

“When I Am Lifted Up” / John 12:20-27, 31-33 / Lent 4B / 25 March 2012

“When I am lifted up,” Jesus says, “I will draw all people to myself.” That’s an interesting thing to say. But more interesting to me is the statement Jesus makes just a few moments earlier. He says, “Now my heart is troubled, and what can I even say? Father, save me from this hour? No, it’s because of this hour that I came into the world.” What does that mean? Did Jesus come for no other reason than to die?

It’s nice to know the purpose that you were created for. In his satirical book, *Stuff White People Like*, Christian Lander, a white man himself—and a self appointed expert on all things white—claims that all white people without exception love to believe that they’re saving the world. I have to admit, he might have a point. On our recent trip to Disney World, in Florida, Michelle and Chloe went shopping for Disney things, while Greta and I went looking for things to ride. We happened to be at Epcot Center when a man came stealing up to us and asked if we would be interested in saving the world. Greta was most intrigued. The man helped us enter some information into a computer, then he said, “Okay, Secret Agent Greta, now you have to go to Norway [the Epcot Norway] and look for someone wearing a green and purple shirt like mine.”

Once in Norway, we located a woman walking around in green and purple, so we asked her furtively, “Um, are you the one we’re looking for?” She said, “Oh, did Secret Agent David send you?” And she took us to the secret headquarters where kids go to save the world. Secret Agent Sue was waiting to welcome us. She pressed a flip-top cell phone into Greta’s little hand and said, “Okay, Secret Agent Greta, it’s up to you. Go to China [again, the Epcot China], and dial this number on this phone to get your orders.” Oh, the urgency, as Greta practically pulled me down the narrow streets of Mexico en route to China! And when we got to China, we entered the code, and another secret agent appeared on the telephone screen. “The sinister villain, Monkey Fist, has stolen the Jade Monkey, and we have to find it before it’s too late.” Now at this point, I’ll admit, I don’t know exactly how stealing the Jade Monkey spelled the destruction of the world, but it did. And so we were directed to go to the Chinese temple and locate a certain statue in a glass case. When we got there, we entered yet another code to ask the statue if Monkey Fist had been in the temple. And you could have knocked both of us over with a feather when that ancient-looking Chinese statue...nodded its head, “yes.”

And now—quick—we had to enter Greta’s birth date into the cell phone to get our next set of directions, which sent us to a carved Chinese Zodiac in a shop window. And when we entered the next code, in front of the Zodiac, the thing lit up and landed on Greta’s Zodiac animal, the monkey. It sent us then to the big market gong, and when we entered the next code, the gong rang. It really boomed, and sent Monkey Fist’s evil minions—also monkeys—scattering. We didn’t see them running, but we heard them, and a secret agent came onto the telephone to tell us what had happened. We had old Monkey Fist on the run...somehow. Next, we had to go to the garden pond in front of the temple, and there we had to locate a certain rock and enter another code. When we did, the Jade Monkey itself came rising out of the water. In all honesty, the water in the middle of pond began to bubble and foam. There was a gurgling noise, and slosh! The Jade monkey appeared from the depths of the pond. We had found the Jade Monkey and saved the world...somehow. But another secret agent came onto the telephone to say, “Quick, get out of there. The place will be crawling with cops and reporters.” We ran because couldn’t jeopardize Greta’s identity as an undercover agent.

We scrambled back to headquarters in Norway, where Secret Agent Sue thanked us profusely for saving the world from the evil Monkey Fist. And Greta assured Sue that she couldn't have done it without her dad there to read her all the codes, because she's just in kindergarten. And when we met up with mom and Chloe, it became apparent to all that...Greta really did believe that she had saved the world. Beaming with pride and great dignity, she told her mother what had happened, and warned her solemnly, "Don't tell Uncle Joey. I don't think he should know that I'm a secret agent." Ignoring her older sister's protests that it was just a game, Greta added, "I've always wanted to be a secret agent. And I've always wanted to save the world."

Now, I promise that when my children are old enough to be embarrassed by it, I will stop talking about them in sermons. Or maybe when they're old enough to sit in here with the rest of us for the duration of the service, I will stop talking about them. But the whole adventure with the nodding statue, and the magical gong, and the monkey rising up out of the water, it reminded me that everyone is created for a life of purpose. We sense it very early on, that our lives are meant to contribute to the greater good of society, perhaps even the world. And there's no greater source of joy, even excitement, than to really and truly believe that you are living into your life's great purpose...for the world.

