

**The 5th Sunday in Lent
March 29, 2009**

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Once again, Mary Oliver provides a gracious starting point for our exploration this morning. It is a poem with a tantalizing title and a provocative opening stanza. The poem is called: “Where Does the Temple Begin / Where does it End?” She writes: “There are things you can’t reach. But you can reach out to them, and all day long. The wind, the bird flying away. The idea of God.”

The idea of God—who God really is, how God really acts, where God really lives—has haunted human beings for eons. Our ancestors longed for the dream of Jeremiah to be fulfilled in their lifetimes. They longed for a God who would be their own, a God who would always be with them in an everlasting Covenant. And Jeremiah has God articulate that Promise: “The days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah....I will place my law within them and write it upon their hearts; I will be their God, and they shall be my people....all, from the least to the greatest, shall know me says the Lord....”

But those ancestors never did get to know that place. And many of them were stunned when a man walked among them centuries later and said

“I am he for whom you have been waiting.”

So many could not be sure. Could it be Jesus of Nazareth? And so even the Greeks come quietly to the Jews, for it is from the Jews that the Covenant is born, and they ask Philip: “Sir, we would like to see Jesus.” They are at least reaching out for the idea of God—and maybe even for God herself. Can God be reached? Can Jesus be seen? Only Jesus knows.

Jesus knows the answer is no, not yet. Jesus cannot really be seen yet. He has not yet been “lifted up” for all to draw near and really see. And in John’s complex and richly theological version, Jesus chooses language that can only stun the Greeks and scandalize the Jews (to quote St. Paul). To the Greeks, Jesus uses the home-spun image of a single grain of wheat being buried in order to produce much fruit. And then says anyone who loves this life loses it; anyone who hates life in this world, will preserve it for eternal life. Absurdity and folly to the Greeks and other Gentiles. And certainly not the God they wanted and longed for.

To the Jews, Jesus uses the unmentionable and sacred language of the Hebrew scriptures. Several times in this short passage, Jesus uses the words of the sacred tetragrammaton, *YHWH*, the very name of God; and he uses it *of himself*. (*Ego Eimi*, “I am who am; or I shall be who I shall be.”) “Where *I*

Am, there also will my servant be.”

But the author of John’s gospel is not finished. In another stunning display of clever word-play, he has Jesus go further. Jesus says “when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all to myself.” The word used for “lifted up,” (upsōthō) has at least a double meaning. It means lifted up as in death (especially on a cross), and it means lifted up as in exalted, glorified, risen beyond death. As theologian Gil Bailie says so simply: “In John’s Gospel, the crucifixion and the resurrection are the same thing.”

And like everything else in John’s gospel, from the very beginning (“In the beginning was the Word...”) to the very end (*Consumatum est*, Jesus’ final words: it is finished, accomplished), this story has not just personal significance for Jesus of Nazareth who is about to die a cruel and unjustified death on a cross, it has cosmic significance deep beneath the surface. “Now is the time of judgment on this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out.” In the memorable title of one of Rene Girard’s books: *I see Satan fall like lightning*. (Cf. Luke 10:18)

Whether Jesus ever said these exact words or not, it is amazing that anyone writing in the first century could make such bold and almost brazen claims. “When I am lifted up I will draw all of humanity to myself.” What is

most amazing is that history has borne it out. “Explicitly and with a calm assurance that in the hindsight of two thousand years is astonishing, the Gospel of John predicts that the crucifixion will have the most sweeping effects on human history” (Bailie). And it does!

St. Paul writing years earlier had it right; John simply picks up the theme. The cross of Jesus Christ is folly to the Greeks (and all their heirs), and it is a scandal, a stumbling block to the Jews (and all their fellow believers in faith). And yet it is the axis on which the world turns.

So if like the Greeks in today’s gospel who turn to Philip and Andrew, if *we* really would like to see Jesus, Jesus says there is really only one place to see him. There on that cross. The ruler of this world—with all that means: the violence, the bigotry, the hatred, the wars, the inhumanity—the ruler of this world is vanquished once and for all time. *Consumatum est*. It is accomplished, finished! And the world we now live in, this very world we call our own, only exists because of the shadow of that cross. And we only have life in the shadow of that cross. That’s reality. The rest is fiction.

“There are some things you can’t reach. But you can reach out to them, and all day long.” Over the next two weeks we can walk together in the shadow of that cross. And we can pray that the shadow of that cross will burn

deep into the dark crevices where we still hide. And we can pray that the shadow of that cross will drape gently where our own souls are profoundly distressed as Jesus' soul was in today's gospel. And we can pray to hear God's voice whisper the Word to us: *I will glorify my name again—in you.*

There are some things you can't reach. But you can reach out to them, and all day long. Peace!