



**St. Andrew's By-the-Sea** THE FIFTH SUNDAY  
*The Episcopal Church* IN LENT  
*in Destin, Florida* March 17, 2024

A homily by the Reverend James J. Popham

We are two weeks away from Easter and the end of Lent. How have we observed a holy Lent in our lives? Has Lent really been for us a time of “self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial?” Have we devoted time to “reading and meditating on God's holy Word?”

Let's be honest. And for those of us who think we might have done more, let me offer a make-up session on God's word by posing for us some questions suggested by the reading from the Gospel according to John that we just heard. They provide some provocative fodder for meditation on Scripture, as well as self-examination and repentance as we enter the final turn in our Lenten journey.

In the fourth century B.C., Alexander the Great had defeated the Persians and planted Greek culture in Israel and Judea. In fact, Gaza - of current infamy - was the site of two-month battle in which Alexander was seriously injured. Even into the time of Christ, Greek culture and language remained strong. Greek was the language of the educated class. Greek was the language of all the New Testament writings. And Greek philosophy had considerable influence on Christian theology.

The Greeks were an adventurous and curious lot. They travelled widely. They sought truth with a vengeance, exploring various philosophical schools of thought. They did the same with religion. Their presence in Jerusalem at Passover was no surprise. They might even have been loitering in the Court of the Gentiles when Jesus was protesting the desecration of Temple worship. Perhaps, it piqued their interest and incited them to approach Philip, a young Jewish man with a Greek name, to inquire about a sit-down with Jesus. Did Jesus' rampage in the Temple pique our interest? Are we still seeking truth, still seeking a better understanding of God and creation? Or are God's holy word just gathering dust on our bookshelves or nestling quietly in the memories of our iPads and Kindles?

But if the Greeks were curious, the Jews were well settled in their expectations of a messiah and their budding understanding of Jesus. When Jesus said "Son of Man," the Jews harkened back to the Book of Daniel in which the Son of Man is understood as the "undefeatable world conqueror sent by God." As messiah, he would be glorified for conquering all the kingdoms of the earth. But Jesus meant something very different: crucifixion. That was incomprehensible to his Jewish audience. It turned their expectation of a messiah on its head.

What do we expect of Jesus? Do our expectations reflect the cross or conquest? Do we expect Jesus to protect us from all harm? Will he insulate us from our insecurities, anxieties, neuroses, or addictions? Or from the less honorable actions of others? Or should we be satisfied that Jesus will empathize with our suffering? Then how do we respond when he shatters our expectations? Do we rebel? Or do we follow Jesus all the way to the cross?

Do we leave our very understandable ambitions and our desires for safety, security, sustenance, happiness, power, prestige, advancement, and comfort and wealth behind? Do we remember that the world remembers well those who set aside their personal, selfish gain for the benefit of others? Those who chose to really live by loving and serving others rather than merely existing in the illusory comfort of their own self-serving accomplishments. Those who know greatness is in the cross rather than conquest.

Jesus knew his life was drawing him to death, but also that his death would draw all to him. That in some fashion life would prevail over death. Good would prevail over evil. Still, Jesus had to be terrified by the thought of crucifixion, his being lifted from earth, as he said. But he never resisted his destiny or sought to escape it.

Few of us, let's hope, will face anything so gruesome as death on a cross. But how do we respond in the face of an uncomfortable or even dangerous task? Or an undertaking that would expose us to material expense or the ridicule of our friends and neighbors? Do we say, "God, save me from this task?" Or do we appreciate that courage means being terribly afraid, but persisting in what we know we ought to do, as Jesus did? Do we really think God would ask anything of us without offering God's voice to guide us and God's grace to sustain us?

By the time Jesus walked the earth, the people of Israel had given up on hearing from God directly. The God who had spoken to the prophets was silent. Any communication from God was a distant, faint whisper.

Consider the reaction of those who heard God's voice in our Gospel story this morning. "Thunder" "An angel" For that audience, God had become too far away. Hearing for the voice of God was a lost art. No one bothered even to listen for it.

But now Jesus was among them. Jesus was speaking to them. Now Jesus was the voice of God. And some would listen. Some would not.

Do we bother to listen? Would we hear if we did? Would we know it was God? And how would we react? Pass it off as "thunder" or something ordinary we could disregard? Could we hear it through the myriad distractions and diversions of our life?

That's why we have Lent. To stand back from the chances and changes and even the monotony of our constantly cluttered lives. To focus on the presence of God in Scripture, in Sacrament, and in our very hearts. To open our hearts and minds and bodies and souls to God.

We still have two weeks.

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