What are We to Do?

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Date: 03 April 2016

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[0:00] There's a certain sort of tension in our service this evening. An ironic tension, in a sense. Because last week, we just celebrated the fact that Jesus burst forth from the grave victorious.

The Lord, the giver of life, who conquered death. And so we began the service singing songs like, Come people of the risen King, who delight to sing His praise, rejoice. And we sang songs like, Joyful, joyful, we adore you.
Songs of gladness and joy, because the Lord has triumphed over the grave. And now we come to a passage where people are plotting His death.
And we feel a tension. It's an ironic tension. And our passage is full of this sort of irony. It's full of it.
This passage that we're looking at tonight is, I've discovered this week, the major transition point between the two halves, major halves of the Gospel of John. It stitches, weaves them together into a continuous tapestry.
[1:12] It's an often overlooked passage because it's small. And yet it's so important. And what it does, in the most interesting sort of way, is it shows us that the same Jesus that we've seen for the last 10 or 11 chapters, whose whole desire has been to give life to the world.

In the first half of the Gospel of John, life, the word life is used 50 times. This is the very one who, in the second half of the Gospel of John, is going to be crucified and put in the grave.
What our passage does for us is it stitches together these two things, which seem so incompatible with one another. And it shows us the irony of that fact.
And what it does is it takes us into the depths of the irony and teaches us mysterious yet marvelous truths about the Gospel. So that's what we're going to do tonight.
We're going to look at two ironies in this passage. First irony, for those of you that just like hearing it up front, is the irony of personal resistance.
[2:22] And the second, the irony of political realism. Personal resistance and political realism.
Let's dive in, friends. You know the context of John chapter 11.

Lazarus has just come out of the grave. He was there for four days, but Jesus showed up and he said, Lazarus, come out. And the unthinkable happened. He came out.
Jesus said, unbind him. And in response to Jesus, as always, there is a mixture. There's a mixed response.
Look at verses 45 and 46. It says, many of the Jews, therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, they believed in him.
But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. So you get a mixed response to Jesus raising Lazarus out of the grave.
[3:19] On the one hand, you get many believing. And on the other hand, you get some tattletelling. And the chief priests and the Pharisees, in verse 47, gathered together to discuss and deliberate about what to do in response to this Jesus figure.

And if you skip down to verse 53, we get the verdict of their counsel. They say, Now, here's the first irony.
This group of people plans to put to death the man who just proved he could conquer death. They plan to put to death the man who says he has come to give life to the world.
And he holds true to his word. In verse 25 of our chapter, Jesus declared, I am the resurrection and the life. And yet the religious authorities want to kill the life.
Why? Verses 47 and 48. What are we to do, they say?
[4:28] For this man performs many signs. And if we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him. And the Romans will come. And take away both our place and our nation.

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Now, that may seem a bit random to you. To be scared of the Romans at a moment like this. So, let me give you a bit of historical background. Just so you understand it. The Jewish people this time were living under Roman occupation and authority.
Now, the Romans weren't too concerned with their affairs. As long as the Jewish leaders kept some law and order. And nothing got too serious. Romans would step in if they saw any sense of political upheaval.
And they would use violence and oppression if they needed to, to keep people in line. If you look down at verse 55, you'll see in our passage, the context is also the week leading up to the Passover festival.
And during the Passover festival, some 200,000 Jews would flock from the countryside, come into the city of Jerusalem. And during Passover, what were they celebrating?
[5:33] They were celebrating God's deliverance of his people from the oppression in the hands of the Egyptians. So, you can imagine under the impression and authority of the Romans, how religious and political fervor would run high at these times.

