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The Fifth Sunday in Lent

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Jesus Draws All People to Himself

Jesus Christ is the central figure of history. All of God's actions after the fall into sin pointed ahead to Jesus and all of God's words since Jesus point back to him. From this central point in history—33 years of living, dying, and rising—Jesus calls people to follow him in faith and love. He calls us, too.

First Reading **Isaiah 43:1-7**
The Lord preserves and protects his chosen ones.

Second Reading **Hebrews 5:7-9**
By his faithful suffering Jesus became the source of salvation.

Gospel **John 12:20-33**
The hour has come for Jesus to go to the cross.

Sermon **John 12:20-33**

Looking for Jesus? Look to the Cross

Introduction – They were in Jerusalem for the Passover. If you were a follower of Judaism, that's where you went at Passover and that's why the city was crammed with pilgrims. But they weren't Jews, they were Greeks. They probably lived in Bethsaida which was a major fishing port on the Sea of Galilee; maybe they moved there to sell Greek fishing equipment to Jewish fishermen. John tells us they were in Jerusalem to worship which means they had converted to Judaism. They observed the law of Moses and believed the writings of the prophets. We assume, then, that these Greeks knew Messiah was coming and that he was coming not just for Jews but also for Gentiles—which what these Greeks were. Had these Greeks heard about Jesus? Probably. Bethsaida wasn't far from Nazareth and three of Jesus's disciples were from Bethsaida. And everybody was talking about Jesus. Did these Greeks see Jesus enter Jerusalem? Maybe, but even if they hadn't, everybody was buzzing about the donkey and the palm branches. So Jesus was certainly on their minds. So now it's Tuesday late in the day and these Greeks are walking around in the city and they spot Philip from their hometown and they know he's one of Jesus' disciples. They reach out, say hello, and then make a critical request: **Sir, we would like to see Jesus.**

We never hear of these Greeks again, but people have been looking for Jesus ever since. Over the span of 2,000 years, millions of people, no, billions of people have been looking for Jesus all over this planet. They've looked everywhere. Some people look for Jesus in hospital wards, figuring they'll find him healing the sick and curing diseases. Some look for Jesus in ghettos and blighted neighborhoods where they figure he's feeding the poor and fighting for the oppressed. Some people look for Jesus in Christian bookstores and Christian internet sites because they assume Jesus has remedies to make them healthy,

wealthy, and wise. Some people look for Jesus in packed churches and filled parking lots; they take for granted that success assures that Jesus is there. Obviously.

According to John who relates this event, Jesus never spoke to these Greeks on that Tuesday night, at least not directly. Instead, he spoke to everyone who could hear him. We're looking for Jesus, too, just like a lot of other people. We're pretty sure we've found him, but with so many people around us and with so many places to look, it's easy to get confused. Jesus speaks to us this morning in John chapter 12. He tells us where to look for him, he tells us where to find him.

Looking for Jesus? Look to the Cross!

What we'll see is a cross for dying, a cross for following, and a cross for reigning.

1. Jesus never pulled any punches. He told his followers clearly: **The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and give his life as ransom for all.** But they never wanted to hear that. Jesus' disciples were adamant that he should sit on David's throne and slaughter Caesar's armies. They never wanted to see him die. And then, when they saw on Good Friday morning how he was going to die—on a cross!—the Romans reserved crosses for traitors and slaves--They couldn't see Jesus on a cross, so they ran.

We all run, really, and so does everybody else who looks for Jesus. We don't like seeing the cross. We can handle crosses made of wood or brass at the center of altars, but that Good Friday cross? Not so much. Nobody varnished the wood or polished the brass on Calvary. Nobody quieted the hammers or wiped away the blood. It was like seeing a horrific car accident; you look and turn away and feel like vomiting. I'm not surprised people look for Jesus in hospitals, bookstores, and packed churches. Who wants to see the gore of the cross? And the worst of it is that the gore wasn't the worst of it. The worst of it was that on the cross God was forsaking his Son because his Son was paying the penalty for the sins of the world.

