



“Focusing on Jesus”

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John 12:20-36

In 1968, four athletes were sent on the long journey from East Africa to Mexico City in pursuit of Tanzania’s first-ever Olympic medal. While none returned with gold, silver, or bronze, the name of one man – John Stephen Akhwari – endures to this day as a source of inspiration to countless athletes and fans in his country and around the world.

Despite hailing from the home of Mount Kilimanjaro, long-distance runner Akhwari was not used to training in the type of conditions presented by the host city. The Mexican capital was positioned 2,300 meters above sea level and, while world records tumbled in the sprint races, the field that lined up for the marathon faced a grueling challenge.

Akhwari was at the back of the pack from the beginning of the race and began suffering from cramps as a result of the high altitude. Determined to improve his position, he stumbled and was then involved in a pile-up with other athletes nearing the halfway point of the race. The fall caused him to suffer a badly gashed and dislocated right knee, as well as a bruised shoulder.

Akhwari was advised to pull out of the race – indeed, 18 of the 75 athletes who lined up for the race would fail to complete the course – but courage and pride outweighed the intense pain he was suffering. After receiving some treatment and a bandage for his knee from trackside medics, the Tanzanian elected to continue, and finish what he had started.

“A voice calls from within to go on – and so he goes on,” said an Olympic commentator. While the Ethiopian runner more comfortable with the altitude than most, was crossing the finish line to claim the gold medal, Akhwari was laboring in a distant last place. But his spirit remained.

As darkness fell and the crowd filtered out of the stadium, a lone figure embarked on the final 800 meters of his journey. Television crews rushed back to their spots to capture the moment that Akhwari limped over the finish line, over an hour after the winning time.

When asked why he persevered in such punishing circumstances, Akhwari uttered one of the most memorable and inspirational lines in the history of the Games: “My country did not send me 5,000 miles to start the race,” he said. “They sent me 5,000 miles to finish the race.”

In our text for today, Jesus has come back to Jerusalem for the annual Passover in order to finish the race. Worshipers had come from all over the first century world to fulfill their obligations to their faith. A celebrative atmosphere filled the districts of the Temple with the commercial traffic that was created with the sale of animals for sacrifice and the exchange of foreign currency. And Jesus is back. He is finishing the race. He is at the end of his ministry and has entered the city one last time.

Unlike his first entrance into Jerusalem, when Jesus took a small group of disciples into the Temple to turn over tables and chase away animals, this time, Jesus has a following, a large one. This time Jesus has healed brokenness. This time Jesus has exorcized demons. This time Jesus has taught about the Kingdom of God. This time Jesus has entered the Holy City not as an angry, table-turning, rabble-rouser but as a confident Messiah who knows he will be lifted up from the earth and that all people, ALL PEOPLE, will be drawn to him. All eyes are now on Jesus. And they should be as this text is preceded by powerful events, such as Jesus' raising of Lazarus, Mary's anointing of Jesus' feet, and the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem.

Roman Catholic author, Margaret A. Farley, recognizes that all those seeing Jesus are "intensely divided, as crowds of people form to hear Jesus, while others plot to destroy him, and some disciples become more reverent while within the heart of one of them, Judas, irritation escalates." And we see the momentum building as all eyes, including some Gentiles, or Greeks, strained to focus on Jesus. And Jesus saw their stares and sought to tell them about his purpose and his mission just one more time.

As we heard, among those who went up to Jerusalem to worship for the Passover festival were some Greeks. Who were these Greeks and why were they looking for Jesus? One commentator thinks that the Greeks were Gentiles and their presence pointed to the inclusive future of Christianity. For example, David Rensberger, Professor of New Testament at International Theological Center in Atlanta, notes that those Greeks "may symbolize the future mission of Christianity to the Gentiles" and refers readers to the seventh chapter of John. In this portion of John, the Jews said to one another, "Where does Jesus intend to go that we cannot find him? Will he go where our people live scattered among the Gentiles, and teach the Gentiles? What did he mean when he said, 'You will look for me, but you will not find me,' and 'Where I am, you cannot come?'"