And you would get these messianic figures who would say, we need to lead a revolt against the Romans. And so, the Romans had a very particular watchful eye on the people during these seasons of the year.
They wanted to see if there's any potential for there to be an upheaval. And they were going to squash it immediately. So, the Jewish leaders are keenly aware of Jesus' rising popularity.
And they are concerned that they will be dethroned by the Romans. Now, don't, don't get too hung up on the cultural background here. Because don't miss how subtle and sneaky the motivations of the leaders really are.
Notice in verses 47 and 48, the proliferation of personal pronouns. Personal pronouns. What are we to do? For this man performs many signs.
[6:46] If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him. And the Romans will come and take away both our, our place and our nation. Do you sense the tone of kind of frantic fear here?

They're concerned for their own well-being primarily. And notice the last clause where it says, they will take away our place and our nation. I think our place is referring to what they find most security in.
It's referring to their secure position in life. And our nation is referring to their identity. Which is wrapped up with being the leaders of this nation.
And as any of you know, when our deepest security, sense of security, and deepest sense of identity is threatened, we do one of two things. We either withdraw from people.
Or we lash out. And in this passage, they lash out. They plan to put to death the man who has just conquered death.
[8:01] And that's the irony of personal resistance in this passage. Now I want to pause here for a moment because I think there's a bit of a pastoral implication for us. I think it's this.

We should be very aware and honest about the personal resistance to Jesus that lies in our own lives. You see, it's easy for us to look at the Jewish leaders in these passages and just say, look at them.
Throw mud at them. Throw rocks. Throw tomatoes. And think we are so unlike them. And even in reading scripture, we can get on our high horse. And fail to see the resistance that lies in the depths of our own souls.
But see, scripture acts much more like a mirror. It shows us what lies deep inside. And we should be appalled and not surprised. There's personal resistance in our own lives.
And we shouldn't underestimate how subtle it can be. I find it interesting in telling that in this passage, resistance and its underlying motivations, they rise to the surface in the midst of a major decision.
[9:12] A council is gathering and making a decision. And I feel like this is so often the case in our own lives, is it not? What decisions we make reveal where our true loyalties lie.

And even more, how and why we make decisions highlight the true orientation of our hearts towards Jesus. Whether we really believe or whether we resist.
A couple months ago, Susie and I were making a big life decision. And we never quite know how to do these things. So we used Gordon Smith, who's a sessional lecturer at Regent.

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We used a little spiritual discernment guide and manual that he has for kind of a day away. The title of it, if you're interested, is called Alone with the Lord, A Guide to a Personal Day of Prayer.
I recommend it to you. We were looking for direction from the Lord with some of our big decisions.
And what we discovered is that God wanted to spend more time exposing our sins and insecurities.
[10:19] Than just giving us a right or wrong answer. And one of the things that struck me so much is just three really simple, yet searching questions that Gordon Smith put in.

That for me, exposed the areas of my life where I was actually resisting Jesus. And it was right in the midst of how I was making a decision. Let me offer them to you.
The first is this. Is there anything... To pause for a moment. You're all making decisions in your life right now. Whether they're huge or medium or small.
Day-to-day or big life-changing course of event decisions. Think of those decisions as you hear these questions. Gordon said, Is there anything in this decision that arises from an inordinate desire for wealth or financial security?
Second, is there anything in this decision that arises from an inordinate desire for power or influence? And third, is there anything in this decision that arises from an inordinate longing for recognition or affirmation?
[11:42] You spend enough time with those questions. And God will unveil where you actually resist him most deeply. Susie and I spent more time repenting and praying than we did.

Probably actually coming up with a decent decision. Friends, we should be aware and honest about our personal resistance. We should not be surprised by it.
But we should neither despair. We should not despair of it as well. You see, in our passage, resistance doesn't ultimately thwart Jesus' mission to give life. Interestingly, by the wisdom and power of God, it's the point where human resistance is strongest.
That God's determination to give life actually proves to be most tenacious. God turns the whole thing upside down. And it's when the council plots to kill Jesus, the Lord and giver of life, it's through that act of killing him that he actually brings life to the entire world.
And this is the second irony of our passage. It's the irony of political realism. Look at verses 49 and 50.
[12:58] In the middle of the council, the chief leader, who's called the high priest, he stands up and he says, Guys, you have no clue what you're doing. Verse 50. Nor do you understand that it's better for you that one man should die for the people than that the whole nation should perish.

