

## **“The Hour Has Come” – March 22, 2015**

**John 12:20-33**

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The word “hour” holds special meaning in the Gospel of John. The writer uses it as a literary device to build tension and to push us ever onward toward the cross. When we read the gospel straight through, we notice that his use of the word “hour” brings us closer and closer to the end of the journey.

Here are some examples: In chapter two, we’re at a wedding. The wine runs out early on – not a good thing. Jesus is there with his mother, and she wants him to do something about it. He says to her, “What concern is that to you and me? My hour has not yet come.” And then he changes the water into wine. An event that caused folks to take notice of him. Then later in the gospel, in Jerusalem, we read that the religious leaders “tried to arrest him, but no one laid hands on him, because his hour had not yet come.” Finally, in the scene at the temple, “No one arrested him, because his hour had not yet come.” When we hear this word “hour”, we know that something else, some deeper meaning, is there, just below surface.

Throughout John’s gospel, as the writer narrates the ministry of Jesus, the action generally focuses on two types of events: miraculous signs that Jesus performs and harsh conflicts with the religious leaders. And these events elicit two separate but powerful responses to Jesus’ ministry. Some want to crown him king, others want to see him dead. These two reactions are diametrically in opposition to one another, and as the story progresses, and the reactions grow stronger, it is easy to see an imminent clash on the horizon. As more people want to see Jesus crowned as king, other people become more fearful and make plans to eliminate him.

Any time the attention becomes a little too great, Jesus makes a sidestep. And why is that? Because, we are told, his hour has not yet come. After he feeds the 5000 and the crowds want to put a crown on his head, Jesus withdraws. (6:15) When he teaches in the Temple, so angry are the religious leaders that they grab stones to hurl at him, yet Jesus slips away. (8:59)

Eventually however, Jesus can no longer evade those who want to crown him and those who want to kill him. Eventually things are going to come to a head. There will come a point where he can no longer avoid the spotlight. And that point comes in today’s text. Prior to this, Jesus had just raised his friend Lazarus from the dead, causing a huge reaction from those two opposing camps. Again, Jesus slipped off into hiding, but then he came to Jerusalem for the Passover Festival. When the crowds heard of his arrival, they rushed over to him and hailed him as king. For months and months, Jesus has avoided the collision. John

tells us that this was possible, because it was not yet the hour. The entry into Jerusalem signals everything is about to change. And what is that final piece of the puzzle, the trigger that sets it all in motion? Some Greeks come. They want to see Jesus.

Some men from the other side of the empire want an audience with him. That seems simple enough. The message about Jesus has spread far and wide. But no longer is his popularity just a local phenomenon. Jesus is now international news. Not only is the word spreading about him among the Jews, but it's spreading to the Gentiles, the non-Jews. After his entry into Jerusalem, to the joyful shouting of the crowds, of one his opponents commented, "Look, the whole world has gone after him." And while that is certainly an exaggeration, the arrival of these inquisitive Greek men, verify that sentiment. And apparently this is what he's been waiting for. Because when Philip and Andrew come to Jesus and tell him that some Greeks wished to see him, he knows it's time. Somehow, he instinctively knows, and so he says, "The hour has come."

The hour has come. This is a euphemism for his death. He knows his death is imminent, and so now he'll begin to talk about it more and more in this gospel. All this attention that he has received has ushered in the inevitability of his death. All the acclaim he has received has pushed his opponents closer and closer to action. There still may be time to change course, to head in another direction, but time is drawing short. Perhaps there is still time to back down a little bit, try to smooth things over with the religious leaders, soften the sting of his message. The future has been weighing heavily upon his mind. Even though John doesn't give us a heart-wrenching scene in the Garden of Gethsemane in this gospel, Jesus does say that he is troubled in his soul. He has considered all his options. And he wonders if he should call upon God the Father to save him from this hour. This hour. His death. Now that the hour has come, should Jesus attempt to avoid it?

He knows he has been given a choice. He can run and hide, and save his life, or he can give up his life, and be a savior. One or the other. He can't do both. And Jesus makes his decision and shares it with his disciples by telling a brief parable. He tells 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."

