

What are You Up to? #5 “Lift Up”

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The Fifth Sunday in Lent

Rev. Dr. Chris Keating

Jesus prepares the disciples not only for his death but also for his crucifixion and ascension, reminding them of the importance of serving, following, and abiding.

Our journey through Lent has become our journey of joy, or perhaps our journey of discovering joy. We have been asking ourselves, “What are you up to?” It’s the sort of question friends ask each other, or perhaps the question God may ask of us. As John shows us, Jesus’ passion is now in plain view: he has entered Jerusalem. The city is stirred by his arrival, causing the Pharisees to say to each other, “Look the world has gone after him.”

The focus is now completely on Christ, and the vision he imparts of God’s love for the world. It’s a turning point for the Gospel. In John, the focus is no longer on Jesus’ works and teachings. Now the hour has come. The passion awaits, and with it the invitation for us to be lifted up to new life. And in this time, Jesus draws the crowd’s attention.

Long before St. Patrick was celebrated by eating corned beef and dying rivers green, Patrick was a pastor, and before that a shepherd, and before that a slave. Kidnapped from Britain when he was a teenager, Patrick was put to work as a slave. Sent to Ireland, he tended cattle on the slopes near Ballymeana.

During this time of hardship and struggle, it was love that lifted Patrick. He wrote, “the love and fear of God increased more and more, and faith became stronger and the spirit was stirred; so that in one day I said about a hundred prayers, and in the night the same.”

We can hear his words in his famous prayer:

Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above.

Christ on my right, Christ on my left, Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit down,

Christ in the heart of everyone who thinks of me;

Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me,

Christ in the eye that sees me, Christ in the ear that hears me...I arise today with Christ.

Such prayers helped Patrick escape slavery, but curiously also led him to return to Ireland, perhaps seeking to be more like the One who said, “whoever serves me must follow me.” In a way that is particularly Irish, there are scores of stories and legends about Patrick,

making it practically impossible to know which ones happened and which ones were mythical. But as the great-great grandson of an Irish immigrant, none of that surprises me, except to say that even the stories which may not have happened are still true.

According to one story, Patrick once decided to spend the entire season of Lent on top of a mountain a forty day fast on top of a mountain which is now known as Croagh Patrick. The story goes that Patrick spent forty days defending himself from flocks of demonic crows. (I'm not sure there are any other kind.) The crows harassed him constantly. The sky turned black from birds who attacked him night and day. But as the story goes, somehow Patrick continued to pray. He spent the entire 40 days praying and fasting and somehow fending off the incessant crow attacks.

At the end of Lent, an angel appeared to him, commending him for his faithfulness. Because Patrick had endured the attack, the angel tells him his prayer would be answered: the people of Ireland would turn to Christ and remain Christians until the day of Judgment.

Patrick then heads back down the mountain where he encounters the snakes. Completely shattered by spending 40 days shouting at crows and dodging their beaks, Patrick loses his composure and starts chasing the snakes into the sea. And that is the story of how Patrick drove the snakes out of Ireland. If someone asks you why Patrick drove the snakes out of Ireland, you can say, "Have you checked the prices of flights lately?"

But my point is this: Jesus' words lifted Patrick above his struggles. Jesus' words about a grain of wheat falling into the ground so it can bear much fruit bring to mind the call to follow Christ on our journey toward joy. In our hardships, in moments of terrifying struggle – and let's face it, being besieged by crows for more than a month certainly qualifies as a terrifying struggle – in all of this, we are, as Paul once said, "more than conquerors through him who loved us."

All Patrick wanted was to see Jesus.

In his ministry, Patrick proclaimed the resurrection. He lived its promises, bringing new life to those enduring hardship and pain. We laugh tell silly Irish tales and do all sorts of other things that have nothing to do with St. Patrick. But in his life, he sought to see Jesus. In his life, he experienced the sort of transformation the Psalmist describes. In his life, he discovered God's presence in his suffering. And in response, like that old Gospel song, he proclaimed the love that lifted him.

"Love lifted me! Love lifted me! When nothing else could help, love lifted me!"

It is the questions of our heart that lead us to find God's promise of joy. Those were the questions that surrounded Patrick, and they are the questions that surround us. I believe these are the questions which tug at the hearts of those around us: those who are filled with loneliness, those who are grieving, those who have experienced pain and suffering. These are the questions of any who seek spiritual fulfillment and change, and they are the questions the same sort of questions that led those curious Greeks to seek out Jesus.

"We would see Jesus." It's no surprise that these spiritually curious Greeks would seek out Philip, who had a Greek-sounding name and who came from an area where many Greek speaking people lived. However they find Philip, and whatever motivated them to seek out Jesus, their question resonates within Philip.

It was Philip, of course, to whom Jesus said, "Follow me." And it was Philip who went and found Nathaneal, telling him "we have found him about Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus, son of Joseph from Nazareth." And when Nathanel muttered if anything good could come out Nazareth, Philip replied, "Come and see."

Philip knows something about what it means to behold Jesus, to see him. This is what propels these Greeks. They do not come to quiz Jesus about theology nor are they seeking to be instructed in faith. They come in search of what scholars tell us is the essential element of John's Gospel: to see Jesus. To abide in him, to dwell in relationship with him.

The promise Jesus offers is one of new life that has overcome the world. No wonder Jesus says, "the hour has come."

The hour has come—it will be just a hop, skip, and a jump to the crucifixion. The hour has come for Jesus to offer his life so that others may find theirs. John is less concerned about whether the Greeks find forgiveness for their sins than he is about helping them know they are part of that world God so deeply loves. This is what it means to see Jesus: to find the love of God that seeks out the world. The cross and resurrection tell a story of God's love lifting up the world.

We tend to think of the cross only as the instrument of God's judgment. But here Jesus suggests that it is the pathway of transformation. It is God working to restore the world, to bring healing. They wish to see Jesus not because they need to know how bad they are, but because they are seeking to be lifted up from the world of pain.

The cross, as John sees it, is the image of God reaching toward the world. It is the light shining in the world, a promise of abundant life.

At one time, it was common to find the words “Sir, we wish to see Jesus” inscribed in or near the pulpits. It was a reminder first of how many men were preachers, but also of another truth: the world longs to see Jesus. It longs for the love which will lift them up. My question is this: when people see us, do they see Jesus? Amen.