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Lifted Up

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Lifted Up

DAVID FLEER

Occasions such as the Pepperdine Bible Lectures have come to symbolize a great source of hope and are an opportunity to remember who we are as Christians in the Restoration Movement, a community who longs to follow Jesus of Nazareth. Our remembrance of who we are is best when the world of scripture becomes essential to our reality, which is possible when we move into the world imagined in the narratives of the biblical text, not interpreting the stories to meet our perceived needs but allowing the stories to interpret us. We begin to do this when we walk into this imagined world and put on a character, live a plot, enter a dialogue, and allow the world of scripture to impact our own.

So, listen now to this word of God as told in the Gospel according to John (12.20-36).

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. 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. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

"Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die. The crowd answered him, "We have heard from the law that the Messiah remains forever. How can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up? Who is this Son of Man?" Jesus said to them, "The light is with you for a little longer. Walk while you have the light, so that the darkness may not overtake you. If you walk in the darkness, you do not know where you are going. While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light."

And this is the word of God; this is our story. Although it's not the only story we hear. Some of the most compelling stories being told in our culture today are told by advertisers and some of us, without knowing it, have allowed these stories to tell us who we are and what we want, naming our life's ambition, attempting to define and shape us. Like this one, "Once upon a time the kitchen was merely a self contained room stuck in a corner attached to a dining area by a swinging door with little style and all toil. No more! The American kitchen is the heart of the house, emotionally and architecturally. Proportion and finish attractively presented

to please the demands of today's buyers. Prestige style: cherry wood or Absolute Black Granite, the beauty of natural stone with French Ochre glaze and an alabaster copper back splash."

Or, allow your eyes to feast upon the photo in shades of blue and lush grays, in a white halo against a black setting. This is the all new M Class Mercedes Benz, completely redesigned; sleek, aggressive, aerodynamic body, luxurious interior. The ad reads, "More than a re-design, it's a re-birth."

Or, Nino Salvaggio's International Market Place with handpicked exotic produce from around the world. Costa Rican organic bananas from the Mendoza plantation; Australian blue squash from Down Under and Korean peppers flown first class with special delivery to Nino Salvaggio's where the ad reads, "Shouldn't everyday hold a little advantage?"

Flowing smoothly from kitchen to car to international market, these three ads are all of a piece from last week's *Spree* magazine, the new Detroit suburban, upscale, discount shopping glossy sent to everyone who considers him or herself on a fast track to "distinguished elegance, a true reflection of your image." The magazine comes complete with drawings for a two-year Lexus lease to get us started toward "luxury that lasts a lifetime."

I am here to tell you we are surrounded by these competing narratives which are false but powerful and seductive stories capable of overwhelming us and overshadowing the true source of our identity, found in the world imagined in John's Gospel. American cultural narratives think John's imagined world is false, and act as if Christianity does not exist, as if Jesus never lived and, (the audacity) pick pocket our language, "M Class Mercedes . . . born again!?"

But you and I are a community who believes John, who wrote "these things so that [we] may believe that Jesus is the Christ the Son of God and that in believing . . . have life in his name." We are here tonight because we wish to listen to this alternative narrative, long to be shaped by this story, and hope to be drawn into the place where Jesus says "and I, if I be lifted up, will draw everyone to myself."

Our story, the story you heard read, has as its immediate backdrop two scenes that are memorable for their strong appeal to the senses. The opening scene (12.1-8) occurs just after Lazarus' resurrection, and Martha, who had protested the "evil odor" she thought would be wafting from the grave, is serving dinner while sister Mary is anointing Jesus' feet with a large quantity of genuine spikenard ointment to such an extent that she must dry his feet with her hair. This warm, intense, musk-like

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perfume is both spendy and fragrant. John emphasizes the odor: "The house was filled with the fragrance," while Judas makes a fuss over the expense, thinking Mary's fragrance is really wasteful spending and should have been kept bottled and sold. Jesus explains that the musk-like aroma that fills the house is preparing his body for burial.

