March 18, Lent 5B (John 12:20-33)

The crucified Jesus in John's Gospel is cosmic—and magnetic.

by Benjamin J. Dueholm in the February 28, 2018 issue

If you reach the 12th chapter of John's Gospel without a firm idea of who Jesus is or how he is supposed to have effected salvation, the text will more or less force you to come up with one.

First Jesus is anointed by Mary at Bethany, in an act that prefigures burial but also echoes priestly and royal consecration. Then he enters Jerusalem to the acclamation of a great crowd laying down palm branches and calling him "King of Israel."

John's Gospel is full of these moments of dramatic irony. People around Jesus—friend, foe, or bystander—say and do things that end up being fulfilled in a contrary sense or an unexpected manner. When the Pharisees lament that "the world has gone after him," their hyperbole ends up being all too accurate. The world shows up at the start of this week's reading, in the two Greeks who ask to see him. Jesus, in that moment, makes another dramatic, demanding announcement: the time for his glorification—by means of his violent public death—is at hand.

As Jesus narrates his coming death, phrases ring like distorted echoes of other parts of the New Testament. When Jesus says that only grain that dies and falls into the earth can bring forth fruit, we hear Paul's analogy of the dying seed and the body (1 Cor. 15:35–44). Jesus acknowledges that his soul is troubled but pointedly declines to pray for deliverance, in contrast to the agony depicted in the synoptic Gospels. And a voice comes from heaven, recalling those Gospels' accounts of Jesus' baptism and transfiguration.

Then a wild and unexampled moment comes. Jesus declares, "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."

As an anticipation of Jesus' crucifixion, it's fair to say that this passage goes further—making claims both stronger and more paradoxical—than anything in the other Gospels. Through the Sundays after Epiphany and into Lent, the lectionary readings from Mark propel us along swiftly and tersely, only to drop us in John 12. Here the judgment is not yet to come, but truly present. The demonic forces that throng the New Testament are not merely engaged more intensely; they are definitively "driven out." And this moment of trial will be summed up not as betrayal or suffering but as being "lifted up," in which Jesus will "draw all people" to himself.

John's distinctive vocabulary is showcased here. The verb we translate as "lifted up" appears twice before in the Gospel—when Jesus says the Son of Man will be lifted up as Moses lifted up the serpent (3:14) and when he says he will be revealed when he is lifted up (8:28). Elsewhere this word is used in an unequivocal sense of being exalted. Only in John does this exaltation include the cross, creating one great figure of crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. Likewise, the verb translated as "draw" appears earlier, when Jesus explains that none may come to him unless they are drawn by the Father (6:44). Elsewhere the word is only used to describe something (or someone) being physically hauled or dragged somewhere.

Taken together, these words create a majestic but challenging picture of what Jesus is accomplishing. In being lifted up on the cross, Jesus will exert a sort of magnetic pull on "all people." Commentators have argued for centuries over the implications. When the Father, or Jesus, draws someone, is this an invitation that we may decline, an enabling of belief that we may resist? Following Erasmus, many commentators find this reading necessary and plausible (though it's hard to imagine Paul and Silas have the option of declining when they are drawn to the marketplace). "Of what use to us," on the other hand, "were grace imparted in such scanty measure," Calvin asks, little impressed as he was with the human power to cooperate with mild divine suggestion.

The universalism of "all people" has prompted anxiety as well. Perhaps this all-encompassing gesture refers, too, to invitation rather than actual movement. In one early variant manuscript the Greek word is not even "all [people]" but "all [things]," which would exclude the possibility of mere invitation. Even discounting that reading, as most editors and commentators do, it seems rather pinched and unimaginative to paraphrase this startling verse as "When I am lifted up, I will give all people the chance to come to me." John's drama is genuinely cosmic, with humanity merely in the foreground. And the magnetism Jesus exerts in this Gospel is

more than charisma or persuasion. It rearranges and reveals the world. It draws people into a new pattern.

Having wrestled for years with these words, I still struggle to make sense of them—either in the context of the canon or in their own koan-like intensity. That the crucifixion should be foreshadowed not as an injustice made good by subsequent events, or even an atoning sacrifice, but as *in itself* an exaltation is a hard thought. The idea that the “ruler of this world” has been in some sense overcome, despite considerable evidence to the contrary, can capture the imagination. But man cannot live by imagination alone. The leap from imagination to sight, let alone to action, still prompts trepidation.

But perhaps that, too, is part of the drama of this passage, after which everything in John’s Gospel unfolds as if by design. The descending figure of the falling grain and the ascending figure of Jesus lifted up draw the hearer along with them, whether we assent or resist. It’s an image of dying—to the world, to security, even to the power to see and understand—that opens into an image of life greater than any individual fate.