The Gospel of John: *The Magnet*

John 12:27-33

As many of you know, I was in Florida for a pastor’s conference during the first week in January. Then, Thursday, January 7th, just 48 hours before I was to fly home, I came down with the dreaded coronavirus. Thus, I was compelled to check into a hotel and remain there for 10 days as required by the CDC. Consequently, it has now been two weeks since I have had the honor of delivering a message, but I want to acknowledge the excellent and faithful work of our pastoral team in my absence. We are blessed with more than our share of gifted, faithful pastors to teach and exhort the Word of God, amen? What a blessing! And yes…I’m feeling better. Still have no sense of smell or taste…still cough a lot…but I feel pretty good overall.

So, as we return to John’s Gospel, we are in the 12th chapter, and Jesus has just arrived in Jerusalem, greeted by large crowds waving palm branches. The celebration of the Passover is imminent, and thousands of pilgrims from all over the middle east have arrived in Jerusalem for the festivities. Among that number were many Greek-speaking believers, some of whom asked the disciples for an audience with Jesus in John 12:21. When Jesus learns that the Gentile believers are seeking Him, He begins to speak to the disciples and the crowd in vss. 22-26, saying:

The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Truly, truly I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor them.

Pastor Mark did a great job of unpacking those verses for us last Sunday, and we must remember this important context as we now turn to hear the words of Christ as His teaching continues in vss. 27-33:

27 “Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? But for this purpose I have come to this hour. 28 Father, glorify your name.” Then a voice came from heaven: “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” 29 The crowd that stood there and heard it said that it had thundered. Others said, “An angel has spoken to him.” 30 Jesus answered, “This voice has come for your sake, not mine. 31 Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out. 32 And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” 33 He said this to show by what kind of death he was going to die.

My message this morning will fall under three subheadings: 1) The Point of No Return; 2) Encouragement from Heaven; and 3) The Universal Magnet.

I. The Point of No Return

It was early February, 1992. I was a second-semester senior at Wake Forest University, and I was approaching the point of no return. The tension in the room was palpable. The hour
was at hand—it was now or never. For many months my feelings for this beautiful, elusive sophomore girl had been growing into something deeper than friendship, but on this particular night, after hours of talking and contemplating the nature of our relationship in my tiny dorm room, the point of no return was upon us. I knew what had to be done. All pride and safety must be put aside. A definitive action…one requiring complete vulnerability…was now required. If received, I believed our relationship would lead to marriage. If rejected, I feared our relationship might never recover. My heart was pounding; my hands were sweating; my nerves were shaking; doubt and uncertainty coursed through my veins. But then…in a moment of unprecedented courage, I pulled her close and kissed her…and I knew…we knew…there was no turning back. Our point of no return was 29 years ago, and I love that young lady more today than ever!

Church: true love requires risk, vulnerability, and sacrifice. To truly love another is to forfeit safety, convenience, and comfort. Ask any couple married for many years. Ask any nursing mother. Ask any dedicated coach, physician, or teacher. Ask anybody who has ever truly loved and given themselves to another, and you’ll hear a common story. Love brings us to the point of no return; and that is precisely where we see Jesus in our text this morning.

Jesus has already acknowledged in vs. 23 that the hour of his glorification has come. Now, initially that statement seems as though it would be something to be excited about, right? If I told you that my hour to be glorified was this afternoon following the service, you would be excited for me, right? You might assume I was getting some award or there was a party in my honor. But notice, as we look to vs. 27, Jesus confesses, “Now is my soul troubled.”

Why is Jesus troubled regarding the hour of his glorification? You know why, right? Because, according to the Father’s sovereign plan, the glorification of Christ will require His death on a Roman cross. The world will never observe a greater act of sheer love and devotion than when they look upon the Lamb of God, nailed to a cross to rescue human souls from the penalty of sin. But notice: Jesus does not sail carelessly past this point of no return. He approaches it with fear and trembling. No man wishes to die at 33 years old; stripped naked and hung upon a cross with nails driven through his hands and feet. No man who is pure wishes to be associated with all that is evil. The mere thought of bearing God’s wrath against the sin of the world is incomprehensible. Let us also recall that Jesus abhorred death, as we observed at the tomb of Lazarus when again, Jesus was “deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled.” Death came as a result of Adam’s fall, and ever since the Great Intruder has wreaked havoc upon God’s beloved creation. And yet Death…the most horrible, unjust, tragic death the world will ever see…is exactly the point of no return that lies now before Jesus of Nazareth.

