

“Evidence That Demands a Verdict”

In the 12th chapter of John the gospel writer tells us of Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Jesus gets on donkey and rides into the city to the cheers and praises of the crowd. Our Lord is fulfilling words of Zechariah the prophet of a King who would rule in peace throughout all the nations. “Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war-horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations; his dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth” (Zechariah 9:9-10).

Something happens the day before Jesus enters Jerusalem that only the gospel writer John mentions. Jesus is in Bethany, a little village near Jerusalem. “When the great crowd of the Jews learned that he was there, they came not only because of Jesus but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead” (John 12:9). A great number of Jews went to Bethany, not just to see Jesus, but also *to see Lazarus*. Remember Lazarus? Jesus raised him from dead, after he had been in a tomb for 4 days! They wanted to see a man who had been to the Other Side and come back!

But the next couple of verses are zingers! John 12:10 says, “So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death as well.” The chief priests (religious leaders) wanted “to put Lazarus to death *as well*.” As well as what? As well as they wanted to put *Jesus* to death!

These religious leaders wanted to kill Jesus, to get Him out of the way, but also they sought to kill Lazarus. Why? Verse 11 says, “since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus.”

Let’s take closer look at what’s going on here. The chief priests were part of a group called Sadducees – a wealthy, aristocratic class of Jews. Palestine at the time of Jesus was occupied by Roman troops. But Rome permitted Jews a lot of freedom as long as peace and order were maintained. The chief priests therefore were very concerned that everything be kept under control so they could maintain their cushy, favored position of wealth and power. Jesus was a threat to all of this!

Each year at Passover the Jews nationalistic hopes rose to fever pitch. Maybe *this* Passover, God would send His Messiah, who would free His people from Rome’s domination! The Sadducees were nervous that Jesus could spark a revolt, since the masses were going wild over Him. If that happened, they knew Rome would step in and squelch this uprising, and their cozy little world would collapse. So they had to get Him out of way.

But their power and privileged position not only thing at risk: their beliefs and teachings were on the line! The Sadducees taught that there was no resurrection of the dead. But here was Lazarus – a man who had been dead 4 days, and was now alive and walking among them. It’s pretty hard to deny the resurrection when you are looking eyeball to eyeball with someone who has done it!

Besides, the crowd who had been there when Jesus called Lazarus out of the tomb, were spreading the word! “So the crowd who had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to testify” (John 12:17). Other religious leaders, the Pharisees, were also exasperated with all the fuss over Jesus: “The Pharisees then said to one another, ‘You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him!’” (John 12:19).

Isn't this a fascinating turn of events! For one thing, it shows us *how bad religion can get at times*. *Religious leaders* (chief priests, Sadducees, Pharisees) were into *murdering* someone!

At least we don't have violence and killing done in the name of religion today! (Don't I wish!) Now we can readily point to horrible things done by radical Muslims. Terrorists fly planes into buildings and gun down and blow up people in the name of Allah.

There was a recent article in the Lancaster News about the tiny nation of Brunei, where 2/3 of the people are Muslim. They just adopted Shariah laws. Under these laws those guilty of gay sex can be stoned to death or whipped. Adulterers risk death by stoning. Thieves face the amputation of a right hand on a first offense and a left foot on the second. These laws apply to children and foreigners too, even if they are not Muslim. All done in the name of religion. What makes this even more scary is that some Muslims in the U. S. have tried to impose Shariah law on their local governments here in this country.

But there are a lot of awful things done in the name of Jesus and Christianity. Bombing of abortion clinics by “Christians”. White Supremacist groups, fostering racial and ethnic prejudice and hate, while claiming to be “Christian”.

Then there is Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, KS. Their web site: www.godhatesfags.com The name of their website gives us a clue to their viewpoint. According to them, God hates gay people. As of mid-week this past week, they claim to have picketed 63,797 times in 1035 cities. They tell us that God is bringing judgment on the U.S. for our sexual sins, judgment in the form of natural disasters. They thank God for 9/11, and maintain that God destroyed the World Trade Center buildings to punish America.

Early on, when they first began to draw national attention, they created a memorial for Matthew Shepard, a gay student at the University of Wyoming, who was beaten to death and tied to a fence post because he was gay. Their monument *commemorates Matthew's entrance into hell*. Also they created a similar monument celebrating the death of Diane Whipple, a 33 year-old gay woman mauled to death by two dogs in San Francisco. At one point their website pointed out that “Matthew Shepard has been in hell for 2352 days.” “Diane Whipple has been in hell for 1514 days.” There is a video on their website telling us why Billy Graham was a false prophet, and is in hell. They boast on their website: “You should be so happy we are here. We're spreading the Good News that not everyone will go to Hell. You should be happy that we're here to preach at all, since all you get from the countless so-called “preachers, priests, rabbis, imams and other spiritual leaders in this nation is a bunch of syrupy, unscriptural psycho-babble. We tell the truth.” (Makes me want to vomit).

Religion gone wrong. Fortunately, few go to far out extremes like Westgate Baptist Church, but there is a lot of stuff said and done in the name of Christianity and Jesus that's not healthy. Steve Arterburn and Jack Felton have written a book called *Toxic Faith*. It critiques some of the unhealthy religious systems in our time. I have preached a sermon series on this topic also.

Whenever we take religion and faith and use it to degrade or hurt people, we turn it into something that is hateful and devilish.