The other backdrop scene (12.9-19) doesn't have a memorable odor. It is seen with the eyes. Watch now as Jesus comes into Jerusalem on a donkey. Notice the big leafy palm branches. The people think they are welcoming a national hero. Observe, though, that Jesus is not on a king's war chariot but is seated on a donkey's colt.

Now watch the watchers. The crowd is oblivious, John says. They want to get their eyes on the star of the last show, the once dead Lazarus. Even the disciples don't really see it, at the moment. They'd remember later, they'd eventually see it, when Jesus was glorified. And the religious leaders gather in little clumps, one with another, "Look at that, will ya'! The whole world is going after him."

Remember the sight of Jesus seated on a donkey. This backdrop prepares us for the narrative you heard. Instead of the senses of sight and smell our story has an overwhelming sense of sound. At first hearing it is almost a cacophony. There are so many voices. The narrator navigates us through the sounds. The crowd has two different parts. And God has a rare speaking part. Then there's Philip and Andrew, to whom the Greeks say, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus" (12.21). And Jesus, who has the most lines, talks in parables (12.23f), declarations (12.22), proverbial axioms (12.25f) and a soliloquy (12.27f). He also teaches, explains and corrects (12.30-32).

Even when we isolate the dialogue and listen to the various speakers deliver their lines, it is still hard to understand. God says, "I have glorified and will again" and some say, "I heard thunder," while others say, "Angels!" When Jesus says, "And I, if I be lifted up," (12.32) the narrator must immediately step in and explain, "He means his death" (12.33). Lifted up on the cross is the first upward swing, followed by rising from the dead and finally the upward ascent to heaven in his ascension. And the people do not understand. They ask, "Who is this Son of Man?" (12.34).

Even for us, with this helpful narrator explaining things, it is still confusing, partly because we prefer to think that "seeing is believing." We are like Thomas who shows up wanting to see with "My own two eyes" and put "my fingers into the mark of the nails and my hand into his side, or I will not believe." And Jesus appears and says, "Really! Because you've seen you believe? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe" (20.29). You get the distinct impression that in John seeing isn't necessarily believing, which is why we should try to lean in and listen. We listen even though misunderstanding is embedded in the narrative; even though the characters don't hear well; even though John uses words and phrases that are almost lost on us, like "lifted up," "My hour has come," "glory," and "death." If your four-year-old grandson and you were to walk up to John and your grandson said, "Mister you talk funny," you'd be inclined to agree. But this *is* our language, this *is* the church's tongue. So, why do you suppose these words have fallen into disuse amongst us?

Images of the Papal wake dominated the news last month. The dead man's body, vested, mitered, laid out among his people in St. Peter's Square wearing his Papal hat and his Papal shoes, borne from one station to the next. Such images are memorable and include watching the millions of people waiting for hours just to pass by the body. And you and I staring into our television screens are saying, "How Catholic, how Italian, how Polish, how traditional." When we are bereaved we choose not funerals but "Celebrations of life" with a guest list open to everyone except the actual corpse, who often is dismissed, buried, burned, out of sight, out of mind.¹

Consider this untitled poem,

My mother said, "Of course,
It may be nothing, but your father
has a spot on his lung."
That was all that was said: My father
at fifty-one could never
Speak of dreadful things without tears. . .

In two weeks, the exploratory
revealed an inoperable lesion
The doctors never
told him, he never asked. . .

. . . seven months later,

1. Thomas Lynch, "Our Near Death Experience," *New York Times* (April 9, 2005). Lynch, a funeral director, is perhaps more accessible in *The Undertaking: Life Studies from the Dismal Trade* (N.Y.: W. W. Norton, 1997).

Just after his fifty-second birthday
 - his eyesight going,
 his voice reduced to a whisper, three days
 before he died - he said,
 "If anything should happen to me . . ."2

The poem is untitled because we don't say that word. We don't like that word. We pretend that word will not apply to us. And that is how we lost it.

"But, when I am lifted up," Jesus said.
 "When Jesus is lifted up," the narrator explained, "he is talking about his *death*."
 "When Jesus is lifted up," God promised, he will glorify his name.