Church, see our Lord as His heart pounds; as He weighs His options and musters up the courage to press on beyond the point of no return. Listen again to what He says:

Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? “Father, save me from this hour?” That is an option, right? Jesus does not HAVE to die. Death has no claim over a sinless man. Like all of
us, when Jesus came to the point of no return, He had options. Jesus could appeal to His Father and save Himself. But to save Himself would be to defeat the entire purpose of His incarnation, and so Christ states, “But for this purpose I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.”

Church, learn from Jesus what is true for all human beings: It’s not about us. God has a plan for every human soul, and His plan is, in the end, all that matters. The Father’s glory is paramount. God is the Author; we are characters in His book. So, when we come to the point of no return, like Jesus, we as disciples of Jesus look to the Author and Perfecter of our faith and we say, “Father, glorify your name!”

I hope you all were able to take in the amazing panel discussion hosted by Pastor Greg and Pastor Mark last Monday evening. One of the participants, Ms. Porsche Seals, shared about a horrific experience she endured that was both humiliating and heartbreaking for her and her four children. But do you remember how she handled that situation? Do you remember her prayer? She looked to heaven and said, “Father, use this for your glory! You have to get the glory Lord!” How does a hurting and troubled spirit turn tragedy into God’s glory? We follow Jesus, amen? Porsche, thank you for sharing your story…and thank you for giving God the glory! Colonial continues to pray for you and your children, even as we thank God for your courage and faithfulness.

Listen Church: we will all come to a “point of no return” in our lives--love demands it. It is the point of giving up on our marriage or diving in for another round of painful conversations and counseling in an effort to restore the relationship. It will be that moment when we speak up and risk losing our job verses remaining silent and compromising our integrity. It will be that moment when stand up for those who cannot stand up for themselves--or we walk away…convincing ourselves that somebody else will have to do that which we know we should have done.

When we come to the point of no return, courage will be required, though our hearts tremble and our souls be troubled. When those times comes, look to Jesus and remember His resolve. Our Lord has gone before us…He blazed the trail that we can follow. May it be said of us as it was of our King: that when it came to the point of no return, we acknowledged God’s perfect plan, we committed ourselves to His glory, and we pressed on, amen? Amen. Let us now turn to my second subheading…

II. Encouragement from Heaven

There are a few defining moments in the four gospel accounts when the Father audibly speaks to Jesus in such a way that even those close to Jesus hear His voice. Remember when Jesus submits Himself to baptism in Luke 3, and the Father speaks from heaven, saying, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.” Again, in Luke 9, when Jesus resolves to embrace His path and He sets His course towards Jerusalem, God glorifies the Son on the Mount of Transfiguration and against audibly speaks from heaven, saying, “This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!”
And now, again, at the point of no return, when Jesus determines in His spirit to glorify the Father and to accept His place on the cross, the Father audibly speaks again. Jesus says, “Father, glorify your name.” And John reports in vs. 28: Then a voice came from heaven: “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.”

Let me make three very brief observations here.

First, Nothing could have been more powerful and encouraging for Jesus than to hear the Father say, “I have glorified [my name], and I will glorify it again.” Why? Well, think about it. One thing that we should surely know by now is that Jesus lived every minute to bring glory to His Father. We have heard Him say that over and over again in the first 12 chapters of John, right? So…what is the biggest fear that Jesus is facing at this point of no return? Is it dying on a cross? Well…maybe. But even worse than dying on a cross would be going through all that suffering but somehow failing to glorify the Father, right? In other words, perhaps the greatest fear that Jesus is facing is the nagging possibility that He will give up His life, endure whips and nails and death, only to discover that it was a waste of time and brought no glory to the Father whatsoever.

Listen: if you have ever come to the point of no return in serving God, you know that the Liar will relentlessly tempt you with this lie: “You’re wasting your time. What’s the point? Nobody is going to care. Nothing you do really matters all that much. How much difference can one person make? You’re going to go through all this pain and suffering, and for what?”

Perhaps this is why the Father chooses to encourage His Son with the words He needs to hear at this precarious moment. The Father essentially says, “Rest assured, Son, your sacrifice is not in vain. I have glorified my name through you, and I will receive glory again because of your obedience.” If I’m Jesus, that’s all I need to know, and I’m good to go. Knowing the Father will receive the glory He is due is enough for the Beloved Son…Jesus is resolved.