There's something else that comes out of today's Scripture from the Gospel of John. It is this: *Jesus has a way of disturbing people!* To say that the chief priests and Sadducees were "irritated" with Jesus is to put it mildly! He disturbed them so badly that they wanted to murder Him! *Jesus can disturb us because He brings us face to face with God – with Truth.* Sometimes get the idea that to get close to God is a warm, soothing experience. It can be – but not always! Sometimes to come into the presence of God is unnerving, uncomfortable! Sometimes we don't want to be near God, for God lays bare our motives, and true character. Remember the story of Adam and Eve. What happened after they sinned and disobeyed God? They *hid* from God!

Jesus not only gives us peace and serenity, He can also agitate and disquiet us! Now He doesn't do this just to lay a guilt trip on us! This reminds me of the lady coming out of church, shaking hands with the pastor and saying, "Your sermon was simply wonderful. I've never felt so sinful in all my life."

Jesus doesn't annoy and disturb us just to make us feel badly. He does that so we might grow and change. Lloyd Ogilvie, a Presbyterian pastor and author and former chaplain of the U.S. Senate, tells of his experience with a parishioner when he was a pastor in Bethlehem, PA. He was having lunch with a man who was a respectable church member for many years. The man was very upset and unsettled with the changes taking place in their congregation. He said to Lloyd, "Young man, stick to the gospel. Your job is to tell us about God's love, not to disturb us. I come to church to find spiritual strength, not to be upset. The church ought to be one place I can find peace, but instead I feel uneasy and disquieted. It isn't the way it used to be. Keep off these controversial issues. Stop trying to change our personal lives. Give us some assurance." Lloyd's response "Wonderful! Sounds like Christ is at work in your life!"

Lloyd went on to explain to the man that to be a Christian means to be disturbed by a divine discontent. He says the "authentic test that shows we have abandoned our lives to the management of Christ is that we have deep dissatisfaction with our personal growth, are unsettled by unhealed relationships, and are indignant towards injustice in any area of our culture. Christ will not allow us to stagnate at any stage of growth." As someone has said, "Christ comforts the afflicted, and afflicts the comfortable." Where is Jesus annoying you? Where is He putting a fly in the ointment of our calm in order to prod us to grow and change? *If we are totally comfortable with everything, we are not growing!*

Jesus also disturbs and annoys churches. Often before a church can move forward into new life and usefulness for God things have to be shaken up and old ways of doing things have to be

disrupted. Dr. Wallace Fisher was for years Senior Pastor at Trinity Lutheran Church in Lancaster. Through his ministry that congregation went through a great transformation. Dr. Fisher had a brilliant mind, and he had a way with words. In one of his books he described the work of the Holy Spirit in that congregation in these terms: “Trinity Church is stirring. The gospel is getting into the crevices of our hard hearts and firming up our soft heads.”

One other point from the Scripture in John, chapter 12: *The Sadducees refused to believe even when the evidence was right before them.* How could they continue to teach that there is no resurrection with Lazarus was walking around? Well, they *could have* backed off and said, “We were wrong! Jesus brought Lazarus back to life, so there *certainly is* a resurrection!” But no, they held to their beliefs, and tried to get rid of the evidence that proved their beliefs were wrong.

One of the great apologists for the Christian faith today is Josh McDowell. He has written a classic book called *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*. It’s a thorough investigation of the evidence that validates the Christian faith – including the Bible, and Jesus’ resurrection. Some people, sadly enough, have written off Christianity without even examining the hard evidence!

Like the chief priests and Sadducees, we have to decide whether or not to believe in Christ in the face of the evidence before us. We can choose to close our minds, hold on to our own views and opinions. Or, we can carefully examine the evidence. As Josh McDowell says, we can’t dismiss Jesus by merely saying He was a nice man, a great teacher or prophet. *He is either Lord, a liar, or a lunatic!* (McDowell says if Jesus wasn’t God then He deserved an Oscar for acting!).

Lee Stroebel was a journalist, the legal editor for the Chicago Tribune. He was also an atheist. He set out to do discredit and disprove the claims of Christ and Christianity. But he wound up being convinced of the validity of Christ and the Christian faith, and became a follower of Jesus. He has written something like 20 books. During this past Christmas season our adult Sunday School class studied Lee Stroebel’s DVD study, *The Case for Christmas*. Next Sunday we will do a three part study on *The Case for Easter*. There is evidence that demands a verdict as we are confronted with Christ and His claims!

Today is Palm Sunday. We remember how Jesus openly rides into Jerusalem as a King, the Messiah – the Deliverer sent from God. People are caught up in the excitement and welcome Him. John lets us know that some of the people are there because they heard this Man Jesus had actually brought a man back to life! Everybody’s caught up in the praise and excitement of the moment! Except for the chief priests and Sadducees and Pharisees – who want to kill Him. It’s the most religious people who refuse to accept and believe what God is doing through this Jesus to save the world. *The most religious people* – something to think about long and hard!

As you know, they got what wanted. Jesus was executed on a cross. They thought they won. But that only lasted 3 days. Then Sunday morning came - Easter! And the One who raised Lazarus from the dead Himself was raised to life again. Check out the evidence, and see that Jesus is all He said He is. God Himself in human flesh. The One who can forgive us and free us from our sins. And the One who can raise us up from death to eternal life.