And the day the Pope died, the Detroit *Free Press*, in a headline, used the word *glory*. But, it was also in the sport's page. Michigan State University's men's basketball team just made the final four and the headline read, "Road to Glory." So, we're here to report these words lost or stolen. "Glory" is confiscated by the wide world of sports. "Death" seems to be wandering off into the woods. And, Mercedes Benz is driving away with "born again."

Without the language we're hamstrung, handicapped, limited. It's as if our churches are suffering from a debilitating and humiliating disease. When Jesus says "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself" we say, "I recognize your face but I don't know who you are." We've been struck dumb at the very moment we most need biblical words and biblical categories and a worldview that is faith shaped, because we find ourselves in crisis. The competing stories have overwhelmed us.

Last Saturday night there was a church dinner. The "Up and Comers Class" met at a member's lake cottage, actually a three-story chalet on the banks of beautiful blue Lake Michigan. It was a chardonnay and cheese party. Grigich Hill, a crisp and fruity chardonnay, with Pecorino Romano cheese and a tasteful assortment of dainty black and brown breads. On the second floor of the "Up and Comers" church party, a twenty-something is crowing about his \$180,000 house purchase last year which he believes is now valued at close to \$300,000. He's thinking of buying more property and getting into the landlord business. A deacon commends the young man's business savvy and recalls his exploits in the dot.coms and advises, "Make as much as you can and get out before the bubble bursts."

And out on the deck, overlooking the lake, someone mentions golfing with the mayor, and someone else brags about having been to the White House and eaten with the President, and rumor has it that one of our number may run for governor of a southeastern state. And I must confess that words fail me to describe how stimulating I find these people, this party, these conversations. But as your preacher this evening, I must tell the truth and that is to say that from the chalet's third story it is very hard to see Jesus on a donkey, let alone "lifted up." And the smell of the crisp and fruity chardonnay has suffocated the fragrance of Mary's spike-nard perfume.

Our other option is not much of a draw: Sunday's after-church potluck in the whitewashed cinder block basement with gooey Swedish meatballs and Aunt Erma's spice lime salad. I'm speaking of the church where the elders called an emergency meeting at three on Sunday afternoon because at the morning service the song leader appeared to coax some teenagers into clapping their hands, which was the last straw for the treasurer, who snatched his jacket, grabbed his Bible, and stomped out of the service threatening to place his membership elsewhere and take his sizable contribution with him.

And this is the crisis in which we find ourselves. We have created two churches. In one, the up and comers Church of Christ, eyes are bright, interest is high, and members have made peace with society, or should

2. Donald Hall, "My Mother Said," *The Old Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1996).

I say “alliances with the principalities and powers.” And the other, the Swedish meatball Church of Christ, is busy swallowing camels as they strain out the gnats.

In these days we long for an alternative story, to find others who, like ourselves, wish to “live in,” or “experience” an alternative narrative. We’ve developed an appetite for the world imagined in scripture. We’ve been regaled long enough by the Gospel according to the Simpsons, the Gospel according to Harry Potter, and the Gospel according to Mel Gibson. The hour has come for us to live in the world imagined in John’s Gospel.

So, let us visit just such a congregation, you and me. This Sunday. When we arrive and make our way to the building, passing through the parking lot, by the members’ cars, allow me to make an observation. Notice the cars, not the make, model, and year. Look at the bumpers, how clean they are. There are no stickers, no flags, no Kerry/Edwards red, white, and blue remnants, and no black squares with a tasteful, elegant, and thin white W in the middle. This is symbolic. Evidently this church refuses to pledge allegiance to any political party.

And now we enter the foyer. It is so beautiful. A long mural along one wall with single portraits, and a gallery of oil and water color paintings along the other. They’re the ones you’d expect in John: Mary weeping, mistaking Jesus for the gardener; Peter and John sprinting to an empty tomb; and a still life—a basin of water and a towel.

