

March 17, Lent 5B (John 12:20–33)

“If you really want to live you’ve gotta die” is a puzzle that could leave you off kilter your whole life long.

by [E. Carrington Heath](#) in the [March 2024](#) issue

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On the pulpit at my seminary there was a plaque that only the preacher could see. It read: “We wish to see Jesus.” The reminder was there for all who stood behind it that our job was to make Christ’s life and message real and relevant for those who heard our words. It is a grounding statement, reminding the preacher of the stakes.

As Jesus approaches his death, he tries to tell the ones he loves the most about what is at stake. From his friends’ perspective, Jesus is just getting started. His reputation is growing, the crowds are coming, and soon he is going to hit it big. Jesus has way too much momentum to stop now.

As another crowd gathers, pleading to see him, Jesus begins to prepare the disciples for what is coming. He will find glory, but not in the way that they expect. He speaks first about wheat. A grain of wheat is just a grain of wheat, but in death it has the potential to become something even more. If that wheat dies on soil, it can be the catalyst for new fruit, new life.

It is a counterintuitive claim: to live is to waste one’s potential, but to die is to live into it. Jesus further tells Andrew that to attempt to hold onto life is the quickest way to lose it, but to die is to truly and eternally live. He says all of this while also exhorting Andrew to follow him and serve him, which should give Andrew a bit of a clue about what is coming for him as well.

In the second half of the passage, Jesus turns more directly to his own death. It is clear that Jesus does not relish the thought; he says, “My soul is troubled.” Yet, he does not resist it. He turns toward his death with the confidence that something is about to happen that will glorify God.

Presbyterians often turn to the first question of the Westminster Catechism: What is the purpose of humankind? The answer is “to glorify God and enjoy him forever.” Our work in life, and perhaps also in death, is to witness God’s love and grace and rejoice in those things.

When Jesus says, “Father, glorify your name,” a voice responds, “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” The crowd argues about whether they have just heard thunder or an angel, but Jesus tells them that the voice was for them and not him. He says that he is about to be “driven out” of this world. Death is coming.

So what do we say to those who look up at us on Sunday and say, “We wish to see Jesus”? What good news do we have other than, “If you really want to live, you’ve gotta die,” a puzzle that could leave you off-kilter your whole life long?

We have this last line from Jesus: “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” There are at least two ways to read this: Are we talking about Good Friday or Easter morning? If it is Good Friday, it is the moment he dies on the cross and his spirit leaves this world. But if it is Easter morning, it is the morning his body is lifted from the ground and the defeat of death is complete.

Whichever way we read it, it includes the promise that Jesus will draw us close to him. Jesus’ death is not the loneliness of a single piece of wheat with wasted potential. It is a generative act which bears the fruit of life for us all. Jesus glorifies God not through the waste of a life cut short but instead through the saving act of creating a community of life for us all.

We all try to hold on to our lives. Not just in terms of staying alive, but in terms of what we want and know versus what we fear and do not understand. Jesus does not deny the fearfulness of death, but he turns the uncertain and horrifying into the promise of new life.

We all wish to see Jesus, preachers included. Here Jesus pulls the curtain back just a little farther and shows us that whatever comes next, we will see him there too. That is good news.