Whoever these Greek-speaking people were, they wished to see Jesus. But they never got a chance. They made a request to Philip who told Andrew, and together the two men went and told Jesus. And Jesus answered them with a discourse on the meaning of his death and the hope of eternal life. So, in the text, it definitely says that Jesus answered them. But, who is "them?" Is Jesus' parable of the fallen dead wheat bringing forth fruit spoken only to Andrew and Philip, or are the seeking Greeks included in those who hear? I'm not sure it matters. In the narrative, Andrew and Philip and the seeking Greeks seemed to serve as background props to set up a discourse about Jesus' death and glorification. When Jesus began to speak, the first century audience seemed immaterial. It appears Jesus was talking to everyone throughout time. We are "them." We are the ones who need to hear the words of Jesus and understand the implications of his impending death on the cross. We, all of us, are drawn to the lifted-up Jesus.

But, why do we want to see Jesus? We, like the Jews, the disciples, the Greeks, and the Gentiles, all have different reasons for focusing on Jesus. Some people look to Jesus to be only a healer. Some want him to be the perfect counselor, a good psychiatrist or psychologist. Others want him to be the Great Reformer, the one who can rescue the perishing and cure all the ills of society. Still others are sure that Jesus can be the one to guarantee wealth, that to live life abundantly as Jesus said is to have a life filled with riches, power, and good things. Then, of course, what was

most likely during the week of Passover, people expected Jesus to be the impeccable political leader, creating and ruling over an ideal government. We all see Jesus differently.

As we have focused on Jesus this Lent, we might've seen Jesus as we wanted to see him. We probably hoped that Jesus would meet our needs above the needs of others. But what Jesus disclosed to his listeners was that HE was the one who would be above all others. And, if those seeking Jesus wanted to see him, they would have to understand what was involved. He said, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Those who love their life will lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life." Suddenly, the triumphant Jesus was no longer easily seen or easily followed. Suddenly, following Jesus meant giving up all and giving up life. The time was now. It was now the hour. Jesus was headed for the cross, and he knew it. It was a moment he had been preparing for. This was zero hour. It was necessary. It could not be avoided. Jesus used the analogy of the grain of wheat that must die in the earth to illustrate that he must die and be buried for the sake of all people, Jews, Gentiles, Romans, Greek, slaves, free, black, white, brown, straight, gay, poor, rich, comfortable, broken. The one thing, the one point, for the people who wanted to see Jesus and follow Jesus was that they must also be willing to give up everything. And to do it now.

"The hour has come," Jesus said. It was a special hour, an important hour. It was an hour to which his whole life had been leading. It was an hour when he would be glorified. It was an hour when all things would become clear and all people would finally see Jesus. It was an hour that was clearly central to Jesus' mission and he wanted his disciples to understand this hour, to see this hour. And of course, Jesus did what he normally does, he spoke in parables. He said that a grain of wheat must in a sense die to what it was in order to not remain alone and fruitless. This jarring parable opened the disciples' eyes, and our eyes today, that we must die to the love of our own lives, lest in loving our lives above all else we risk losing our lives and destroying ourselves. We must first see that following Jesus is about diminishment, depletion, and death. It is about the crucifixion and the cross before we get to the resolution of resurrection and redemption.

But even if we choose to follow Jesus and focus on Jesus, we often don't want Jesus to see us. Perhaps we have avoided Jesus intentionally because we don't want to face our sins and we hope to hide from the Almighty. Perhaps we have lost interest in church because it is too difficult to make real change or have grace with people. Perhaps we have a hurting child, or a friend with cancer. Perhaps we just experienced the death of a parent or spouse. Perhaps we have taken on a way of thinking that keeps God as one who is remote and ourselves as distant players in a divine game. Whatever we are experiencing in Lent, we hear the request of the Greek visitors in Jerusalem to see Jesus and perhaps it stirs something in us to focus more on this Jesus who will be lifted up from the earth. Their very simple request should become our request this Lent. These Greek visitors have shown us a way to tear down the boundaries and walls and barriers that we may have constructed around us to keep us in and others out. These Greek visitors can energize us and instruct us with the words that we need to say, as well. "Sir, we wish to see Jesus."

We wish to see Jesus, in his broken glory, lifted high upon the cross where he draws to himself all people. Where he draws us in with a love that is stronger than all our willfulness, with a love that is stronger than our sinful habits, with a love that is stronger than our stubbornness, with a

love that is stronger than our selfishness, sadness, and stony hearts. This fifth Sunday of Lent, let us peer through the shadow of the cross into the face of love. “Sir... Church... we wish to see Jesus!”

Amen.