

John 7:25-36

We are continuing this morning in our study of John's Gospel, picking up at verse 25 of chapter 7 and working through to verse 36 of the same chapter. The passage is printed for you in the bulletin so you can follow along there, but you may want to use your own bible or make use of one of the extra ones we have available in some of the seats around the room.

As we approach the Scriptures before us this morning, my mind is drawn to something John said earlier in this same Gospel, chapter three, verse 16 and following,

"For God so loved the world,¹ that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹ And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰ For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. ²¹ But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been carried out in God."

And the thing that I think about there is the opposition between light and darkness that John speaks of and that characterized Jesus' whole ministry, and which has really come to the foreground in the past couple of chapters of John's Gospel. While Jesus has always met with *some* form of opposition, we have seen in chapters 6 and 7 the rise of very fierce *official* opposition to his ministry which will lead - in very short order - to Jesus' death at the hands of the religious authorities.

That opposition, and how God will use it to bring about his saving purposes, certainly plays a big part in the events being described in verses 25-36. What has happened is that Jesus has come into Jerusalem, carefully orchestrating his appearance at the temple. He has to be careful because he wants to avoid, on the one hand, any additional attempts by the crowd to make him a king and, at the same time, because his opponents are out to get him, he wants to avoid any pre-mature arrest and/or interference on their part. And then, while avoiding both of those scenarios, he also desires to continue carrying out the ministry which his Father has given him!.

And so, while avoiding any sort of showy, opening-day appearances at their Feast of Booths, he HAS chosen to still make a mid-feast appearance - and not really for the sake of taking part in the feast itself but rather for the opportunity that it presented for him to again address the people there, and to continue bringing his message of the coming of God's Kingdom. And as usually happened when he taught, lines began forming - some responding to him positively, drawn to the light, while others responded negatively, repelled by the light that was Jesus. Last week we saw part of the interchange that took place between Jesus and his listeners on this occasion. This morning we will take a second look at this interchange. Before we go any further, let's pray.....

Now before we look at the passage itself, I need to make one more preliminary comment which, I hope, will help you to make more sense of the verses when we DO read them. And it has to do with this whole matter of what people back then were expecting with regard to the *manner* in which the Messiah - this promised Savior - would appear among them.

While there certainly would not have been an sort of universal agreement on this subject, it was widely taught and believed that when the Messiah showed up to do what he was sent to do he would do so in a manner that was quite sudden. People wouldn't see it coming and it would catch them all by surprise. This view seems to have been based, largely, on a particular reading of some things found in the Prophet Malachi, chapter 3.

To be sure, they understood - at least many of them did - that the Messiah would come from *somewhere* specific - like Bethlehem, a fact which the scribes in Matthew 2 seemed to be right on top of when they quoted to Herod from Malachi 5. In addition to that, Matthew's Gospel also records the scribal perspective that the Messiah would also have associations with Nazareth in Galilee (see Mt 2:23).

So there was an understanding that the Messiah would have identifiable origins but it was also believed that these things would be known more *after the fact*. There was a belief that he would be revealed as an adult and that it would happen in an obvious way such that there would be none of this "maybe its him, maybe it isn't" sort of thing that seemed to always be going on with respect to Jesus.

In other words, it was not expected that the Messiah would make himself known in any sort of *gradual* way or in such a way that people might see it coming in advance. This is the sense in which the crowds are speaking when they say, in verse 27, that "when the Christ appears, no one will know where he comes from". He will come, as it were, seemingly out of nowhere.

Because of these assumptions and expectations, the crowds had questions about Jesus being the Messiah since he had *not* appeared suddenly, out of the blue as it were, but was the son of a couple that they knew about - Joseph and Mary - and had been among and around them in a known fashion for quite some time. And so, keeping those comments in mind, let's now listen to the passage before us and then we'll dig in.....

(Read 7:21-36)

As many of you will recall from last week, in the section just before this, Jesus has just responded quite sharply to his opponents who are troubled by his activities on the Sabbath. In response, he has shown them that they have no right to accuse him of anything since they are lawbreakers themselves and thus in no position to judge the authenticity of his message. Even further, he shows them that their criticism of his Sabbath healing as "work" is baseless and hypocritical since they themselves seem to have no trouble whatsoever engaging in matters of lesser significance - such as circumcision - even though such actions would *also* fall under the category of "work" - at least as they were wrongly and narrowly defining it.

