

Sermon – John 12:20-33  
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Grace Lutheran Church  
5 Lent – Year B  
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“Looking for Christ in All the Wrong Places”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace this day in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. It was about this time three years ago, and the Lyles were getting excited. We were getting closer to meeting two groups of people and we couldn't wait to see them. The first group was you, the people of Grace Lutheran Church and School. Your call committee and I had entered into conversation, and the more we learned about Grace, the more excited we were getting to travel here and meet you; to dream together about what the future might look like for Grace and the Lyle family. But if I'm being honest, you were not the people we were most looking forward to meeting. We had other people to meet first. No, not another call committee from another church. The people we were excited to meet were Princess Anna and, most especially, Queen Elsa from the movie *Frozen*. We were going to Disney World, and the highlight of the trip was going to be an audience with royalty. Elsa and Anna were new on the scene. So new, in fact, that we were not able to get a coveted FastPass to get to the front of their line. On our first day at Magic Kingdom, we entered the park right as it opened and hustled our way over to their palace, at which point we were told that there would be a two-hour wait to see them. I know what you're thinking, because I was thinking it too: There is no way this is going to be worth a two-hour wait! And yet, miraculously, it was. As we inched forward in line, our excitement grew and frustration was somehow kept to a minimum. And then it happened. We were ushered into the presence of the queen and the princess. Greta, who was five at the time, was on cloud nine, a smile plastered on her face. The kids received hugs, took

pictures, got autographs. To see the joy on Greta's face made it worth it. Honestly, if we would have let her, I think she would have stayed there all day, basking in the glow of the queen. She wanted to see Elsa, and she did. And it was magnificent.

2. I can't help but think that this was the mood in Jerusalem on that day long ago. Excitement was in the air. The itinerant teacher that some were calling royalty had entered the city. It felt like a parade, like something new and wonderful was breaking over the horizon. In the midst of it all were some Greeks, and they wanted in on the spectacle. They find the disciple with a Greek name not unlike their own, Philip, and ask for an introduction. Philip and Andrew bring the request to Jesus. If the gospel were a Disney story, the Greeks would have been asked to patiently and politely queue up and wait their turn. The payoff would have been majestic, new subjects coming to see a new king, happily ever after and all that. But the story Jesus entered Jerusalem to enact is most decidedly not one that would ever emerge from the Disney studio. Jesus does not even offer to meet the Greeks. They are sent away empty handed, with nary a photograph or an autograph by which to remember the moment.
3. Instead of meeting the Greeks, Jesus tells a different story. A gospel story. The hour has come, Jesus proclaims, for the Son of Man to be glorified. And it is not a story that will culminate with a magic kingdom of glory. Instead, it is the story of a new seed, something small and unremarkable that will be buried unceremoniously in the ground; the story of God's Son who will be lifted high upon on a cross to die the death of a common criminal and then tossed into a tomb. It is a story of pain and loss and death, and most certainly not what the Greeks, or even the disciples, wanted to hear. For if Jesus was a new king, if Jesus was the Son of God, then certainly the next step was coronation and majesty. But not suffering, humiliation. Not death on a cross and a corpse in a tomb.

4. We, of course, are not so different than these Greeks, these disciples. Even knowing the whole story, we can't help but equate the Son of God with glory for himself and with the hope of basking in that glory. And yet, even if that's not the story we would tell, it is the gospel that we so desperately need. For we don't live in a magic kingdom. We live in world that has been broken by our sin, a world ruled over by the evil one. We live in a world that seeks glory and power to the detriment of others. We live in a world of death, and Jesus has come to suffer and die for our sins and to show us that glory for glory's sake isn't all it's cracked up to be.
  
5. And so instead of holding court with the Greeks who wish to see him, Jesus tells Philip and Andrew where they, and the Greeks, and the whole world will soon see the glory of God revealed. Not in a palace, but on a cross – the Lamb of God lifted up in loving suffering for the sake of the world, so that all will be able to look to him and see God's love for this world demonstrated once and for all. The Lamb of God who is also the High Priest makes this offering on our behalf. And this is where we will see what true glory looks like. It looks a lot less like power and a lot more like love – a love that seeks reconciliation and forgiveness between God and us, and among us, too. The only way to get there, Jesus knows, is through his suffering and death; a death that shakes us free of our own thirst for glory and sets us free to enact suffering love for those around us. To be sure, that doesn't mean we seek suffering or rejoice in it for its own sake. But it does mean that we will come to hate and lose our lives in order to find the true life that flourishes now as fruit from the new Tree of Life that is breaking through the soil through our crucified and risen Lord.
  
6. So it is that, to follow this Jesus, we need to lose our lives. And lose them we have, drowned in the waters of baptism. And lose them we will, when disease or tragedy lay claim to our mortality. Many times already this year, my

colleagues and I had stood in the memorial garden or in cemeteries to place the remains of beloved Grace members into the soil. On the surface it feels not only like an end, but a failure. How could such a thing come to pass? But because of Christ, the One who was glorified in the suffering of the cross but who could not be contained by the garden tomb, we know that the burial of these seeds is not the end but contains the promise for new life that will burst forth from the earth in the power of the resurrection.

7. This, mysteriously but simply, changes everything. For God, for us, for this whole world that God so desperately loves. We are people of the new Kingdom, and in this world that Kingdom is not shiny and powerful. It is gritty and sacrificial. We look to his cross and take up our own crosses to follow him. To take up the cross does not mean putting up with life's burdens and challenges. It means, to quote the preacher Judith McDaniel, "willing obedience and self-emptying for the sake of God's kingdom. Taking up one's cross means redescribing reality from the perspective of God's vision." So what, I ask, do we see when we look through God's eyes? We see through the eyes of Jesus, who though he was suffering and dying on the cross looked out at this world, at you and at me, with grace and love and forgiveness. Looking through those eyes, we hate the lives we see, burdened with sin and complicit in systems that keep others down, shut out from the palaces of power. In seeing with cross-shaped eyes, we see that the world is not as it should be, but we also see that God is remaking this world into a kingdom with room for all people – Jews and Greeks, you and me, saved by the cross of Christ. It's not a magic kingdom with a happy ending. It's the Kingdom of God that knows no ending at all. The gospel we will hear and proclaim over the next few weeks is not the one we would have written. It's hard and challenging and it costs God the life of the Son. And yet this is the story, the gospel, we need. It seems to end with the seed, the Son, thrown into the ground and forgotten. But from that soil, that tomb, new life will begin to emerge. So if you want to see Jesus, don't wait in line, looking for him where

he is not. He is on the cross, suffering in love for the world, calling us to suffer in love so that others will see him, too. Friends: look to the cross, and live.  
Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep you hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.