

Fifth Sunday in Lent
Wicker Park Lutheran Church
Rev. Jason Glombicki
March 18, 2018

If I had to describe 2018 with one word, I'd use "unexpected." Back on New Year's Eve, I did not expect that we'd have a flood in the church basement. When that famous ball dropped in New York City, I did not imagine Puerto Ricans would still be without power today. When midnight struck, I hadn't pondered that high school students would take a lead in gun control legislation. So far, it's been a year filled with surprises. In today's reading from John, we have an opportunity to explore God's presence in the midst of the unexpected.

Today's episode began in Jerusalem when two Greeks asked to see Jesus. After the question was passed through committee, after committee, the decision finally came to Jesus. But Jesus didn't really answer the question. Instead he said, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified" (John 12:23). We have been waiting for this moment in John's gospel. In John 2, John 7, again in John 7, and in John 8, Jesus has consistently said "wait for it... the time of glory isn't here yet...wait for it..." Finally, Jesus's glory is here! Buuuut, the "glory" we expected is different. As one author notes, it is not like Olympic glory or Valedictorian glory; rather, it is cross glory, suffering glory, obedience glory.¹ In short, God's glory is surprisingly different from the world's.

¹ <http://www.davidlose.net/2018/03/lent-5-b-the-great-inversion/>

That's not the only surprise in today's episode. Jesus also said that, "Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life" (John 12:25). Well, that doesn't seem logical. Another way to put it is that those who embrace the material things they love have already destroyed their humanity. Yet, those who structure their lives in God's values – values of justice, truth, service, and understanding – they have *true* life today.²

And, in John's gospel, Jesus did not only surprise us by 1) inverting our understanding of glory and 2) espousing a different lifestyle, he also 3) rejected a typical response to death. Most of us, including the Jesus portrayed in all the other Gospels, would be afraid of death and the suffering of the cross. Yet, one scholar notes that in verse 27 Jesus rejected the fear of losing his mortal, physical life because he knew that God was with him, and that God sent him to reveal God's abundant life. That is, Jesus was sent to show something more than the usual symbols of life that the world offers – things like, wealth, youth, and power. What we come to understand from the John's Jesus is that even in the darkest, loneliest, and most difficult moments of life, God can bring something good and beautiful. What we discover is that God is not only with us in those moments but that God can use those moment for something good.³

Now, we need to be careful in John's gospel. There are many well-meaning Christians who have used John's words to make some inaccurate and disturbing theological claims. One of the greatest dangers in John's gospel is that with a slight misreading someone could come to believe that suffering is not actually suffering but

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rather it is glory. That is NOT what John is saying. John bends over backwards to reveal God's unanticipated presence *in the midst* of suffering. John emphasizes that Jesus willingly stepped into a world of decay and materialism, a place that *naturally* tends towards suffering and abuse, so that Jesus could reveal the presence of God within that despair. In other words, while God *does not* desire suffering *nor* does God cause suffering, God can work *through* suffering for good.⁴

One week from today, we begin the most holy week of our faith which ends with the great Three Days, namely Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and the Easter Vigil. During this sacred time, our expectations will be inverted. We'll come with clarity and depart in muddied waters. Instead of glorious trophies and golden metals, we'll see glory at a wash basin and a cross. Instead of fighting for his life, Jesus will offer himself without a struggle. When we expect the powerful to see Jesus' true identity, we'll see them flog and kill him.

Today, in preparation for next week and for the trials in our lives, we are reminded that God will unexpectedly reveal God's spirit in the midst of terrible things. With this story, we are prepared for whatever may come. So, as we journey closer to Holy Week, I invite you to sit with this complexity. Try to avoid seeking an explanation. Rather, approach the unexpected looking for God's presence. For, in that pursuit, you may find the Spirit's guiding hand in the church's flooded basement, you might see hope in the disaster response in Puerto Rico, and through traumatized teenage voices you may just discover our God. Amen.

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