Some of the crowd, at this point, seeing and hearing this fairly in-your-face response by Jesus are flabbergasted that he is getting away with speaking to the authorities in such a fashion. And so, some of them, knowing that there is already a plan to do away with Jesus, voice their confusion as to why no one is coming forward to shut him up.

Now what is recorded here may have simply been the chatter that was going on from one person to the next in the temple that day. But it is also possible that what we have here is the record of some individuals in the crowd attempting to stir things up a little bit, firstly by asking why no one is trying to apprehend Jesus if they are so upset with him, and then suggesting a possible reason for their not doing so - a reason that these individuals don't really *believe*, but which would be sure to get the authorities all riled up:

"Can it be that the authorities really know that this is the Christ?"

And so they wonder out loud - half taunting, half teasing. And then, almost as soon as the possibility is suggested, it is dismissed as these same voices now declare their own verdict on the question of Jesus' identity:

"But we know where this man comes from, and when the Christ appears, no one will know where he comes from."

As we saw in the introduction, so sure are some of the crowd about the manner of the Messiah's coming, that they are prepared to ignore the numerous and painfully obvious signs of Jesus' divinity – all his teachings and miracles, etc. – in order to cling to their precious assumptions in this matter. But Jesus does not let them get away with such an easy dismissal:

So Jesus proclaimed, as he taught in the temple, "You know me, and you know where I come from? But I have not come of my own accord. He who sent me is true, and him you do not know. ²⁹ I know him, for I come from him, and he sent me."

Now, there is some debate on how verse 28 should be punctuated. If you have an NIV translation, there will be a period at the end of the sentence there. If you have an ESV, you will have a question mark. And the reason for this is because the punctuation of Greek sentences is a function of *context*, not symbols. At the end of the day, it doesn't make much difference as Jesus could have said what he did either way and the point would have remained the same.

They think that because they can identify his parents and talk about where he grew up, that they therefore "know him" and everything they need to know *about* him. But Jesus talks to them about his origins, not in geographical terms, but in relational and *ontological* terms - which is just a fancy word talking about Jesus' *being*, his *person*. And so, in responding to their arrogant claims at knowing him and where he is from, Jesus re-iterates a point he has already made by using language that will draw them back to this previous point - namely, that he has not come on his own but has, instead, been *sent* by his Father who is, in fact God, to accomplish His Father's purposes here on earth. And since they do not know his Father, Jesus argues, then they couldn't possibly know him or where he is *truly* or *ultimately* from.

Now, of course, the crowd recognize Jesus' language here for what it is - i.e., not merely figurative or symbolic language but as the language of *reality* and *actuality*. He was saying that he really *was* from God - the God who truly is. And he was from him - not merely in the sense of being sent as a messenger or envoy but in the sense that he was *of him*, really, relationally. The fact that this is what he was getting at when he spoke, and was how he was understood, is indicated by the immediate response of those listening to him, in vs 30,

So they were seeking to arrest him, but no one laid a hand on him, because his hour had not yet come.

Those around him knew exactly what he was saying. It was the sort of thing he had been saying about himself all along, on a number of different occasions. And it was this association with the Father which he kept claiming for himself that was the primary factor in his opponents' murderous hatred of him (See Jn 5:18).

We also see at this point the continuation of the pattern that we have seen throughout this Gospel - this side by side presentation of both *negative and positive* responses to Jesus. And so, right on the heels of talking about people who want to have Jesus arrested John includes the brief but clear declaration, "Yet, many of the people believed in him". And the reason given for this belief, while perhaps not the greatest reason in the world, is still valid,

"When the Christ appears, will he do more signs than this man has done?"

As we have seen in this Gospel, responding to Jesus merely on the basis of the signs he performs is not necessarily an indicator of true or lasting faith, but it is at least a willing acknowledgment of the undeniable legitimacy of what he had done. However, once again, the authorities are upset and put out by the attitude of the crowd and by any expression that might be construed as some sort of support for Jesus and thus they are motivated to try a second time to have Jesus arrested - this time by sending officers to seize him, which, again, they are unable to do.