Caiaphas speaks words that bear all the force of political pragmatism and realism. He says, guys, there's an obvious solution to this situation. If you just kill this one man, then you spare your whole nation and you're good to go.
One person or 200,000. Obvious decision. Come on, guys. And in a sense, he's right. But in doing so, in saying that, he actually shows us something really deep about the gospel.
And John explains it to us in verses 51 and 52. John wants us to see the meaning of it. He says, He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation.
And not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad. So John highlights two things for us.
[14:20] He says, Jesus is going to be a substitute. And he says, Jesus is going to be a magnet. He prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation.

That's substitutionary language. A little lesson, side note thing. This is for free. Throughout the tradition of the church, there have been three major theories of what Jesus' death means and how to understand it.
One major theory is something called Christus Victor. Christ the victor. Meaning that on the cross, Jesus triumphed over evil and Satan and all the forces of death and sin in this world.
And he reigns victorious as king. That's true. There's another thing called the moral influence theory. The theory that Jesus showed us his love on the cross.
He showed us the depths of God's love by pouring out his life on the cross. And that love influences us and transforms us to model and live the same way in the world.
[15:33] To reflect that sort of costly, life-giving love in the world. So the cross influences us. It changes us as we look at it.

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And that's true too. But at the heart and soul, and this one's becoming less popular in our day, is something called the substitutionary atonement. Substitutionary atonement.
And it's simply this, that where we put our place, we try to take the throne of God and put ourselves as God's substitute. God takes the penalty of humanity and puts himself as our substitute for sin. We're going to get to that in a second. But I'm really aware that substitute may sound really, really impersonal or foreign to you. I think there's a few reasons for this. Simply, we don't really live in a culture where animal sacrifices are done very much anymore.
And we're thankful for that in Vancouver, right? There's also, we don't really live in a culture where there's a shared moral, an shared understanding of a moral fabric to life.
[16:44] Where if you do certain actions, then you rightfully bear certain consequences. That's kind of eroding away in our culture. But there's something else as well. We live in a culture that's been really psychologized.

And that's good in a lot of ways. Psychology has done us a lot of good things. But one thing it's hurt us in is that it makes us see ourselves as victims of circumstances a lot more than sinners in the presence of a holy God.
And yet with all this cultural backage, we need to attend to this word substitute because it lies at the very heart of the gospel. Three times in our passage, verse 50, verse 51, and verse 52, the word for shows up.
Jesus died on behalf of and in place of the people. And that word is an Old Testament sacrificial word.
It connects with the theme of the whole gospel of John. You know at the very beginning, John chapter 1, verse 29, Jesus shows up on the scene and John the Baptist sees him for the first time and he says, Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.
[17:57] The Lamb of God, it's sacrificial. And then you know if you go all the way back to John chapter 19, Jesus hanging on the cross, he says, It is finished. He breathes his last breath. And John tells us at the very end of John chapter 19 that the soldiers did not break Jesus' legs, but they broke the legs of the two people next to him.

Why are we told that detail? Because sacrifices in the Old Testament were meant to have no broken bones. And so Jesus has no broken bones, so he is the perfect sacrifice on the cross.
See, Jesus is being portrayed in our passage as the Old Testament sacrificial lamb. And in the Old Testament, when you had sins that needed to be dealt with with God, what you did is you brought a lamb to the temple.
You put your hands on its head to symbolize your sin and guilt and shame being transferred onto that lamb. A priest would come up with a knife and slit its throat, symbolizing the penalty for it.
And you would watch the blood of that lamb pour out on the floor. And the priest would gather it up into a bowl. He would walk into the center of the temple or the tabernacle, and he would sprinkle that blood and pour it out on the ground before the presence of Almighty God and say, spare your sinner, spare your people, O Lord, for blood has been spilt in their stead.
[19:35] So what John is doing is he is showing us that in Caiaphas' words, we are coming into the very heart of God, reaching out to humanity and saving them from their sins.

