

“A New Hope”  
John 12:20-33

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The word was getting around about Jesus. This was Palm Sunday afternoon, and the crowds had already joyfully greeted his arrival to Jerusalem. In fact, Jesus was attracting huge crowds; they were even bigger than usual because this was Passover, and people had traveled from all over to celebrate.

As word about the presence of Jesus spread throughout the crowds, some of the Gentiles wanted to meet him. They sought out his disciples and asked for an appointment.

Now, John doesn't tell us if they ever got the chance to see Jesus, but upon hearing that Gentiles had come to see him, Jesus made an astounding declaration. "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified." Those that heard him must have thought that the kind of Messiah, which they had hoped for, was finally going to be manifest. No more preaching and teaching! No more healing! No more talk of love, and peace, and forgiveness! It was finally time to form an army, and start the war to drive the Romans out of their beloved Promised Land!

Of course, we know the rest of the story. Jesus didn't rally the troops. Jesus didn't declare war on the Romans. Jesus didn't convene a war council to strategize the best way to clean out the Roman rabble. What Jesus says makes sense to us, because we know of the crucifixion and resurrection, but what of those expecting a much different response? What must they have thought of Jesus' following lesson?

*"Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor."*

Wait! What has that got to do with driving the Romans out of Israel? We want freedom and life, and he is talking about servanthood and death!

Finally, he says, *"When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself."* We know pretty much what he was talking about; but, even today biblical scholars argue if he was talking about the crucifixion or the ascension. What do you think his disciples and the folks in the crowd were thinking? Of course, the disciples were used to him saying things that they didn't understand, but they had hoped that this was the turning point for which they had waited. The others were probably more confused than ever.

However, even though the people were confused, even though their desire for a warrior Messiah didn't materialize—they continued to follow Jesus. There was something about Jesus that undeniably drew people to him—even before he was "lifted up from the earth."

What was it that drew people to Jesus? There is nothing in Scripture that gives us a clear picture of his physical appearance—which probably means that the Gospel writers saw nothing in his appearance that was unique. We do know that he didn't come from a wealthy or prestigious

family. He came from a town that was pretty unexceptional. What was it that attracted people to Jesus?

Certainly, his teachings were unique—if the people could understand them. He spoke of love, and grace, and compassion. He showed great compassion for the people through acts of kindness, acceptance, and healing. Jesus was quite unlike the other religious leaders of the day. He spoke of God's Kingdom, and of God's great love for the people. Was it a sense of hope that he embodied for the people?

In today's Old Testament reading, we hear the words of the prophet Jeremiah: *"The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah ... I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people."* Jeremiah gave the people a new hope. At the beginning of the Exodus, there was hope. At the end of the exiles, there was hope. But, over the years, that hope had faded. Now, with the presence of Jesus, perhaps there was a hope that God was doing a new thing. Was Jesus the new covenant?

Several years ago a school teacher accepted the volunteer position of visiting and teaching children who were patients in a large city hospital. One day the phone rang and she received her first assignment as a new volunteer. She took his name and room number and was told by his teacher that this boy was studying nouns and adverbs in his class before he was hospitalized.

It was not until the visiting teacher got outside the boy's hospital room that she realized that he was a patient in the hospital's burn unit. She was prepared to teach English grammar, but she was not prepared to witness the horrible look and smell of badly burned human flesh. She was not prepared to see a young boy in great pain either. She wanted to hold her nose ... to turn ... and leave faster than she came. But she could not just walk away. So she forced herself to step to his bedside, and she simply said, *"I am the hospital teacher and your teacher sent me to help you with your nouns and adverbs."*

The next morning a nurse from the burn unit asked her, *"What did you do to that boy?"*

The teacher began to apologize profusely, but before she could finish, the nurse interrupted her: *"You don't understand. We have been really worried about him ... his condition has been deteriorating over the past few days, because he had completely given up hope. But ever since you were here with him yesterday, his whole attitude has changed and he is fighting back, and responding to treatment. It's as though he decided to live!"*

When the nurse later questioned him about it, the boy said, *"I figured I was doomed ... that I was gonna die ... until I saw that teacher."* And as a tear began to run down his face, he finished: *"But when I saw her, I realized that they wouldn't send a teacher to work on nouns and adverbs with a dying boy ... would they?"*

However, as Scripture has taught us, hope for the new often requires a death of the old.

Although we don't ordinarily think of it in terms of dying, every time we move into a new phase or situation in life, there is a death of the old. In relationships, in marriage the single person must die to come to life as the married couple; the couple must die when a child is born to come to life as family. The same is true for community. The small group must die to be reborn as a community, and the community must die to be reborn as an organization.

Every season of growth, change or transformation, requires a death in order to be born to new life. Ministry is no different. If the Church as we have known it is to be Christ's instrument of compassion, love and justice in the world, then it must die to its own needs, to its own agenda, and to its own priorities, and become reborn for the sake of God's mission in the world. If the church bravely faces death, and embraces new life, following Christ to the cross, it will discover true, abundant life as it serves others. The same is true for us as individuals. One of the greatest challenges we face in a society that praises the self-centered is to willingly seek to die to our self-interest in order to find the true peace with God. When we seek to save our lives – refusing to love others as much as we love ourselves—refusing to risk our comfort for the sake of the Gospel – we lose our lives, or perhaps I should say that life becomes a living death. But, if we are willing to give up our old life—if we are willing to die to our old ways – if we are willing to be drawn to the cross of Jesus—we will find an abundant joy which only God can provide. AMEN