Now, this whole matter of the inability of the authorities to lay a hand on Jesus, even though they sincerely want to, is a point that John is obviously concerned to get across to his readers. He doesn't want us to miss this, which is why it comes up pretty regularly in this section of the Gospel, as well as in the sections that follow.

Again, we have seen it here, in John 6:30,

So they were seeking to arrest him, but no one laid a hand on him, because his hour had not yet come.

And we will see it once more in John 6:44,

Some of them wanted to arrest him, but no one laid hands on him.

We will see it again in John 8:20,

but no one arrested him, because his hour had not yet come

And again at the end of chapter 8, vs 59,

So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple.

We find it once more in John 10:39,

Again they sought to arrest him, but he escaped from their hands.

Do you think John is trying to tell us something? John clearly wants his readers to conclude that *Jesus' life was not for the taking*, that *nobody* could take his life from him. Nobody - no matter how powerful or determined. As many times as they tried, so also they failed.

All except for that *one last time*. They did, finally, pull it off. But when you read that *successful* arrest and trial - after so many failed attempts, then it puts an entirely different spin on it, doesn't it? It's sort of like what would happen if I went out and played Tiger Woods in ten rounds of golf. And every time we played, he beat me by a *minimum* of 60 strokes. And then we play one last round. I shoot my usual ridiculous score, but somehow, Tiger shoots 12 more than me and suddenly I am "the winner". I beat Tiger Woods.

Of course, any sane person watching this sad little scenario would conclude that I hadn't beaten Tiger at all. Rather, Tiger had *allowed* himself to get beaten. The same sort of conclusion is what John wants his readers to come to with regard to Jesus' death at the end of his Gospel. In light of all the previous failed attempts at arresting and doing away with him, you can only conclude in the end that the last attempt worked only because Jesus - and his Father - *allowed* it to work. They *wanted* it to happen.

And that fact changes the crucifixion of Christ from being just another senseless, pointless, random death to an intentional, purposeful, even meaningful death. His sufferings were not, and cannot be regarded as having been in vain. His demise cannot be written off as just another unfortunate accident of history to just another man with good intentions but who, in the end, showed himself to be of the same sort of stuff as the rest of us.

John's Gospel, written as it is, does not leave any room for such an opinion about Jesus' death. The many failed attempts at arresting him only made the one successful attempt that much more significant.

Now, as for how, providentially, all these “near misses” happened, we cannot say because John doesn’t bother to tell us. In the verses before us this morning, the two failed attempts may have come about in any number of ways. Perhaps the crowds, being made up of both supporters and opponents, prevented any sort of “seizing” of Jesus from happening. Those who believed in him might have blocked the way or something. Perhaps the orders to have officers arrest him were delayed by the fact that the officers weren’t present but had to be sent for. Who knows? The reality is that by various providential means, every time an attempt was made to seize him, that attempt was frustrated by God.

At any rate, in response to this second attempt to have him arrested, Jesus says to them,

I will be with you a little longer, and then I am going to him who sent me. ³⁴ You will seek me and you will not find me. Where I am you cannot come."

With these words Jesus communicates at least three things to them. Firstly, and almost as if in defiance of their decision to try and arrest him, Jesus makes it clear that it just isn’t going to happen. Not yet, at least. “I will be with you a little while longer”, he says. In other words, nobody’s taking *anyone anywhere* today.

Secondly, Jesus indicates, admittedly somewhat cryptically, that what they want will *eventually* happen although, when it does, it will not be the triumph of *their* agenda, but the Father’s. They are not sending him away. He is “going” away, to return to his Father, via the cross and tomb. We, with the benefit of hindsight, can look back from this side of the cross and see a reference to his death and resurrection and ascension which will be made clearer much later on.

Thirdly, Jesus makes a fairly sobering comment about their status before God, even though they completely miss the point. When Jesus says, “You will seek me and you will not find me. Where I am you cannot come”, they think he is talking about his physically *going somewhere*. Judging from their response, they believe that Jesus is planning on leaving and going to hang out with some of the Jews who had been scattered in other places, out amongst the “Gentile” nations. They aren’t certain of his meaning, but this is the only one that makes any sense to them at the time.

