



John 12:20-36
So That You May Believe: John
“The Reason for Jesus’ Birth”

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November 27th, 2022
1st Sunday of Advent

Besides celebrating the first Sunday in Advent today, we are continuing in our series in the Gospel According to John. So, the passages aren’t going to be classic Advent passages connected to the birth of Jesus. But several of the passages we will look at tie in to Advent themes and even directly to the birth narratives in the gospels.

Now, before we go any further, there’s one thing in John’s gospel account that I haven’t mentioned yet that needs to be talked about. You could have a whole half-day seminar or longer on this topic, so we’ll just touch the surface. But it needs to be acknowledged that John highlights different teachings and events from Jesus’ life, and the way in which he relates these things to us, the sense of “time” in his gospel is very fluid.

Now, as a result, some people kind of question John’s account perhaps more than the others, but we actually encounter this in news reports all the time, and we accept the practice there without even questioning it. For instance, a report on a baseball game might spend two-thirds of the article describing a couple key plays that happened in the 7th inning, and how a pitcher struck out a batter with the bases loaded in the 8th, and then the winning team hit a home run in the 9th. And then in the last third of the article – sometimes even in just the last paragraph or two – they’ll also briefly mention how three other runs were scored in the game in the first couple innings. And then they might not even mention innings 3-6. So, they’ll take things out of order by starting with the end of the game, finish the report by briefly describing the beginning of it, and spend a lot more ink on just a few key plays, or pitches, or at-bats, and spend very little time on all the rest. They do this to relay to the reader what the key moments of the game were; the things that really led to the final score.

John’s gospel is much the same. The result is that things don’t line up with the other gospels which seem to flow in a little more evenly and the sense of time in John’s gospel is very fluid. It’s one of the reasons John’s gospel stands out from the others. I mention this because here in John chapter 12, we

are entering into events that are in the last week of Jesus' life. Thanksgiving Eve we looked at Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem – what you and I usually call “Palm Sunday” and is the week before Resurrection Sunday. We're in chapter 12. Jesus' death and resurrection are in chapter 18. So, we get like 5 ½ chapters – roughly ¼ of the gospel – covering a week of his life. Time slows down incredibly in these chapters.

Why does he do this? To underscore his purpose for writing, which he states near the end, that he's written this “so that you may believe” (John 20:31). So that whoever reads this would believe in Jesus. That's his reason for writing (not that it isn't with the other gospel writers, but he's more intentional about it). So, as we enter into Advent, what could the last week of Jesus' life possibly teach us about his birth? Is there a connection at all? Let's turn to John 12:20-36 this morning. We'll read it in four sections, beginning with the first three verses. **(John 12:20-22).** This is God's Word to you and me today.

Let's pause there for just a moment. **We know nothing of these “Greeks” whom John writes of.** We don't know if they're people who have become Christians because they heard the good news preached in their own towns. They certainly seem to have become Jewish, which is why they're at the Passover festival. Or maybe they're highly skeptical of Jesus and want to interrogate him. We really don't know. But, they approach Philip, who confers with Andrew, and together they tell Jesus about these people.

When I read this, I'm reminded of the Magi who came to visit Jesus sometime after his birth. Probably, based on textual evidence in the gospel of Matthew where the story of the Magi is told, they came a couple years later or so, but we tend to lump that event in with the birth narratives. Either way, here near the end of his life, we have some other foreigners coming from afar, seeking him out. But exactly who they are where what town they came from, and so forth, is simply not known.

Jesus then responds as we'll read in just a moment. One of the interesting things is that Jesus doesn't really answer the request for these guys to come see him. Although, it's highly possible that we just don't get the answer to

the request, and they do in fact get ushered to Jesus. In verse 34 John writes of “the crowd” to whom Jesus speaks, so perhaps that crowd is partly comprised of these Greeks. He’s certainly not only speaking to the 12 Disciples. Regardless, here’s what John writes next: **(John 12:23-26)**.