My second observation is this: we must take into consideration what this audible encouragement from heaven meant to those standing close to Jesus in the first century. NT scholar William Barclay writes: “Behind this coming of the voice of God lies something great and deep.” According to Barclay, there was a time when the Jews really and fully believed that God spoke directly to men. It was directly that God spoke to the child Samuel. It was directly that God spoke to Elijah when He fled from Jezebel. But by the time of Jesus, the Jews had ceased to believe that God spoke directly. The great days were past; God was too far away now; the voice that had spoken to the prophets was silent. Nowadays they believed in what they called the Bath qol, a Hebrew phrase which means the daughter voice or the daughter of a voice. When the Bath qol spoke it quoted scripture most often. It was not really the direct voice of God; it was what we might call the echo of his voice; a distant, faint whisper instead of a direct, vital communication.

But it was not the echo of his voice that Jesus heard; it was the very voice of God Himself.
“Here is a great truth,” writes Barclay. “With Jesus there comes to men not some distant whisper of the voice of God, not some faint echo from heavenly places, but the unmistakable accents of God’s direct voice.”

This understanding makes sense of what Jesus says in vs. 36 when Jesus comments, “This voice has come for your sake, not mine.” In other words, the disciples and those gathered around were witnesses to the fact that the Father in Heaven spoke directly to Jesus, His beloved Son, God’s Chosen One…and that was a sign of validation to the witnesses even as it was a source of encouragement to Jesus.

Finally, we should be encouraged that just as the Father spoke directly to Jesus in His moment of great need…at this point of no return…so also the Father continues to speak to those called by Jesus’ name. Barclay writes:

What God did for Jesus, he does for every man. When he sends us out upon a road, he does not send us without directions and without guidance. When he gives us a task, he does not leave us to do it in the lonely weakness of our own strength. God is not silent, and ever and again, when the strain of life is too much for us, and the effort of his way is beyond our human resources, if we listen we will hear him speak, and we will go on with his strength surging through our frame. Our trouble is not that God does not speak, but that we do not listen.

I don’t know about you…but that last sentence is pretty convicting. I have no doubt that God speaks to His people in times of great trial and distress. I know that I have heard directly from the Father on a few occasions in my life; and I know that is true for many believers. However, the question for most of us is this: are we listening?

As I mentioned earlier, I had about 10 days of sitting alone in a hotel room recently while stranded in FL with Covid. For the first few days, I found myself uncomfortable with the silence. I watched way too much TV! But then it occurred to me: this is an amazing opportunity to hear from the Father. So, for the last week of isolation, I kept the TV off. I read, I sat quietly, I took walks. I would like to tell you that God spoke and shook the hotel room! That didn’t happen. However, as I sat quietly and listened, I became ever more aware that I was not alone…that God saw me in my sickness…that I was loved and that there was a purpose and a plan that was still in play…even in my isolation. The Lord brought to mind people I needed to call; notes I needed to write; and scriptures to read. I can tell you that the second part of my time in isolation was far more restful, productive, and life-giving for the simple reason that I began to pay more attention to God’s voice then the TV or other distractions.

Church: when we come into hard times…when our souls are troubled and we are crying out to the Father, may we prioritize the art of listening, that we might hear from our Father in Heaven and be encouraged, amen? Let me conclude now with my third and final subheading:
III. The Universal Magnate

Following the encouragement from heaven, Jesus says these profound words beginning in vs. 31: 31 Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out. 32 And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”

Here at the point of no return...at the coming of His hour...Jesus states, “Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out.”

NOW...at this hour...as Jesus presses past the point of no return and embraces His sacrificial death on the cross...NOW is the judgment of this world. What does that mean? It means two things: 1) It means that the world has been weighed and found wanting. Sin has so thoroughly corrupted all of humankind that it will require the perfect, unblemished Lamb of God to lay down His sinless life to redeem all that is lost; and 2) It means that the world has been judged as that which is worth redeeming! “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever would believe in Him would not perish but inherit eternal life!” This is the judgment of the world that is proclaimed in the Hour of our Lord! It is the Gospel—it is the GOOD NEWS, but there’s more.

In addition to this definitive moment of judgment, the hour of Christ will also mark the cosmic defeat of Satan. Jesus says that the “ruler of this world will be cast out.” Why? Because Satan’s rule is based upon condemnation. As long as human souls remain bound in sin, the Enemy’s condemnation is legally warranted. However, when Christ dies as the perfect, unblemished lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, Satan’s power is crushed; his authority stripped; and he is cast out.