But they completely missed the significance of his statement. To be sure, if Jesus *had* gone out among the Jews scattered among the Gentiles, his opponents *would not* have come to those places. They despised the Gentiles and wanted nothing to do with them. But Jesus didn’t talk about a place they *would not* go to. He talked about a place they *COULD NOT* go to. In other words, Jesus was speaking of going to heaven, to be with his Father again in a place that his opponents could *not* go because they did not know the Father. Their pursuit of him would be allowed to go only so far, bounded by this world, and this time and this space. But that pursuit could not go beyond the grave and into the heavens.

Now, with that admittedly cursory description of what seems to be going on in this passage, and with only a little bit of time left, I want to draw your attention to just one of a number of significances to be found within these verses. And it has to do with this whole thing of people being incapable of doing anything to Jesus. As we have seen, the frequent failed attempts at doing away with him only highlight the fact that Jesus' life was never, and could never have been taken from him. He might GIVE it. But it couldn't be taken from him, protected, as it were, by the unshakeable plan and purpose of God which no one and no thing could thwart.

And the thing that I want to say to you, and which may come as a surprise to you, is how very *ordinary* that reality is. To be sure, there is a uniqueness to Christ that is his by virtue of his being the only begotten Son of God, the same in substance with the Father, and by virtue of what he has uniquely accomplished that no other could. No question about that.

But with regard to this fact of the unshakeable plan and purpose for his life and that no power on earth could ever get in the way of - *that* fact is not unique or exclusive to Jesus at all. It is the lived reality for all of creation, and it ought to be the *conscious*, lived reality for all of God's people.

Looking in the Scriptures themselves, we see other stories which illustrate this truth of the sovereign and unshakeable working out of God's purposes. Do you remember Saul and David in the Old Testament? Do you remember all the times when Saul tried to take David's life and yet, every single time, he was prevented from doing so? Was that mere accident or coincidence? No.

What about Daniel? There he was, face to face with a fierce lion, and yet he escapes unscathed. What about Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego - thrown into a fiery furnace and left for dead - yet emerging unharmed. What about Jonah - thrown overboard in a violent storm at sea, swallowed whole by a whale - and living to tell of it?

This sort of "bullet-proof" existence was not the exclusive domain of Jesus, but is seen over and over again in the Scriptures, illustrating the comforting, yet sobering reality that nothing ever happens except that which first passes through the gates of God's providence.

And that is both a comforting and sobering reality because, as both the Scriptures and history testify, while God can and will, at times, guard and protect and preserve his people through the most amazing circumstances, as we see illustrated in the first part of Jesus' life, he will also, at other times, allow them to suffer the harshest and most difficult of trials, as we see at the end of Jesus' life. But whether we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, or the valley of sunshine, the path we walk remains *his* path.

And even when we focus specifically on the *difficult* things that come to us by the Lord's permission - even amidst these *sobering* things there is still a comfort to be had in the knowledge of God's sovereign supervision.

Pain and suffering are always difficult and frightening, but they are *infinitely* more so if we operate under the conviction that whatever happens, happens for *no apparent reason* or cause other than the relentless randomness of the universe. Suffering that comes from nowhere and leaves us nowhere is far more difficult than suffering that is part of a bigger story that is *actually going somewhere*.

Suffering and evil are always difficult to endure, but even more so if we feel that we are nothing more than the victims of persons or forces that we neither know, nor trust, and that we are powerless to do anything about.

Pain and suffering are a massive burden to bear, but are even more so if we feel that we bear these things *alone* with no one that we can ultimately turn to who actually cares or is in any position to do anything about it.

Suffering and evil are always a challenge, but they would be an even greater challenge if we did not have the comforting knowledge that there is a day coming when all the books will be opened, all the books will be balanced, and every sorrow addressed.

We look at Jesus' life, and we see the evidence of God's unshakeable supervision of his every step. And we can know that God's actions and intentions toward us are exactly the same. There is a real comfort to be found in the knowledge of God's sovereign superintendence of all things. Even when we find ourselves amidst great hardship, the comfort comes from knowing that we are not, nor are we ever, merely the victims of forces beyond all control, or persons we neither know nor trust. The comfort comes from knowing that our own suffering is part of something bigger than itself - a story that is actually going somewhere, a story that means something. The comfort comes from knowing that, as the old hymn goes, "behind a frowning providence, faith sees a smiling face" - a face we know, a father we know who is loving and just and wise. The comfort of God's sovereignty comes from knowing that in the end the darkness and silence and randomness will not, and cannot, win.