

Sermon: “The Right Time”

3/21/2021

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

My wife, Mallory, and I got our dog Sam a little over 11 years ago. I loved that dog. After my wife, he was my best friend. I trained him and walked him twice a day, rain or shine. Whenever someone needed to go home to feed him and let him out, I went. Everywhere I look around our house, I see memories of him wagging his tale, begging for food, and running outside to chase the bunny living in the bushes. I’m going to miss that dog, my dog, so much. Miss how he would come over and sit with me when I was sad and how he was so overjoyed that he couldn’t contain himself whenever I arrived home after being gone. But it was his time. He had an aggressive form of blood cancer that was causing tumors to grow in his abdomen. When I learned the grim news in January, I asked the vet how we would know when his time had come, when his hour had come. The vet told us that there will come a time when one of the tumors burst, and in that moment, you will know. That moment was last Sunday morning.

As I sat down to read today’s Gospel lesson, I couldn’t help but think of Sam. One of the things I have said many times over the last week is that it was Sam’s time. No matter how much it breaks my heart, I knew and still know that his hour had come and that we had to let him go. But how, I asked myself this past week, did Jesus’ know that his hour had come? Various times throughout John’s Gospel, he had been telling those around him that it was not yet his time. So how did he know that day? What made that day different than all the ones before? Did he just know, like I did the moment I saw Sam lying in the grass? Was it something that Philip and Andrew should have noticed, much like Mallory did when I, while holding Sam, told her that the time had come to call the vet? Why was that the hour, after all the hours that had come before?

Why was that the time in which Jesus was to be glorified? Well, our Gospel lesson for today helps us answer this question.

Much like a few weeks ago, when I preached on Jesus driving the moneychangers and animals out of the Temple, today's Gospel lesson takes place on Passover. Passover was and remains the most important time of the year for Jews. It is a time during which they gave thanks to God for delivering them from slavery and oppression, and during which they sought forgiveness for their sins. Every year, tens of thousands of pilgrims would travel to Jerusalem from across the Mediterranean. And among those who made the pilgrimage that year, it appears, were a group of Greeks, how many exactly we're not told. A group of Greeks who, upon spotting Philip, made of him a simple request: "Sir, we wish to see Jesus."

Now, it makes sense that the Greeks approached Philip. After all, Philip had a Greek surname and was from Bethsaida, a fishing village on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee; a place with a large Greek population. Of all the disciples, he was the one most likely not to hold their nationality against them, that they were Greeks and not Israelites. Now, perhaps they wished to see Jesus because they wanted to follow him. By that time, news had spread far and wide of Jesus' miracles and teachings. By seeing Jesus, they may have hoped that the words of Jeremiah, our Old Testament lesson for today, would ring true, that seeing Jesus would cause God's law to be written on their hearts and for them to from that day forward "Know the Lord." Or, this group of Greeks may have simply been curious. They may have just wanted to see for themselves this so-called Messiah and Son of God. Well, whatever their reason, Philip went and told Andrew, and the two of them passed the request on to Jesus; a request, it appears, that was filled with far more meaning than they realized.

“The hour has come,” Jesus responded to Philip and Andrew, and possibly even the Greeks. “The hour has come,” he said seemingly out of the blue, “for the Son of Man to be glorified.” According to the Gospel of John, Jesus had just entered Jerusalem, surrounded by a crowd of people waving palm branches and shouting, “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—the King of Israel!” In other words, today’s Gospel lesson didn’t just take place on Passover, but on Palm Sunday, the day we celebrate next Sunday, as well. Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem that day may have been a sign. As he looked out upon the crowd, Jesus may have just known, much like I did when I saw Sam. Jesus may have just known that his hour had finally come. That the time had now arrived for him to be glorified, so that through his glorification a new covenant might be established between God and God’s chosen people. But if that is true, I couldn’t help but wonder this week, then why does our Gospel writer pay such attention to the Greeks and specifically mention their desire to see Jesus?

In the verse directly before today’s passage, the Pharisees say to one another, “Look, the world has gone after him!” When Jesus entered Jerusalem that Palm Sunday, in all likelihood, it wasn’t just God’s chosen people who were waving palm branches and shouting “Hosanna.” It was Jews from all across the Mediterranean, believers who had traveled from far and wide to celebrate Passover in Jerusalem, and who were now gathered outside the city to celebrate the arrival of their long-awaited king. What if I told you that the Greeks we read about in today’s Gospel lesson were among the crowd that day, welcoming and praising Jesus as he rode by on a donkey? Or what if I told you that they had arrived too late, and having recognized the significance of whom and what they had missed, had gone in search of Jesus? If that is true, then their inclusion in the story begins to make a lot more sense, as well as Jesus’ words directly after.

“I have been sent not just to save God’s chosen people,” we hear Jesus proclaim, “but everyone. On the day when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself. It won’t matter whether you are Jewish or Greek, black or white, male or female, or Democrat or Republican. No, what will matter is whether you desire to be reconciled with God and with one another. In order to live into this new covenant, this long-foretold covenant, you must serve and follow me. Who among you is willing and ready to answer this call?” Last week, while preaching on discipleship, I mentioned how it comes with a cost. That making the necessary changes in our lives will not always be easy. There will be things which we do not want to give up, things about our lives which we love and would hate to sacrifice. But as Jesus recognized, and doctors and nurses know all-too-well, sometimes you have to be hurt in order to be healed. Sometimes you have to give up things you don’t want to in order to keep your life for eternity.

The reality, as we hear in today’s Gospel lesson, is that Jesus didn’t want to die on a cross. That such a painful death awaited him troubled his soul, especially, I must imagine, given the realization that that hour had finally come. But Jesus also knew that his death was necessary. He knew that he could only do so much through his preaching and miracles. After all, he was but one person; the Son of God, but one person nonetheless. But if he died and rose again, though, people near and far would come to believe. His death and resurrection would be like a grain of wheat that falls into the earth and dies. It would go on to bear much fruit, and not just among God’s chosen people. Which is why it seems to me that, at least part of the reason why Jesus realized his hour had come that day, was that the world was at long last ready to bear witness. Those gathered in Jerusalem for Passover would witness his death and resurrection, and while some would reject him, others would come to believe. Believers were gathered together that day

from all across the Mediterranean, all across the known world. Believers who would then go home and take the Good News with them, who would help Jesus bear much fruit.

I still miss Sam, and the truth is that I'll always miss him. But I find peace in knowing that it was his time. That it was his hour. Each time that I picture Sam chasing that bunny or curling up on my lap, I know that his life bore much fruit. I know that Sam touched the lives of those around him, that his life was a blessing. My hope and prayer this day is that when each of us feel that our hour has come, whether that be at the end or because God is calling us to do and be something new right now, that we might be the same blessing for those around us. That through our lives and our witness, we might bear much fruit, we might help Jesus bear much fruit, just like Jesus did so long ago when he was lifted up on a cross. On that fateful day when our Savior died, he died so that everyone, and I mean everyone, might be drawn to him. So that everyone might witness how much he loves us, and hopefully might go out and witness God's love to others, and thus the fruit might multiply. Let it be so. Amen.