When Jesus said that he would be “glorified” he didn’t mean that he would be glorified in the eyes of people. That actually just happened at the triumphal entry, when he came into Jerusalem in the little one-man parade, with everyone cheering him on. **The glorification Jesus points to here was being glorified on the cross.** It’s clear when he then talks about a kernel of wheat falling on the ground “dying” and through that, because it is on (or “in”) the ground, it produces fruit. Its purpose is fulfilled. Its job is accomplished. The point of seed is to be the start of something bigger: a plant that ultimately has more seeds. So, the cross is what Jesus is talking about – he’s the seed that’s about to die. And while the world could only see that as disgraceful humiliation, because that’s what the cross was for them – it was a method of execution, a place for disgraced humans to be put to death – Jesus instead sees this as being glorified.

And whoever follows Jesus follows in his footsteps. There’s a “death” to our own selves that we experience when we follow Jesus. In fact, Jesus speaks of “hating” our own lives. It’s a strong phrase and often a bit misunderstood. Here’s what he means: **We are called to hate our life *not* in the sense that we disregard and despise our life, but in the sense that we freely give it up for God.** Our life is precious to us, especially because it is something we can give away to Jesus. Our own life is not our first priority, in other words. Jesus is.

This is entirely counterintuitive. It has been for centuries, and it’s only become more and more counterintuitive in our world in the last several decades, and especially in places like America where we are all about the individual and the “American Dream,” and “pulling yourselves up by your bootstraps.” We want to “just do it” (Nike) and “have it your way” (Burger King) and while we recognize that “there are some things money can’t buy” we also know that “for everything else, there’s Mastercard” and it’s the “everything else” that gets pushed our way, and life is really all about

“doubling your pleasure and doubling your fun” (Doublemint gum). It’s a selfish, materialistic culture we live in that reinforces self-glorification. But Jesus tells us that he will be glorified on the cross, and in response we are to let go of ourselves and follow him; To even be a seed similar to him, and to bear fruit for him and his kingdom. That’s what we’re called to, when we follow Jesus.

Let’s keep reading (**John 12:27-33**). (**Sermon slide**) There are themes here that overlap with Jesus’ prayer in the garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus *does* ask his father to “take this cup from me.” Though Jesus does also pray, “But not my will, but yours be done” (Luke 22:42). You see, no matter how much Jesus knew the cross was coming and no matter how much he knew it was for the benefit of humankind, it was still painful. And his emotions are not really any different than ours would be. Which should be no surprise. He was not just fully God, but also fully human. But here, we see Jesus stays strong in what he tells them – he’s not going to ask God to save him, this is the reason he came. This hour is the purpose for his birth and his life. **Right here is really the centerpiece of this whole passage. “For this very reason I came to this hour.”** “This very reason” means: his death. It’s what he was just speaking about right before this.

The whole reason Jesus was born...The reason he came from heaven to earth...The reason he taught what he taught...The reason he worked the miracles he worked...The reason he ministered to people, wept with them, prayed for them, ate with them, drank with them, walked with them, mentored the 12 disciples and others as well... His whole life, starting with his birth that we celebrate at Christmas: **His whole earthly life’s mission and purpose comes down to “this very hour”: his crucifixion.** It’s not literally an hour away as he speaks it, but clearly he’s referring to his death; his body, like a seed, that will perish but produce incredible fruit. That’s what he’s talking about. And it’s the whole reason he came.