The purpose of a savior, his purpose, is to give his life so that others can find true life. The purpose of the grain of wheat is to fall into the ground so that more wheat can be produced. In a rather euphemistic way, Jesus is saying that he is accepting the path of death. He is ready to lay down his own life for all of us. He is getting ready to die. He repeats this message in two other ways. He says in verse 23, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified." And in verse 32, "I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." All these phrases - the hour has come, he will be glorified, he will be lifted up -

these all refer to his death. And somehow, some way, his death will bring to us, to all of us, new life.

The Old Testament prophet Jeremiah brought a message of hope to the people of Israel and Judah during the Babylonian exile. The people were suffering. They were in bondage. And Jeremiah brought them a message from God. This message was that God was announcing a new covenant that was to come. The people had so broken the covenant God had made with them on Mt Sinai that it was left in shards. But God didn't give up on them. This new covenant would not do away with the law, the Torah. But there was something unique about the promise of this new covenant, something different. This time, in this covenant, between God and the people, the law would be written upon their hearts. A covenant at the core of one's being. Transformation from within. Old Testament scholar Gene Tucker writes, "God thus promises to change the people from the inside out, to give them a center." (Preaching Through the Christian Year B, p. 162)

If we are truly to confront the evils of this world, not only the ones we witness but the ones in which we participate, we need much more than a simple external change. Window dressing won't cut it. Professor Diane Bergant writes, "If we are honest, we will admit that we need radical interior transformation. Our self-absorption and unbridled pursuit of personal satisfaction, our arrogant sense of superiority, the hatred and desire for revenge that eat at our hearts can be remedied only at their roots. We are certainly in need of a new covenant commitment." (The Hour Has Come, online sermon, from Textweek.com) When will this new covenant be established? Verse 31 says, "The days are surely coming, says the Lord."

And deep down I think we all long to be transformed. We yearn to be rid of our selfishness and our arrogance. We resonate with the words of Psalm 51 as we contemplate God's offer of a loving commitment to us, "Have mercy on me...wipe out my offense...create in me a clean heart and put a new and right spirit within me." In our contemporary situations we might also ask, "help me to not be so irritated with what I find bothersome in others. Help me to give up my stubbornness and my pride. Cure me of my need to always have things my way. Purge me of my desire to accumulate wealth and to pursue worldly success. Cleanse me of my hatred for people who look and act and worship differently than I do.

Jeremiah shares with us God's words, "The days are surely coming." Do we really believe this, deep down in our hearts? Or more honestly, do we want to believe this? Are we doing anything to bring this about within us? Yet even in the face of our doubt, God still says, "The days are surely coming."

And when we come back to the Gospel of John, we hear Jesus say, "The hour has come." Yes, he's talking about his death. But he is also talking about the hour of his glorification. In his death he will also be glorified, and through it, somehow will come new life for us. The obedience of Jesus to his destiny opens the door for new life for us. The key is obedience. The work that God began in the Incarnation of Jesus finds its completion when Jesus obediently chose to submit to his death. His death on the cross was the culminating action of the mission of Jesus. His mission to bring reconciliation between God and humanity. His mission to bring salvation.

To whom is this gift of salvation offered? The promise of the new covenant in the Book of Jeremiah is addressed to the people of Israel and Judah. These were the two kingdoms that comprised the entire Jewish nation. Though they were separated, God called Israel and Judah, these two nations, to "be my people." The Gospel lesson however extends the scope of the new covenant. It's not only for the Jewish people. John tells us, the Greeks, who represented the Gentiles, or "everyone else", came to see Jesus. So all people, men and woman and children everywhere, are invited to seek him out. And Jesus declares, "I will draw all people to myself."

The hour has come; a new covenant has been offered. New life is available to each and every one of us. We can enter into a new way of living if we so choose. All we have to do is look at our own lives, to really look deep down, and it is easy to see that we need to be transformed. But this kind of radical transformation does not come without first paying a price. For our sake, for each one of us, Jesus suffered exceedingly, and he tells us in the gospel lesson, "Whoever serves me must follow me." And there's the catch, if you will.

Throughout this season of Lent we have been given the challenge to do a little Spring-cleaning in our own lives. To examine ourselves honestly, to assess where change needs to be made, and now we are challenged to do something about it. We've done the assessment. We know those places where we are still rough around the edges. In what ways are we willing to make the needed changes? Where do we still need to seek reconciliation? In what areas must we drop our worldly viewpoint and adopt a Christ-like viewpoint? "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." To what extent are we willing to die to our own selfish indulgences in order that we might experience the fruits of the new covenant. It's time to decide. The hour has come.