Today we see Jesus in a rare, melancholy mood, as some Greeks request an audience with him, and he launches off into a tirade about how his hour has come, and a seed has to die in order to live, and losing your life, and hating your life, and being lifted up from the earth...on a gruesome cross. And drawing all people to himself. All of this because some Greek seekers approached him for spiritual counsel? We never even find out from John if the strangers got to see Jesus. But in the end, didn't he draw all people to himself? An unlettered carpenter who died at the age of 33, having never raised a sword nor written a book (perhaps having never read one), and yet, he sent a ripple through the world, through history, through you, and through me. His living, and his teaching, and his dying, and his mysterious return to live again in new ways: these have changed the course of human history; for millennia they've had a profound impact on nations and individuals. It's easy to understand his claim that, when he is crucified, everyone will be drawn to the spectacle. But what does he mean when he says, "It's because of this hour that I came into the world"? Does he mean to say that his sole purpose in life was to die on the cross? I think not.

"Sir, we wish to see Jesus. John 12:21." It was popular, at one time, to have this verse carved into the insides of pulpits for preachers to see whenever they stood up to preach: It's what the Greek seekers said to Philip. It's what launched Jesus into his melancholy discourse about being lifted up. "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Whenever a preacher climbs into that great stone balcony that serves as a pulpit at East Liberty Presbyterian Church, they find that verse etched in stone. Of course, it assumes that the preacher is a "sir" and not a "madam." But it's a reminder to the preacher that whatever he or she does up there in that prestigious pulpit, however he or she makes those buttresses and arches sing with eloquence and rhetoric, whatever the preacher says, the hearers mostly don't care about pomp and religion. They want to know about Jesus.

Another pulpit that bears those words is in the little Presbyterian Church in Calcutta, Ohio—a ramshackle suburb of East Liverpool. You couldn't crowd eighty people into that humble sanctuary, but you won't have to. It never saw more than twenty-five. The organist in that church knew about ten hymns, and I didn't like any of

them. But, as a seminary student, I stepped into their little wooden pulpit each Sunday to be met with these words, inscribed on a tarnished brass plate: “Sir, we wish to see Jesus. John 12:21.” It was the only time in my week when I got called “sir.” For me, it served as a sobering reminder that I couldn’t just speak my mind in that pulpit. Whatever I said, my words had to show my tiny flock *not* my well-rehearsed oratory, or the amusing stories I collected to hold their attention, but the person of Jesus. Calcutta Church had a second brass plate in their pulpit, bearing a more menacing Bible verse: I Corinthians 9:16: “Woe is unto me if I preach not the gospel!” I sometimes glanced down at the woe plaque and wondered if what I was preaching actually counted as “gospel.” I think that, there in Calcutta, many thought that it was not.

My point is that two churches of the same denomination couldn’t be more different from each other than East Liberty and Calcutta, but both churches express that universal wish in their architecture. They express it in the words of those ancient Greeks: We wish to see Jesus. Other religious words wear out. Words like “repentance,” and “confession,” and “sin” have become tarnished over the years, so much so that we rarely hear them for what they mean; we hear them instead for all the extra stuff they call to mind. But the person of Jesus still intrigues many people. In fact, there’s a viral video on YouTube today where a young man does a rhyming semi-rap about how much he hates religion but loves Jesus. He’s mainly attacking the angry politics of the religious right, and he seems unaware that there are any churches that do not take part in that movement. And yet, his point is taken. The world still finds something of value in the person of Jesus. After all these years, he still stands among the world’s great thinkers, and teachers, and sages. Even people who have nothing to do with religion can sense that there’s something of enormous importance in his life and teachings. They know from a glance that it’s not just the death of Jesus that matters, but that there’s something in his living that can inspire meaning in our living; something in his speaking that can transform the way we speak, and think, and act; something in his peace that can bring us a degree of peace. People sense that there is something in his forgiveness that can help us to forgive. They might not give church a chance, but they’re open to Jesus.

