The next verses are downright grim. Jesus states the necessity for seeds to fall into the ground and die before they bear fruit. Jesus declares that we must lose our own life, even hate our life, to be his disciples. Jesus speaks of our call to resolutely follow him, no matter the consequences. “Now my soul is troubled,” Jesus sighs, unburdening himself of his deepest dread. In language that foreshadows his impending agony in the garden, Jesus wonders if he dares pray, “Father, save me from this hour.”

The prayer Jesus finally utters is not one of protest but of steely resignation: “Father, glorify your name.” Jesus seeks not his own glory, but God’s. Then, as happened at his baptism and on the Mount of Transfiguration, a voice booms out from heaven: “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” The crowd hears this very public revelation, and they are confused.

So, Jesus explains that the time of the world’s judgment is at hand, and with it the defeat of “the ruler of this world.” Whether he is speaking of the emperor or of a more spiritual adversary is difficult to say. Maybe he means both. Then he says: “When I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” The Gospel-writer John is convinced that the lifting-up part refers to Jesus’ death on the cross; but to the disciples, it is a mysterious saying. How will Jesus draw all people to himself? Only later, after the crucifixion and the resurrection, will Jesus’ followers discern the full extent of his words.

The 19th century pastor Alexander Maclaren wrote that “The Cross is the magnet of Christianity. Jesus Christ draws [people], but it is by His Cross…then the question arises, what is it about His death that makes it the magnet that will draw all [people]? [People] are drawn by cords of love. They may be driven by other means, but they are drawn only by love. And what is it that makes Christ’s death the highest and noblest and most wonderful and transcendent manifestation of love that the world has ever seen, or ever can see?...The one thing that entitles [people] to interpret Christ’s death as the supreme manifestation of love is that it was a death voluntarily undertaken for a world’s sins.”

Further, Maclaren affirms that a “universal attraction is raying out from Christ’s cross, and from Himself to each of us.” This attraction may be resisted if we plant our feet firmly and hold on with both hands to something other than the cross of Christ. When we cling not to the Cross, says Maclaren, the “drawing cannot draw.” There is an attraction, but we are not pulled to Jesus. Maclaren says that we “demagnetize Christianity” if we reject Christ’s death on the Cross for our sin; for what is left is not a magnet, but a bit of “scrap iron.”

To illustrate this attraction, think of Jesus as a bar magnet, like the ones our grade-school science teachers used to explain the physics of magnetism. If you placed two of those bar magnets together on a lab table in a certain way, they would fly together to meet each other. But if you spun one magnet around the other way, no amount of force could bring the two together. As soon as you let go, one or both magnets would go spinning off in the opposite direction, unable to resist the powerful force of magnetic repulsion.

“Our relationship with the Divine is like that,” says Vance Morgan. “We are spiritually equipped with hearts that are God-magnets, hearts that God cannot approach when they are turned self-ward. But when we turn our hearts outward, we attract the divine from every place imaginable.”

This is where we find ourselves at the end of Lent. Next week is Palm Sunday. Jesus enters Jerusalem in triumph, acclaimed by the crowd as their King. There was something fascinating about Jesus’ and that spiritual attraction caused the crowd to cheer. But there is also something repellent about Jesus to those unwilling to welcome him into their hearts. “Look,” say the scribes and pharisees in amazement, as they see the surging crowd, “the world has gone after him!” (John 12:19). They speak those words not in admiration, but in revulsion. Soon enough their schemes will turn the world against Jesus, squeezing his lifeblood out upon the stones of Calvary.

Jesus still has that magnetic pull on our lives. If we lay our lives up against his, if we seek to align our life with his teachings, we sometimes discover that our own life is spinning around until we are facing the opposite way. That is that power Jesus has, God’s power, the power of righteousness, plunged into this world of sin like a hot poker immersed in water. It is no wonder the principalities and powers crucified him. Once they discovered who he truly was, and what his presence in this world really meant, they realigned the repellent poles of their magnet against his by brute force.

