

“Lent: A Time to Say the Hour Has Come”

Valley Presbyterian Church – March 29, 2009

Fifth Sunday of Lent

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Rev. John Wahl

John 12:20-26

Often, adults hear themselves saying to children, “not yet.” Aren’t I old enough to get my ears pierced? Not yet. Why can’t I go by myself, I know the way. Not yet.

Apprehension and fear – often justified fear – are primary reasons why adults ask children to wait. Some of the waiting kid’s do, like to play football or drive a car, are mandated by law. Others are from convention. But, as we know, the fear does not go away once the appointed hour arrives. The risks that we have been able to put out of mind come rushing in, and we are apprehensive to peacefully proclaim, “now it’s time.”

Jesus says to his followers, “the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.” (v. 23) Prior to this announcement, Jesus has repeatedly told his followers that the time had not yet come. In chapter two, at the wedding in Cana, Jesus responds to his mother’s request that he help to rectify the wine shortage by saying, “my hour has not yet come.” (2:4) Later on, in chapter seven, as a result of his astonishing teaching, the Pharisees make an early attempt to have him arrested, but Jesus escapes, “because his hour had not yet come.” (7:30) In chapter eight, the narrator again explains that Jesus could not be arrested – even while teaching openly in the Temple – “because his hour had not yet come.” (8:20)

So why the sudden change? What happened around and within to transform the mind of Christ from *not yet* to *right now*?

One peculiar thing we see happening in today’s reading is that some Greeks who were in Jerusalem for the festival time requested a meeting with Jesus. Who these folks were we may never know, but for certain they would fall outside the accepted bounds of the Hebrew people. Here we see an example that the good news about Jesus has begun to pass through the limits of culture and race – a foretaste of what would be seen and heard when the wind of the Spirit blew through Jerusalem on Pentecost.

Just a few chapters earlier, as Jesus was speaking of himself as the good shepherd, he made it a point for his disciples to know that some of the sheep from other folds must also learn to recognize his voice. “I must bring them...so there will be one flock, one shepherd,” (10:16) Jesus informs them. God never intended for the followers of Christ to become a closed and bounded society, but one limited only by faith and belief.

Another part of the story leading up to this change from some future hour to the present hour is the miracle of the raising of Lazarus. When the news comes to Jesus that this man, “he whom you love,” (11:3) was ill, Jesus stayed where he was for two days before leaving for Bethany, where Lazarus lived with Martha and Mary. Upon arriving

and hearing the news that Lazarus has died, Jesus wept. (If you're ever asked in *Trivial Pursuit* what the shortest verse in the Bible is, the answer is John 11:35 – “Jesus wept.”)

Jesus then went to the tomb where they had laid his friend's body and called for Lazarus to come out from the cave. When the Pharisees heard about this, their mind was made up that if they were to keep hold of their position of power among the people, then Jesus would have to die, and Lazarus would have to die with him.

And so, maybe one of the reasons that the coming hour grew to be the hour at hand was that the threat of danger was no longer only for Jesus, but for his followers as well. In the other gospels, Jesus informs his disciples that if they truly wish to be his followers, they must be willing to take up their own cross. After the raising of Lazarus, it was no longer safe to be a follower of Jesus, to be a recipient of his saving grace. The hour was coming not only for Jesus to be revealed as the Messiah, but for the light also to shine on those who would claim the same and live their lives accordingly.

In John's gospel, those who wave palm branches during Jesus' final entry into Jerusalem are those people who saw and heard testimony about Lazarus being raised from the dead. They shout “hosanna” and say “blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord – the king of Israel.” (12:13)

For the Pharisees, the situation had gotten out of hand. Not only was this rabbi Jesus being praised for having power over death, he now also received adulation as the new king. The only worldly authority they knew were the Romans who held the power to impose death, but not to conquer death. Violence was the means for keeping control, and it was only their respect for Roman rule which kept them alive.

The Jewish leaders of that day – and many people in our day as well – have fully adopted what Walter Wink calls “the myth of redemptive violence. According to this myth, the way to bring order out of chaos is through violently defeating *the other*. And the way to deal with threats from enemies is by violently eliminating them – as the world seeks to do with Jesus.”¹ Wink's example for this kind of sanctioned violence is Popeye who, after eating his spinach, will pummel Bluto, his nemesis, into submission in order to restore order within their cartoon world.

The problem with this thinking is that we sometimes imagine that because the world tends to operate this way, God must also operate this way. We assume that Jesus had to die in order to appease a God who was angry with our sins. Jesus realizes that his followers might be tempted to think this way, and so he quickly turns the issue around. He says to them, “unless a grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” (12:24) The violence done to Jesus will not conquer him, but will instead allow him to grow through the testimony of others.

And so it is, after his arrest, that Jesus tells Pilate, “my kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me

¹ As quoted by Charles Campbell in *Feasting on the Word*, year B, vol. 2

from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.” (18:36) His followers had been taught to live not according to the rule of violence, but the Law of love; loving neighbors and strangers, loving friends and enemies, loving God and one another. And if we truly love God, how do we then blame God for Christ’s death? The violence inflicted on Jesus was not simply an atonement for our sins, but also a rejection of the myth of redemptive violence. When the world killed Jesus, his ability to influence and transform the lives of people did not diminish, but instead flourished. The witnesses of the resurrection, emboldened by the presence of the Holy Spirit, could recognize Jesus as God’s Son, and – just as important – recognize God through Jesus.

Why had the time come for Jesus to suffer? If you have ever made a campfire, you know that it will not be judged by how quickly it starts, but by how well it endures. The flames must be able to withstand the winds that arise, but the true worth of the fire – not only its light but its enduring warmth – comes from the coals that develop after the wood has been burning for a while. A good campfire continues to provide heat and light – even when the flames die down a little. But the embers, the source, remain at the ready to be rekindled when the time is right.

Michael Battle says this: “God, by taking on human nature – living in poverty and dying in shame and torment – has earned the right to ask us to hold on a little longer until morning comes...until resurrection.”² In Christ, God does not bypass the death that we too must endure. In Christ, God removes the barriers between the human and the divine and meets us in our human condition – mysteriously and lovingly – the way we can grow to learn, in Christ, that God truly is.

C.S. Lewis has described Aslan, the Christ figure in his *Chronicles of Narnia* series, as a “not so tame lion.” Here is an account of an encounter between Aslan and the children from *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*:

*Oh children, said the Lion, I feel my strength coming back to me. Oh, children, catch me if you can! He stood for a second, eyes very bright, limbs quivering, lashing himself with his tail...A mad chase began. Round and round the hilltop he led them, now hopelessly out of their reach, now letting them almost catch his tail, now diving between them, now tossing them in the air with his huge paws and catching them again, and now stopping unexpectedly so that all of them rolled over together in a happy laughing heap of fur and arms and legs. It was such a romp as no one has ever had except in Narnia, and whether it was more like playing with a thunderstorm or playing with a kitten Lucy could never make up her mind. And the funny thing was that when all three finally lay together panting in the sun the girls no longer felt in the least tired or hungry or thirsty.*³

Jesus said, “the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.” (12:23) In this hour, we come to know God more fully, in Christ, and come to understand his command to love. AMEN.

² Michael Battle in *Feasting on the Word*, year B, vol. 2

³ As quoted by Michael Yaconelli in *Dangerous Wonder*