But how did Jesus see his own mission in life? Everyone senses some urgency about his or her role in the life of the world. In fact, when Greta and I were running around Epcot Center saving the world from Monkey Fist, I had to be careful to steer us clear of all the other kids who, with their parents, were busy about the same task. Did Jesus see himself as having come into the world primarily just to die, as he seems to imply when he says, “It’s because of this hour that I came into the world”? Well, how does anyone ever see their purpose in this world? It seems to me that our life’s mission really only makes itself clear to us day-by-day, year-by-year, situation-by-situation.

A priest and a rabbi got into a terrible car accident, but strangely, neither of them was hurt. The rabbi crawled out of the wreckage, saw the priest’s collar, and said, “Oh, I see you’re a priest. I’m a rabbi, and I think it’s a true miracle that we survived this accident. Maybe God wanted us to meet and become friends.” “Yes,” the priest replied, “It’s a miracle that neither of us was killed. Maybe we’re supposed to go from place to place telling the story of how God brings people together—even by accident.” “And here’s another miracle,” said the rabbi, “My car’s destroyed, but I’ve got a bottle of wine that didn’t break. Let’s each drink half of it to celebrate the miracle and our new calling to be friends across religious barriers.”

He handed the bottle to the priest, who was never one to pass down a friendly drop. The priest promptly drank half the bottle and handed it back to the rabbi. The rabbi put the cork back on the bottle. “Now, friend rabbi,” said the priest, “Aren’t you going to drink your half?” “Oh, friend priest,” said the rabbi, tossing the bottle into the weeds, “I think I’ll just wait till after the police make their report.”

It’s true that life has its pivotal moments that can change our perspective and set us on a different path from before, perhaps even give us a new calling, as the priest in the story believed the car crash with the rabbi had done. And when it comes to Jesus’ sense of his own mission in life, some believe that it all became clear to him at his baptism. But for the most part, I find that our purpose in life only becomes clear when we trip over it, day-by-day, hour-by-hour. Only rarely do we know, all in a moment’s time, what we’re here on earth to accomplish. When I look at my own life, and the lives of most people I know, I must admit that nobody sneaked up to us in the street and pressed a flip-top cell phone in our hands and conscripted us to save the world. No, life just revealed itself in the moment, situation-by-situation, relationship-by-relationship. All the urgencies we’ve faced, all the risks, all the sorrows and joys: they came to us in the same succession of days that brought us our meals, and our lawn-mowing, and our bill paying. Life does come at you fast, but you don’t know what it’s bringing until it’s upon you.

And so, when Jesus says, “It’s because of this hour that I came into the world,” I do not believe he’s saying that the whole purpose of his life is to die on the cross. But I do think that he’s telling a truth that all of us would do well to learn: No moment stands alone, isolated from what went before and comes after. No moment is your decisive moment, for all of the hold together like links in a chain. The boredom. The pain. The drudgery. The mirth. The joy. All of it makes up a bigger picture that perhaps we’ll get to see in the end. Step back away from the picture of Jesus’ life long enough to see it in its entirety. His living itself is the beautiful thing, not just the dying. His humble birth among the laboring beasts of a tired world, his spiritual awakening, his teachings, his sufferings, his death, his mysterious new life. When you look at the life of Jesus as a whole, it becomes a parable, of sorts, for the way we should live: throwing our lives in the causes of justice, defying with our very lives the worldly powers of injustice, and rising again to live in new and better ways. Jesus, the teacher of parables, become our parable. It’s not just the crucifixion that gives his life its mission. It’s the living of his whole life that matters, for not a single sentence could be taken out of his story. If Jesus’ only purpose was to die, then he was a puppet. But if his death is not the focal point, then his becomes a story of beauty, a story worth holding onto and comparing to your own. Think of Jesus’ life as a parable for how life should be lived, how it should be handed over for the right cause, how it will be restored even though it appears lost. His mission is to be our parable for living. His mission—like yours—is the living of life itself, the facing of the next hour. And after all these years, he still draws people to himself.

And you! What if you could see your own life as the completed work that it will someday be? What if your life, too, ends up being a parable of justice, or strength, or forgiveness, or some other virtue? What if—in the end—all the failures and faults are just part of a bigger picture, and that bigger picture turns out to be a thing of great beauty? Then live the hour ahead of you knowing that it is for this hour that you have come into the world. Maybe that’s what this world really needs: people who make it their mission to live each hour joyfully, and wisely, and well. Amen.