And you see, if we don’t get that...if we don’t comprehend that at Christmas...if all we think Christmas is about is the gifts and the lights and all the other pomp and circumstance...or even if we think it’s about the birth of a baby whose life was important, but we just kind of stay focused on baby

Jesus...**If that's all the further we get with any of this Christmas stuff, then we completely miss the point.** Jesus' birth was not the point. Christmas is not the end-all-be all. His purpose was for the very hour of his death. That's completely different than you and me. Yes, death is inevitable...the mortality rate hasn't fluctuated much in the last 2,000 years, let alone prior to that...it still hovers around 100%. ☺ But our death doesn't really have a purpose as far as the whole rest of humanity is concerned. People die every day and it doesn't change us significantly. When the time comes that I die, a few people might come to my memorial service. A few will shed tears of sadness, and a few will probably shed tears of joy. And then they'll go home and go their merry way. No one is starting the Church of Brian North. I can't believe I even just uttered that phrase. It's heretical to even think of it. I'm not proclaiming that my death is the reason I was born, and neither are you about yours. Who does that?!? Only Jesus, because it's only true about him. **Jesus' death has meaning. It has purpose. It's the reason Jesus was born.** Everything points to him on the cross.

All right, let's finish out the passage: **(12:34-36). (Sermon Graphic)** So, they doubted that they heard God's voice call out, and now they doubt that Jesus is who he says he is. And it's not just this "Son of Man" phrase. Sometimes, I read this and think they weren't actually being serious about that...like they're almost mocking him. (May also indicate that these Greeks at the start of the passage were in the crowd, and maybe they genuinely were not familiar with the OT references to "Son of Man".) Either way, their central argument is what the Old Testament says about the Messiah. The problem is: They are only focusing on the Old Testament passages that speak of a coming messiah, a king, who would reign forever, who's kingdom would have no end, and they make assumptions about what that means and what it will look like. But they are glossing over passages that speak of his suffering and his death, such as in Psalm 22, which Jesus quotes from and attributes to himself, and Isaiah 53, as well, among others. Because of their skewed and earthly perspective on the Messiah, they question if Jesus is who he says he is.

Then, Jesus gives an invitation to them to believe in him. He uses the metaphor of light and darkness, where he is the light, and we want to walk in

that light and be children of the light. It's where you want to be. It's where Jesus invites us to be. It really gets back to his purpose, to his death on the cross, just using a different metaphor than seeds and fruit. His purpose is not a selfish one, it's for others. It's for you. It's for me. And when we believe that and trust in Jesus, then we walk in his light. We walk with him by our side, and in our hearts, and he makes a way for us, and illuminates the path down which he leads us. All of that is wrapped up in this teaching of his.

And, as I said earlier: it's why he came. He was born to have a purposeful death, that benefits you and me. And so: **The only remaining question is, "Do we believe that?"** Well...I realize some of us here this morning may have other questions. If you're new to Jesus or have not experienced much of him, then you may very well have other questions. But were those other questions to be answered – and I believe they can be satisfactorily answered; I wouldn't be standing here if it weren't so – then the only remaining question is this one of belief. And just as Jesus invited this crowd to believe in him, so he does the same for you and me. His birth – and his death and his life of purpose and meaning, is for you...to draw you back to your heavenly father, into his eternal kingdom, serving him, giving of yourself to him and his cause, and shining the light of Jesus, so that one day, every knee would bow and every tongue would confess that Jesus is Lord. On this Sunday of hope, nothing in this world gives us hope that can really deliver. Worldly hope is akin to buying a lottery ticket: it's just luck; just a shot in the dark. Hope grounded in Jesus, however, is sure and certain.

So, drawing people to himself, is his purpose. And when we follow him, that's our purpose as well. We serve him, which means our lives and our priorities align with his. **His mission is my mission and your mission.** We put our trust in Jesus, the light of the world, and we walk in that light, and shine it for the world to see so other people might be drawn to him. We are fruit of his ministry, which means we have seed in us to be planted and tended to so as to bear more fruit for Jesus. It's the reason we've come to "this hour," to this place of faith: to follow Jesus and lead others toward him where we live, work, and play. I pray this Advent season, and this Christmas, even as we celebrate his birth: I pray that we would allow Jesus' mission to drive us and lead us into a deeper sense of being on mission for him right

here, each and every day, so that the glory of Jesus – from the manger to the cross, and of course on through to his resurrection – I pray that his glory, through us, would be seen by all. Let's pray...Amen.