Which leads to the climactic statement of Christ here at the end of our passage, in vs. 30, when Christ proclaims, “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” Church, John doesn’t want us to be confused. Jesus is not referring to his ascension to heaven... John states clearly in vs. 31, “He said this to show by what kind of death he was going to die.” Jesus was pointing to the cross.

Jesus is making a claim here that will blow the minds of his listeners. It sounds completely ironic and counterintuitive—yet Jesus is not unclear. When Jesus is placed on a cross and lifted up for the world to see, Jesus will actively draw all people to Himself.

The great 19th century preacher, Alexander Maclaren, writes profoundly about this verse, and I will but share a small snippet of his insight. Here’s what he says:

The Cross is the magnet of Christianity. Jesus Christ draws men, but it is by His Cross mainly, and that He felt this profoundly is plain enough, not only from such utterances as this of my text, but, to go no further, from the fact that He has asked us to remember only one thing about Him, and has established that ordinance of the Communion or the Lord's Supper, which is to remind us always, and to bear witness to the world, of where is the center of His work, and the fact which
He most desires that men should keep in mind, not the graciousness of His words, not their wisdom, not the good deeds that He did, but "This is My body broken for you ... this cup is the New Testament in My blood." A religion which has for its chief rite the symbol of a death, must enshrine that death in the very heart of the forces to which it trusts to renew the world, and to bless individual souls.

I love that quote, and there is a lot there. But I hope you are beginning to appreciate the power and the irony of this moment. Whereas every other great ruler in history longed to be remembered for conquests, land acquisition, cities built and cities burned...Jesus will forever be remembered by His Cross...and it is there, on His cross, that He draws every human soul. Why? Because we see the cross of Jesus Christ as the supreme expression of love, right? And why do we see the cross that way? There is only one reason: because His was a death voluntarily undertaken for a world’s sin. Jesus was no martyr for His faith. Jesus voluntarily gave up His perfect life for the world’s sin...which is why He is beloved by the world!

As Maclaren observes:

It may be, it is, a most pathetic and lovely story, but it has not the power to draw all men, unless it deals with that which all men need, and unless it is the self-surrender of the Son of God for the whole world. The Cross is the universal remedy, for it goes direct to the universal epidemic. The thing that men and women want most, the thing that you want most, is that your relation with God shall be set right, and that you shall be delivered from the guilt of past sin, from the exposure to its power in the present and the future. Whatever diversities of climate, civilization, culture, character the world holds, every man is like every other man in this, that he has sinned and come short of the glory of God. And it is because Christ’s cross goes direct to deal with that condition of things that the preaching of it is a gospel, not for this phase of society or that type of men or the other stage of culture, but that it is meant for, and is able to deliver and to bless, every man.

Church, I encourage you to print the manuscript of this message and meditate upon these profound words later this week. The Cross of Christ is the Universal Magnet. That has been true now for some 2000 years, and it shall be true until the end of the age. All men...all women...all people from every tribe, tongue and nation in every age are drawn to Jesus as they see Him on the tree. He is the only medicine for our sin-sick world, and He has offered Himself to us all. His power to save is not just historical, it is ever present, and even powerful enough to give us assurance for the life to come! It is not the story of Jesus that draws us...it is Christ Himself, the Crucified and Resurrected One, who continues to draw every human soul through the power and whispering of His Holy Spirit.

Do you know yourself to be a sinner? Are you familiar with the condemnation of the Accuser? Have you doubt that God would ever welcome you into His city of light due to all the evil that has happened in your life? Friends...look to the Lamb of God upon the cross, and feel the magnetism of His pierced body as He willingly dies in your place! Look to the Lamb upon the
Cross and see there the One who came for us all. He is the Savior of the world…He is the One who cast out Satan…He is the One who conquered death. All who come to Him receive the forgiveness of sin and the life everlasting. You know this is true, for even now He bids you…one and all…to come!

Let me close with the invitation Maclaren offered to his congregation well over 100 years ago:

As so I come to you now, dear friends, with the plain question. What are you doing in response to Christ’s drawing of you? He has died for you on the Cross; does that not draw? He lives to bless you even now; does that not draw? He loves you with love changeless as a God, with love warm and emotional as a man; does that not draw? He speaks to you, I venture to say, through my poor words and says, ‘Come to me, and I will give you rest;’ does that not draw? We are all in the bog. He stands on firm ground, and puts out a hand. If you like to clutch it, by the pledge of the nail-prints on the palm, He will lift you from the horrible pit and the miry clay, and set your feet upon a rock. God grant that all of us may say, “Draw us, and we will run after Thee!”

Let us pray.