The other reason we don't like looking for Jesus on the cross is because we're the ones who put him there. Those little sins we joke about, the medium sins we make excuses for, the big sins we regret but then repeat, they're all there on the cross with Jesus. What does the hymn writer say? "For it was my transgression which brought this woe on thee." We don't like looking at the cross because it forces us to look at ourselves. We look away, hoping to find Jesus in other places, easier places, less embarrassing places, less humiliating places, less painful places.

Jesus comes to us today and he reminds us that we must look for him on the cross. **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.** Jesus heals the sick and defends the oppressed, he solves problems and fills churches, but other people can do all those things. Jesus was the only one who could carry our sins on his back, the only one who could endure the punishment in our place, the only one who could cause God to cancel his anger and forgive us. Jesus was at his best when he seemed to be at his worst. The seed that was buried in the dirty darkness of death sprouted into life for everyone who put their trust in him. If you're looking for Jesus, look to the cross. The cross was for dying so that Jesus could give us life forever.

2. And so we put crosses on our altars and on our steeples (towers) and we hang crosses on our walls at home and wear them on a chain around our necks. But the cross has to be more than a decoration. The cross has to be a lifestyle. The cross compels us to repent and believe in Jesus every day. It prompts us

to hate sinning and it invites us to long for forgiveness. The cross which was the place of Jesus' death becomes the center of the Christian's life.

That's where the problem can be. All sorts of things contend to be the center of our lives. My family is the center of my life or my job is the center of my life or being secure in retirement or my health or my home or my leisure--this is the center of my life. All of these things are good and Jesus loves it when we love them. But they dare not take our eyes off the cross. Listen to Jesus: **Anyone who loves his life will lose it, while anyone who hates his 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.** The great challenge of the Christian is to live life under the cross of Jesus. To look for Jesus in other places, to find my center where Jesus is not, to take my eyes off his death for me, risks losing my life him. **So the cross is not just for looking at, the cross is for living in.** Look for Jesus on the cross and you will see that the cross is for following.

3. The cross was a challenge for Jesus, too. He knew what the cross meant for him, and it wasn't just a matter of nails, thorns, a spear, and a heart monitor gone flat. The challenge for Jesus was carrying the curse and bearing the burden and dying the death he didn't deserve. The horror was not with laughing soldiers or mocking thieves; the horror came because of a Father who abandoned him. He said it here: **Now my soul is troubled.** He said it again in the Garden of Gethsemane: **My soul is overwhelmed with sorry to the point of death.** He prayed to his Father, **Take this cup from me.**

There was really never any doubt. We can tell. **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!"** What had started as a plan in the far reaches of eternity was now three days away. From the start, the Son of God was determined to carry out God's plan. God had done many things to prove he was the grandest and the greatest: he created a universe and two perfect people, he saved people with water and destroyed people with fire, he opened up oceans and wiped out armies. But nothing that God ever did was greater and more glorious than saving sinners by sending Jesus to a cross. God agreed right here. **Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified (my name), and will glorify it again."**

Of course, no one knew what was going on. **The crowd that was there and heard it said it had thundered; others said an angel had spoken to him.** But God knew and Jesus knew. **This voice was for your benefit, not mine.** So listen up, everybody. **Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out.** Here is the fulfillment of God's original plan. Do you remember it from Genesis 3:15? Here is the Seed of the woman, the descendant of Eve. Here is the serpent, the prince of this world. The cross is the wound the serpent inflicted on the heel of the Seed and the cross is the weapon the Seed wielded to crush the serpent's head. Jesus looked ahead to Friday. **And I, when I am lifted up from the earth—when I die on the cross—I will draw all people to myself." He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die.** From that moment on the cross, every man, woman, and child on this planet has to come into the presence of God through the cross. With faith in the cross, they live; without faith in the cross, they die. And so Jesus and his cross stand at the center of history. The writer to the Hebrews wrote: **For the joy set before him Jesus endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.** Look for Jesus on the cross and you will see that the cross is for reigning. Because of the cross, Jesus is King of kings and Lord and lords, and he will reign forever and ever. When we find him on the cross, we will reign forever and ever.

Those Greeks who wanted to see Jesus, do you think they found him at the cross? Did they follow? Are they reigning now? We can't know. But if we want to see Jesus, the cross is where we have to look. Uncomfortable to see? Of course. A challenge to follow? No doubt. A reign to await? Absolutely. Amen.