But on the day we visit, the accent lights shine upon two paintings, and clusters of disciples, small groups of Christians, gather around the paintings talking about the images, talking about the implications for their lives. In one relief, done in basic colors, dark blues, shades of green, browns and a dash of red, Peter is wielding a sword, finishing a back swing, and Malchus is reeling, grabbing his head. Jesus has grasped Peter’s forearm, dislodging the sword from his hand, and the caption reads, “Put away the sword.” And the congregation remembers and talks about their own battles to take up the weapons of the world.

And the accent lights shine upon a portrait of Pilate and Jesus. Not Pilate with his back to us, addressing a crowd assembled beneath his portico, leaning over the balcony rail with one arm gesturing back to Jesus. No, lights fall upon a more sinister Pilate, confronting Jesus face to face, and Pilate seems to say, “Do you have any idea who I am? What I can do to you? What I can do for you? Just a little compromise and I can make your life a lot easier.”

Jesus stares back. And the congregation says, “He never compromised with Pilate. Not even a little.” And Jesus says, “When I am lifted up the ruler of the world will be cast out.” And these are the stories on everyone’s mind.

This is the church that believes and acts as if computer porn, M rated video games, and *Spree* magazine that lies and claims that “materialism reflects our image,” are all of a piece. Yet, this church knows that worldliness is a habit hard to break.³ And this church will not compromise.

This is the church that refuses to get into bed with Pilate or Caesar or others who wield power and make promises. And when the treasurer stomps out of the service, like Judas making threats, the congregation remembers the scent of spikenard perfume and refuses to compromise to such worldly power plays.

And now we leave the foyer and move into the “sanctuary,” if I can call it that. Some call it the auditorium, but that’s not the correct term either. It’s a “place” and the light is radiant and clarifying from all angles, and we immediately notice that this church has no walls. It’s not the Crystal Cathedral, it’s not the fastest growing church in Orange County. It is a church capable of movement, it is a church intent on serving where Jesus serves. In fact, there are no pews, nor theatre seats like the massive Community churches. But the church has a pulpit, made of wood, vertically tall with a horizontal piece near the top. And today

3. In preparing this sermon I communicated with Willimon and Hauerwas, who acted as my dialogue partners. They stimulated the conversation with John and set out some helpful language, including this phrase. William H. Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas, *Resident Aliens* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989) 96.

Jesus is preaching, and for his sermon he takes as his text the twelfth chapter of John and the twenty-fourth verse. And this place is quiet because Jesus is speaking.

Listen. Jesus is saying, "Cling to what the world offers and you'll lose your life in the process. But if you hate your life in this world, hate the way you cheapen your life by chasing comfort and luxury, making alliances with worldly power, if you hate it enough to stop and follow me instead, and watch and serve where I serve, I promise, God will honor you."

Jesus says, "I could have protected my life. Stopped eating with outcasts, been more respectful of organized religion, made a few political friends along the way. But, then I would have loved this life and saved it."

"But I lived my message because a grain of wheat cannot grow unless it dies. Put the seed in a crystal basket and place it on display in your china hutch and it will remain useless. But, if the seed does what seed is meant to do, it must be buried and when the hour comes it will crack and burst forth a new life. The seed gives its life so there can be wheat in the world."⁴

And now the sermon ends, complete quiet returns for a brief moment, and we have a clear understanding of what Jesus says and means. And then we hear someone behind us, a younger voice, and she says, "He was talking about us, too, wasn't he?" And an older voice responds, "That's right, we are God's grain of wheat."

Soon these voices are muffled by the sound created by the movement of people, groups of three and a dozen, blacks and whites together, young and old, men and women together, conservatives and liberals. Because being a Christian is too difficult to do alone and we are following Jesus into the inner cities, rest homes, and all the places the outcasts live, which is why some stay and serve among us.

I conclude, brothers and sisters, to say this. We have found a faithful church when we are determined to allow the Bible to breathe again, determined to permit scripture to blossom in its natural habitat, determined ourselves to live in the world imagined in John where we have ears to hear the words of our Lord who said, "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself."

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4. I've adapted Jesus' language in these three paragraphs from Barbara Brown Taylor, "Unless a Grain Falls," *God in Pain: Teaching Sermons on Suffering* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998) 61-65.