

*In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen.*

This gospel reading from John begins the last public dialogue of Jesus before his arrest and crucifixion. It is, chronologically, actually *after* his triumphal entry into Jerusalem which we will mark next week on “Palm Sunday”. According to John, Jesus has been followed right along by crowds, especially after the great feeding miracle, the feeding of the five thousand, and the raising of Lazarus from the dead. But John’s testimony is that the crowds still don’t understand who Jesus really is. Perhaps they think he is some kind of wizard or magician. Perhaps they think this remarkable ministry of Jesus is some strange traveling circus and freak show. And it’s now the Passover Festival, and hundreds of thousands of tourists are pouring into Jerusalem, even, as these verses point out, some Greeks, or non-Jewish gentiles. Now to say that all were devout pilgrim worshippers seems unlikely; hey, there was a big feast going on...the “State Fair” sort of. Or Spring break in Ft. Lauderdale. Jerusalem was the place to be this time of year, if you could find a place to stay, and there must have been a variety of street entertainers. How humiliating it must have been for Jesus to be considered just another circus clown.

And what new trick would he do now that he has gotten into the city? What new puzzling riddle would he give us to play around with? Jesus has been speaking the truth to the crowds. He has been speaking truth to power. But many, no doubt, considered his message to be just street theater. What would he do next? I hope we don’t miss it! All the great wisdom brought from heaven to earth, God himself walking the earth among them, and they follow him primarily for amusement. Even the disciples, scratching their heads repeatedly from one obscure teaching to another, must have wondered just who this person was to whom they had hitched their wagons and given up any semblance of a normal life. So, as the crowds press in to hear today’s riddle, raising their heads to get a better look, Jesus says: “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. “Very truly.” Jesus is speaking from the heart. Jesus is speaking the wisdom of God, who creates, redeems, and restores. The wisdom of God who makes, loves, and keeps. Does the crowd get the point? Do we?

John, who wrote down this gospel many, many years after these events occurred, and who had lived and experienced many of the trials and tribulations of the early Christian church after Jesus had ‘ascended into heaven’, is again pointing out that people, even the most faithful ones, the disciples, did not grasp the significance of Jesus’ teachings until later. In some cases, much later. In fact, here we are two thousand years later still trying to decipher the gravity of Jesus’ message. But did the crowds of his day take what he shared seriously? Well, probably not so much. Do you suppose Jesus ever felt frustrated by that? Do you suppose he ever thought that his mission had been a failure? What would it take to demonstrate the importance of the message? How could these crowds be persuaded? Jesus knew what was coming, and probably knew there was little time left to try to make his point. It troubled him, wondering, perhaps, if it were all worth it. He prays: “Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say— ‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.” Is this a silent prayer? Does the crowd hear this prayer? Do they have any idea, do they have any clue just how tortured their ‘favorite street performer’ feels at this moment?

Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified my name, and I will glorify it again.” The crowd standing there heard that, at least, and said that it was thunder. Others said, “An angel has spoken to him.” What a great trick! Not as good as bringing back Lazarus from the dead, but being able to make it

thunder on cue! That's pretty darn good! Jesus overhears them, and says, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine." And then, knowing perhaps that this is the last time he will have this public opportunity, knowing that he has their attention, he makes it a teaching moment. Permit me to read it to you, and include how the Gospel goes on to the end of this dialogue...beyond where our reading so abruptly ended: Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die. The crowd answered him, "We have heard from the law that the Messiah remains forever. How can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up? Who is this Son of Man?" Jesus said to them, "The light is with you for a little longer. Walk while you have the light, so that the darkness may not overtake you. If you walk in the darkness, you do not know where you are going. While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light." After Jesus had said this, he departed and hid from them. Although he had performed so many signs in their presence, they did not believe in him.

The good news is that he didn't give up on them. God never gives up on us. Very truly, I tell you, God never gives up on us. Jesus may have agonized over those who just wouldn't listen, he may have been frustrated to the point of tears over those who just refused to understand, but he didn't ever give up. The New Testament Book of Hebrews, from which we have read a little today, says "In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, but he didn't give up. God never gives up on us. This grand experiment of sending this aspect of God, this Jesus, into the world to live among us, not to condemn the world but that the world through him might be saved, did not end on the cross. It continues in those who choose to hear and see and be children of the light, those who are faithful to the mission of being Christ's body in the world even today, so that the experiment can go forward, so that the mission can continue. So that the world may know forgiveness and how that just changes things.

So, we encourage each other to pray, as many have done since the Psalms were first written: Purge me from my sin, and I shall be pure; wash me and I will be clean indeed. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Give me the joy of your saving help again and again and again, and sustain me with your bountiful Spirit. Psalm 51 is a beautiful piece of work. Liturgically, it is used for confession mostly. But it also reminds us that though we seldom have gotten it all right, even from the mother's womb, that we may *always* be reconciled by grace. That is God's intention. That is God's dream. Dreamy old Jeremiah, who, as a prophet gave a public voice to God's intentions, says "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant..." I plan to renew my vows to the people, and give my solemn word, and make my promises to them again. And again. And again. 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. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the LORD," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

This covenant relationship is the one we long for. It's not just one which observes the law of a contract, but is written on our hearts, a relationship of love. A trustworthy relationship. A faithful relationship. A covenant which, unfortunately, we are bound to break like our ancestors because of our imperfection. But a covenant which God vows to honor dependably for all time. May there, please God, come a day when the people of this world will no longer need to teach one another, or say to each other. "Know the Lord", for all will know God already. When all will know what wondrous love this is. Amen.