Jesus is the substitution. I want to read a quote from John Stott. A few people better to read quotes from on this. It's from the book The Cross of Christ.
He says this. The concept of substitution may be said to lie both at the heart of sin and at the heart of salvation.
For the essence of sin is man substituting himself for God, while the essence of salvation is God substituting himself for man. Man asserts himself against God and puts himself where only God deserves to be.
God sacrifices himself for man and puts himself where only man deserves to be. Man claims prerogatives that belong to God alone.
[20:45] And God accepts penalties that belong to man alone. Jesus is our substitute. Brothers and sisters, I figure that much of our maturing as Christians in this life includes moving from seeing Jesus as our substitute, not as a boring and abhorrent thing, but coming to see it as a beautiful and magnificent and life-giving thing.

Second, Jesus is a magnet. He's a substitute, but he's a magnet as well. Look at verse 52. This is a bit unexpected, I suspect. It was for me when I was looking at it this week.

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And Jesus died not only for the nation, verse 52, but also to gather into one, into one, the children of God who are scattered abroad.
God. This is amazing. It's some sort of imagery of return from exile.
It's somehow telling us that one of the primary purposes of Jesus' death is to gather people together in unity. Now, this verse is going to speak to us slightly differently depending on our backgrounds.
[22:18] For some of us, we've lived in, or we've grown up in a Christianity that emphasizes the cross and it emphasizes personal salvation and Jesus died for your sins personally and that's really good, but it emphasizes very little about church unity.

unity. And what this does is it distorts our understanding of Christianity because unity is deeply important.
There's no such thing as individual Christianity. We're together. Jesus died for our sins, but he also died to make us one family. And so what we see here is that unity is one of the major purposes of Jesus' ministry.
ministry. That's why in John chapter 17, right before Jesus dies, and he's praying with the Father one last time, he says, Father, I pray that my people may be one as you and I are one.
Why? So that the world may know that they are my disciples. There's some sense in which when we are united in life-giving relationship with one another, when we come around the Lord Jesus Christ, it shows the world what God is like.
[23:39] So it means our relationships are deeply important. But for others of us, we've grown up in a Christianity or we have chosen to adopt a Christianity that loves and emphasizes unity, church unity.

It's kind of a buzzword right now. But often without the cross being central. people. And the major question we have to ask ourselves is what unifies us as the people of God?
It's not first and foremost common interests. It's not fondness of musical style or a certain preacher. It's not even a shared social ethic.
It's not a vague sense of humility. It's not even tradition. And it's not even ecclesiastical structures. Now don't get me wrong. All those things are really, really important.
But it's first and foremost Christ. It's a person and it's him crucified in the act of giving his life away for the life of the world. What unifies us is the person of Jesus on the cross for our sins.
[24:48] And that's important because that's the only thing that can bring unity and healing to a fractured and fragmented world. He substitutes his humility for our pride.

And that changes the way we relate to each other. He substitutes his grace for our shame and guilt. And that changes the way we relate to each other.
He substitutes his life for our sin and our brokenness and our death and that changes the way we relate to each other. So brothers and sisters to conclude John wants us to see the deep ironies of our passage.
That the leaders plan to put to death the man who has defeated death. And when their plan is accomplished it means more life for the world. God gives God gives God and God gives John a glimpse of heaven.
We get a scene of all the company of heaven marveling at the wonder and the wisdom and the power of God. We have living creatures and angels and elders and saints bowing before the throne of God and they are singing what Revelation 5 describes as a new song.
[26:19] And what is the new song? It's worthy is the lamb who was slain to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing for you were slain and by your blood you ransomed for God a people from every tribe and every language and every nation.

Amen. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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