

Thomas R. Cook  
St. Stephen's Church – Edina, Minnesota  
9:00 and 11:15 a.m. Celebrations of the Holy Eucharist  
Sermon for the Fifth Sunday in Lent – March 18, 2018

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## “Ready... Action!”

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Scripture: John 12:20-33; 5 Lent B

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This *Gospel according to John* is like the *Star Wars* of the Bible. It's cosmic. So much intrigue. So many mysteries. Plots and subplots. Grand destinies and sweeping ambitions. What is it that Jesus knows that no else knows? Who are these mysterious Greeks whose arrival throws Jesus into a muddle of paradoxical preaching? From where do these inexplicable voices emanate, sounding like thunder or angels from the heavens? Who is this so-called “ruler of this world” that is now to be driven out? What's going on here?

It's as if this stuff is written for Hollywood. And, in a manner of speaking, it is. You know we've made movies about it. But what I really mean is that John's gospel is no linear report of the facts, rather it is a grand and sweeping epic, filled with intrigue and mystery and adventure. It's like *The Iliad* of the gospels, the *Odyssey* of the life of Jesus, the quest and the trial and triumph of the Son of Man; it's *Luke Skywalker* all wrapped up with the heavenly hosts and taking on the evil Empire. John's gospel intends to be the very revelation of the deepest meanings and purposes of this world.

Remember this is the script that begins with those famous and alluring words: *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.”* This is big, very big!

Now, imagine Andrew and Philip, having just announced to Jesus that he has a couple of visitors, being told in reply: “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.” *Okay, Jesus. But what about the guys waiting at the door? Do you want to see them?* “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.” *Right. Ummm, Jesus, I think these guys just want a chance to say hello.* “Those who love their life will lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” *Right, I, umm, I’ll just tell them they need to wait outside for a while.* “Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also.” *Okay, got it... What’s gotten into him?* You know, Jesus gets so philosophical here that he apparently never does meet these mysterious Greeks.

So, what if I were to tell you that, while you might believe that all you intended to do this morning was come to church, that, in fact, you were enacting a *critical role* in the continuing saga of the purging of evil from the earth and bringing the ultimate salvation of this world and all of humankind; what would you think of that? What if I told you that your sitting there this morning is at least one manifestation of the

judgment of the world, and because you are here, the mysterious “ruler of this world” has a little less influence than otherwise? What if I were to tell you that it is because of a couple of mysterious Greek visitors who dropped in one day 2,000 years ago just to meet this famous wanderer Jesus, strangers that nobody ever heard of before or sense, what if I were to tell you it’s because of them that you sit here, and because you sit here, we know the world is being saved? Do we have any idea when we set off for church on a Sunday morning just how big a deal it really is?

John tells us there is more going on in this world than meets the eye. *There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our philosophies...*\* And John’s gospel wants you to know it. ...So, what *is* going on? Well, Holy Week is coming.

Jesus is headed toward his destiny, his impending appointment with doom. His fate wraps itself ever more tightly about him, and he feels the end drawing near. “*Now, my soul is troubled,*” he says. Remember, he has raised Lazarus from the dead. He’s gaining a following. The authorities are worried about his power over the people. *He is part of a rebel alliance and a traitor.* There is but one solution for Jesus and his followers: *Wipe them out; all of them.* Now, when the Greeks approach, Jesus takes it as a sign. His reputation precedes him now. Those outside his circle of Jewishness are seeking an audience with him. The Word is out. The world is ready to know him.

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\* From Shakespeare’s Hamlet.

But the price for that exposure is high. While the world may be ready to know Jesus, the insidious “ruler of this world” is not ready for that to happen. And so the end is set in motion, the clock begins to count down. Jesus goes to his death. He knows it. His enemies know it. But how differently they understand it.

For his enemies, Jesus’ death is the end; that is what *they* know. But Andrew and Philip hear what Jesus knows: “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain...” Jesus reveals that his death is but a part of a larger master plan, the cosmic plan that will defeat the “ruler of this world” forever, because it is through Jesus’ death that the seed of his life is disseminated and scattered abroad. It is through his death that the seed dies making way for the plant to come alive and grow to bear new and abundant fruit. Hence all this talk of “dying” leads ultimately to a new way of living. And guess what... We are the fruit of his dying. We are the stalks of grain that grow to produce new seeds, and we too must one day fall into the earth in order that the seeds of our lives might die so that new life might rise up from us again. Yet in the meantime, our dying to self, our willingness to live for others, our service in Jesus’ name has been a part of the plan all along. And the ruler of this world? Defunct, but not yet without power, whose days are numbered, who never really stood a chance in the light of the goodness emanating from God’s son. In the end, John’s epic gospel is about life and salvation through Jesus Christ and the triumph over evil. For us. For all. So, play your part... for good.