

# **Sitting in the Gap Study Guide – March 18, 2018**

## **[John 12:20-33](#)**

(Click on scripture above to link directly to the passage on biblegateway.com.)

### **Suggested Study / Prep**

1. Read the passage in several different translations and/or paraphrases
2. Reflect on the provided questions
3. Generate your own questions and “wonderings”
4. Read the provided commentaries below
5. Visit and explore some of the additional resources links (and/or explore your own commentaries, resources, etc)

### **Reflection Questions on John 12:20-33:**

1. Biblical scholars are in general consensus in naming the Gospel of John as being the last of the four canonical gospels to have been written. Thus, it evidences a later stage in the development and evolution of the early Christian tradition and church, as well as their theology and Christology. Given this context, what is the significance in v. 20-21 of the seekers who want to see Jesus being named as Greeks? Given the eventual anti-Semitism that developed out of the Gentile/Greek distinctions in the gospels and the church, do you see such identification as supporting an inclusive or an exclusive faith?
2. Consider vv. 27-32. While Jesus at first admits his soul is “troubled”, everything that follows seems to suggest that that isn’t really the case. The agony of the Jesus who prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane to “let this cup pass from me” in the synoptic gospels is easily dismissed in these verses with assertions of confidence and glory, which Jesus says are for the benefit of those listening, not himself. Does one of these portraits of Jesus appeal to you more than the other? Do you resonate more with the Jesus who agonizes over “the cup he must drink” or with the Jesus who projects confidence and assurance in the divine plan that we see here?
3. Consider our congregational life and programming? How do we help people to “see Jesus”? In what ways might we actually be getting in the way?

**What questions do you have?**

**What do you “wonder” about when reading these passages?**

## Commentary on John 12:20-33

(From *Homiletics*; "Exit Lines" – March 18, 2018)

Unique to John's gospel, this passage, which tells of the approach of the Hellenists (NRSV "Greeks"; not Greek-speaking Jews) to Jesus through Philip and Andrew during the Passover, is important for three reasons.

First, it signals the close of the evangelist's account of Jesus' ministry. From this point on, Jesus will offer no more signs to the public. Second, this passage serves as a bridge to Jesus' final discourse to his disciples and to the passion narrative. Finally, and most significantly, this passage indicates that Jesus no longer has a place in Judaism -- the gospel will now take root in the Hellenistic world. The highlighting of Philip and Andrew is due to their non-Jewish names, and the mention of Bethsaida in Galilee may also be important, for Galilee was often associated with Gentiles. Of course, this third aspect of the story suggests a symbolic import more so than an actual historic coincidence.

From the opening, the reader is aware that something different and significant is happening. Rather than Jesus' offering a sign to the world (2:11, 4:54), the appearance of the non-Jews who seek him is a sign to Jesus that "his hour" of glorification is drawing near (12:23). The reader is given no indication that the Greek inquirers' request is ever granted. For John, it serves only as the means to introduce one more of Jesus' discourses. Certainly, the evangelization of the Greeks is not part of Jesus' historical ministry; and yet, his coming crucifixion and resurrection will open the door fully to non-Jews, and John is dramatically foreshadowing this shift here.

While the opening of this scene suggests that a number of characters will play important roles (Jesus, the Greeks, Philip and Andrew), the dialogue that John wants to highlight is between Jesus and the Jewish crowd. Jesus, in verses 20-26, offers a short discourse on the meaning of his death and discipleship. In verse 29, the crowd's presence is noted and they become the collective foil for the remainder of the drama.

Although the tone of John's narrative is very different from the tone of the Synoptics, in this passage John relies heavily on the synoptic tradition. For example, in the Synoptics, the coming of the Son of Man is an apocalyptic, eschatological event. In John, however, the title Son of Man is more descriptive of a heavenly man who descends to Earth to receive glory through humiliation. Moreover, the mention of the "grain of wheat" dying to bear much fruit, "those who love their life lose it," and "Whoever serves me must follow me" in verses 24-26 are all found in the synoptic material. Even 12:27 recalls Jesus' prayer in the garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:32-42).

However, John has altered its impact. The synoptic accounts offer the reader a window into Jesus' agony and struggle. In contrast, John gives the reader a description of Jesus' confidence and readiness. In John's gospel, there will be no sign of weakness, no sign of wondering, no agony, no pain, no request to "let this cup pass"; Jesus is in control throughout. The death of Jesus is the climax of his obedient life. The heavenly voice confirms Jesus' obedience and echoes the description of Jesus' transfiguration and baptism described in the synoptic gospels.

Jesus' crucifixion will be the moment of judgment, exaltation, fruition and challenge. The Prince of the World, who is Satan, will be judged and defeated. In the crucifixion all humankind is lifted up. There is an attestation for a neuter plural here which would signify not only humankind but all of creation; however, most would agree that this reference is to persons and not to the cosmos as a whole. Verse 33 offers an interesting editorial insertion. It is well-known that crucifixion indicates a monstrous Roman capital punishment, but to John the gruesomeness of crucifixion becomes a gracious posture of an open-armed welcome. Again, John de-emphasizes the suffering of Jesus.

Hence, on the one hand, this passage presents the inclusive, powerful, saving gospel of Jesus Christ. Yet, on the other hand, this passage presents a darker side. As throughout John's gospel, so also in this passage there is a very negative sentiment against the Judaism of the first century. It is an issue that must be recognized by the astute preacher. Casual or unreflective use of John's reference to the Jews or

Judaism can cause great damage in today's atmosphere of interfaith dialogue.

It is Jesus as represented by John who is placed in stark relief against the Johannine portrayal of the Jews. The context of this passage is the Passover festival, and the scene is rich in bitter and tragic irony. The Jews gather in Jerusalem to remember a passing over of God's spirit at the Exodus which spared the children of Israel and killed the first-born of the Egyptians. This is juxtaposed with the early Christians' celebration of the memory of the crucifixion of God's first-born son. Jesus is lifted up to die, but in so dying, all are included in the life-giving promise, except for those who do not accept who Jesus is (i.e., the Jews). The Fourth Gospel, which is seen to be the expression of a more exclusive sect within early Christianity, here highlights the inclusive nature of the crucifixion at the expense of the perceived exclusivity of Judaism of the first century. John goes so far as to imply that the Jews will be passed over again; however, this time it will not be for freedom from slavery but for judgment and, according to the author of the gospel, for damnation for being enslaved to the ruler of this world.

In John's account, God's voice comes from heaven (v. 28), confirming Jesus as the glorified one, but for the Jewish crowd, the sound is, at best, thunder or possibly a voice of an angel (v. 29). That the Greeks recognize what the Jews do not is the cause for the judgment of the world and the casting out of the "ruler of this world," who is Satan. John identifies the Jews as being part of Satan's world -- reminiscent of the connection John has made between the Jews and Satan, or the devil, before (8:44).

Hence, this passage, which promises the inclusion of all, is shaped at the expense of the Jews who -- to John -- exclude themselves from the salvation offered in the "lifting up" of Jesus on the cross.

## Additional Resources

- [“The Text this Week”](#) – a huge archive of commentaries, blogs, sermons, etc. Note – this site collects resources related to ALL of the lectionary texts for this week...not all will relate to the Matthew passage we are studying, but many will. You will have to sift!
- Check out the commentaries and additional resources available for this Sunday (and others!) at [WorkingPreacher.org](#).