on Jesus. Jesus is more important to us than life itself. But we still live our lives and our lives aren't always pretty. Sadness comes, strife comes, sickness comes. Disappointments, diagnoses, and even death. And what does Jesus say? **Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me.** Hear that? Death wasn't the end for Jesus and it won't be the end for us. Resurrection followed death for Jesus and resurrection follows death for us. And all that happens because the kernel of wheat fell to the earth and died.

The sheaf of wheat on Granddad's coffin? I kind of like that. How about you? Amen.

*This sermon was preached by Pastor James Tiefel.*