“When I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself,” said Jesus. That is spiritual magnetism at work! Jesus both repels and attracts. Once the power of his love gets hold of you, there is no resisting. He just draws you along. Have you felt the pull of his love in your life, calling you out of ungodly habits? Do you experience the fascination that comes from hearing his story retold by the church every year? Have you ever turned to Jesus in grief or worry or fear, and discovered at the center of your being a calm and peaceful place, where none of life’s storms can harm you? If so, you know his magnetism.

There is one other characteristic of those clunky, old bar magnets from science class. If you take a magnet that is powerful enough, and you strap another piece of metal right up against it for a sufficient time, that metal, too, becomes a magnet. Somehow the magnetic force leaps the gap, and the metal bar becomes imbued with the magnet’s power. Then, it too can attract others. It too can invite and guide others to the one source of all attraction. When we feel the pull of Jesus in our lives, and when we submit ourselves to his power, we discover that our lives become magnetic, too. His magnetism will work through our own lives to invite others into a saving relationship with him.

With Holy Week coming soon, maybe you are already feeling the attraction. Maybe you feel your soul yearning for that saving story of King Jesus, riding on a donkey, then hung from a cross, then bursting forth from the tomb that could not hold him. As we move towards our celebration of those world-changing events, know that the entry of the Son of God into human life is not only a matter of teaching, of blessing, and of healing; it is also a disturbance. Jesus reminds us that God still has big plans for this world, and we have a place and a purpose within those plans.

You and I can respond to that divine disturbance with hostility and rejection, or we can welcome the Lord as liberator and life-giver. Either way, it is up to us to answer the call. I invite you to walk with Jesus in these final days of Lent. Walk with him not only as he enters the city in bright sunshine, but also as he wades into the shadows. Wave your palms, but then go with Jesus to dark Gethsemane and beyond. Watch with him, and wonder at this spectacle of God’s own Son, arrested, condemned, crucified, and risen from the grave! Draw near to God, for surely, he draws near to you” (James 4:8).

Prayer: God of thundering glory and wondrous love, you lifted Jesus Christ from the earth to draw all people to your holy name. Like grains of wheat that fall to the dust, teach us to die to ourselves and so to bear much fruit, giving our lives for the sake of the gospel, following, and serving Christ Jesus forever. Amen.

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**Magnetic Jesus**

Sunday, March 21, 2021 John 12:20-33

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Hanging over the altar in Saint John’s Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota, is a crucifix that is truly unique. For one thing, the cross rotates 360-degrees on its vertical axis, so that Jesus can face those in the choir stalls for daily prayers, then turn around to face the sanctuary for Sunday services. Vance Morgan, a philosophy professor who visited the abbey writes, “I watched a monk after last Sunday morning’s prayer take a forked pole about 4 or 5 feet long, grab the bottom of the crucifix with the pole and turn it 180 degrees to face the sanctuary. If I were a monk, that’s the job I would want – very cool.”

Morgan goes on to say: “This cross is large (as is everything in the Abbey), but Jesus is small and abstract, probably no more than 2 feet tall, seemingly ready to step or ascend from the cross at any moment. And, as it turns out, that’s exactly what he does. Several years ago, a monk revealed to me at dinner that Jesus on the Abbey cross is magnetic. He sticks to the cross securely, but is taken down during Lent.”

Magnetic Jesus: what a concept! I wonder what magnetic Jesus does when he is not sticking to the cross? Does he hold up menus on the community bulletin board? Does he keep monastic art projects securely in place on the refectory refrigerator? And just how powerful is his magnetism? Do the monks keep their credit cards and thumb drives at a safe distance? No doubt about it: Jesus has a magnetic personality.

**Our text says that** “among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks.” They sought Philip out and beseeched him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” Although their request seems normal to us, it sounded strange to Philip. To the disciples, Jesus was their rabbi (teacher); like them, a guy from the rural region of Galilee. What could these cosmopolitan Greeks possibly want with Jesus?

When Jesus hears of their request it seems to spark something disquieting in him, perhaps a sense of foreboding. “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified,” he declares, knowingly. Most of Jesus’ followers imagined their little reform movement flourishing solely under the umbrella of Judaism. The presence of these Greek pilgrims seems to remind Jesus that his true mission will soon be played out on a much larger, cosmic stage.