



“The Hour Upon Us”

a sermon by

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Our text this afternoon comes from John 12:20-33. Though this Sunday is Palm Sunday when Jesus entered Jerusalem on a donkey's colt during the festival of the Passover, our text this week takes place just after the triumphal entry, as Jesus turns his face toward all that is about to take place- his suffering, his death, and his resurrection in glory. "Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor. Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say- 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him," Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die."

"The hour has come". That long awaited hour. For so long, it seemed like Jesus 'hour' would never come- the hour of his suffering and his death- but now suddenly, almost in an instant, it was upon him and upon his disciples. Previous attempts to brace them for this experience had not gone so well - "Never, Lord, this shall never happen to you!" Peter had protested once when Jesus told them that the Son of Man must suffer and die.

But Jesus had ridden into Jerusalem- he was in the arms of that city that stoned its prophets- and the Gentiles had begun to seek him out. Which actually was not in itself a bad thing- it was just a sign, really. A sign that the movement of Christ's saving activity- his ministry here on earth - had reached its last leg - or at least the last possible leg that could be accomplished without his death and resurrection.

You see the good news flows out in concentric circles from Jesus the source. First is his revelation to a very few- then spreading out to his own people, the Jews. Then the next phase of his ministry was the Gentiles in the surrounding land- the folks who were now seeking him out - and then the ends of the earth. So clearly something would have to change from him just walking from town to town on a preaching circuit for this to take place. These Gentiles signaled the last phase of his earthly ministry now complete. The ends of the earth could only be reached after his death when his spirit would be sent into his disciples and therefore multiplied and spread like so many seeds scattered to the wind.

"The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life." The fruit of this hour- and by hour we're talking about his suffering, death, and resurrection- is the community of faith that will be born as a result of it. With his spirit in them- seeds scatter to lay roots across the globe that will grow to bear fruit to God's glory. And the mark of membership in this community of faith will be that members will live like their Lord. So moved will they be by the passion they witness in his death for them when he is lifted up on the cross that their lives somehow will become inexplicably intertwined with his own.

So that in his own resurrection he will lift them up with him as he will be with God and they will be with him, and therefore they will be with God too. But, they will live like their Lord in whatever hour is upon them. Because in that sacrifice the two, inextricably, become bound together for life. Which means that life will change its course from the inside out. If you love the way things are too much then you will refuse to be changed and resist the invitation to grow together in love. “Those who love their life lose it”, Jesus said. But if you are ready to dive in, “those who hate their life” Jesus says, though he is not talking about self-hate here, he is talking about the kind of hate the Apostle Paul is referring to when he says that he counts every victory he has gained for himself as loss compared with the love of Jesus Christ, “those who hate their life in this world will keep it eternally.” Because the true and only life that will last is the one that we live for Jesus. We have seen the future- and it is only in him. So does it make a difference in the life we build for ourselves today?

I recently read an article about several soldiers in Iraq who were traveling in a multi-purpose mobile unit when a hand grenade was lobbed from somewhere out of the desert around them into their vehicle. Before they could even comprehend what was happening one of their peers- a young man in his early 20s threw himself on the grenade, giving his life to shield them from the blast. They were only alive now because of him.

And so it startled me to read a piece by Frederick Buechner just the other day that was written in 1981 detailing his reflections on a strikingly similar scenario. “War is hell,” he writes, “but sometimes in the midst of that hell men do things that heaven itself must be proud of. A hand grenade is hurled into a group of men. One of the men throws himself on top of it, making his body a living shield. In the burst of wild fire he dies, and the others live.

Heroism is only a word, often a phony one. This is an action for which there is no good word because we can hardly even imagine it, let alone give it its proper name. Very literally, one man takes death into his bowels, takes fire into his own sweet flesh, so that the other men can take life, some of them men he hardly knows.

Who knows why a man does such a thing or what thoughts pass through his mind just before he does it. Maybe no thoughts at all. Maybe if he stopped to think, he would never do it. Maybe he just acts spontaneously out of his passion... Or if you are a cynic, you might say that a man must be temporarily insane to do such a thing because no man in his right mind would ever willingly give his life away, hardly even for somebody he loved, let alone for people he barely knows...it is impossible for us to imagine the motive.

“But I think that it is not so hard to imagine how the men whose lives are saved might react to the one who died to save them- not so hard, I suppose, for the obvious reason that most of us are more experienced at receiving sacrifices than at making them. In their minds’ eyes, those saved men must always see the dead one where he lay in the ruins of his own mortality, and I suspect that at least part of what they feel must be a revulsion so strong that they come to believe that if they could somehow have stopped him from doing what he did, they would have stopped him. We say “life at any price,” but I have the feeling that to have somebody else pay such a price for us would be almost more than we would choose to bear. I have the feeling that given the choice, we would not have let him do it, not for his sake but for our own sakes. Because we have our pride, after all. We make our own way in the world, we fight our own battles, we are not looking

for any handouts, we do not want something for nothing. It threatens our self-esteem, our self-reliance.

And because to accept such a gift from another would be to bind us closer to him than we like to be bound to anybody. And maybe most of all because if another man dies so that I can live, it imposes a terrible burden on my life. From that point on, I cannot live any longer just for myself. I have got to live also somehow for him, as though in some sense he lives through me now as, in another sense, I live through him.

If what he would have done with his life is going to be done, then I have got to do it. My debt to him is so great that the only way I can approach paying it is by living a life as brave and beautiful as his death. So maybe I would have prevented his dying if I could, but since it is too late for that, I can only live my life for what it truly is: not a life that is mine by natural right, to live any way I choose, but a life that is mine only because he gave it to me, and I have got to live it in a way that he also would have chosen.”

“Now my soul is troubled.” Jesus said. “And what should I say - ‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.”

The hour was upon him in an instant. And Jesus’ motives were clear. “He died for us, died because in some way that he did not try to explain, his death would make all the difference, for everybody, until the end of time. So Does it?”

Does it make a difference in your life today? Does it make a difference in your pain today? We have a Christ who did not fear turning his face to the cross because he knew that in its cold shadow he would find all of us there waiting there for him.

Helpless on our own to move beyond it. Bound to face trial in our lives. Pierced through the heart by the suffering of those we love. Trembling in the face of our realities. And looking straight into the oncoming end of our earthly ministry and wondering if there really is anything beyond this at all?

But in that sacrifice he bound us to himself- bound us closer to him than we perhaps would like to be bound to anybody. Not because it is our right, but out of his immense desire to give us life. So that we can face our deepest fears and darkest valleys and say, as Christ did, ‘yea, my soul is troubled too’ - ‘I don’t want this either, Lord, but glorify your name.’

Let your name be glorified not just in the hereafter, not just when the stone of our heartache and our burden rolls away, but here and now when the hour is upon us. When I feel I am hanging on the cross and weary, glorify your name.

Because the proverbial hour- when we are facing trial and death and resurrection - is upon us at any given time and all the time. And so the challenge to us as an Easter people living in a Good Friday world with the call to live like our Lord remains:

To dig deep into the difference Christ’s sacrifice makes in our lives today. So that we too can not only bear up under but embrace the hour that is upon us now is an expression of our love for God and pray with Jesus that his name be glorified. Amen.