

Jeremiah 31: 31-34; John 12: 20-33

The Days Are Surely Coming

It seems this past winter, Beverly, James and I played more phone/text tags than we did last year, trying to make an informed guess at whether or not Beverly would be able to make it to church in the morning for the snow. It's hard to believe we were still doing that this weekend, for John's memorial service yesterday (which was a full-house event, by the way) and for today. And yet, we know, the snow these days are different. The daytime temperature rises well above freezing and the ground is warmer; the snow, even when it's surprisingly wet and heavy, is not falling in the "deep freeze" of the winter. Defying the occasional cold fronts and sporadic snow, the time is steadily moving towards the full-blown spring.

So also, our Lenten journey is approaching the destination: Easter. This is the Fifth of the Six Sundays in Lent. Next Sunday is the Palm/Passion Sunday kicking off the Holy Week when we follow the last days of Jesus' earthly life before his death on the cross and the surprise of his resurrection on the Easter morning.

But it was a surprise only to his disciples, as we will see. It was not a surprise to Jesus, and thanks to the witnesses of the gospel writers and the Scriptures, it is not a surprise to us. In fact, when the hour of his death drew near, Jesus did tell his disciples what was about to happen and what was on his mind, though they didn't quite understand him. Let us, too, listen, with attention, what it is that Jesus wanted the disciples to hear. So, hear now, the words of our Lord Jesus the Christ, according to the Gospel of John, 12: 20-33.

"Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. 21They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, 'Sir, we wish to see Jesus.' 22Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. 23Jesus answered them, **'The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.** 24Very 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. 25Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. 26Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor. 27 '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. 28Father, **glorify your name.**' Then a voice came from heaven, 'I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.' 29The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, 'An angel has spoken to him.' 30Jesus answered, 'This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. 31Now is the judgement of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. 32And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.' 33He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

The scene is Jerusalem, and the occasion is the Jewish festival of Passover. Jesus had done a great deal of healing work, and Jesus and his disciples, like many other Jews, came to Jerusalem for this festival. And there came some Greeks, who were not Jewish by heritage; they were the Gentiles, like many of us. And they came asking for a formal visit with Jesus. “Sir, we wish to see Jesus,” they said. They must have heard of Jesus’ teaching and healing work and were drawn to him.

They came to Philip who was from a town in Galilee, the land of Gentiles, the non-Jews; maybe that made Philip more approachable to those Greeks. Then, Philip went and told Andrew. All of Jesus’ twelve disciples were Jews, like Jesus himself, but two of them, Philip and Andrew had Greek names. And, more importantly, they were the ones whom Jesus said to “Come and See” and they followed him.

Now, the non-Jews are starting to “come and see” who Jesus is. Jesus is starting to attract disciple-wannabes from the world beyond the boundary of Jewish tradition; they would be the first Gentle disciples. And this was a sign for Jesus that his “time” has come. When Philip and Andrew told Jesus “some Greeks are here to see you,” Jesus heard “the whole world is at your door now.”

Then, Jesus answered them, “the time has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.” It’s a strange “answer” to Philip and Andrew, don’t you think? It must have left them wondering, “well, Jesus, are you going to see them or not?” But what Jesus wanted them to know was that the Gentiles coming to see him was a sign that “the time has come for Jesus to be glorified.” What does that mean? What “Time” is that?

In John’s gospel, Jesus often refers to himself as “the Son of Man.” But what does it mean for Jesus to “be glorified?” And if he’s “being glorified,” who is doing the “glorifying?”

Then Jesus says to God to “glorify God’s name.” And God responds, in the voice from heaven sounding like the thunder again, “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” Glorify, what does that mean? The way the word is used in the Bible, the glory of God is God’s self-revelation, in which God shows forth all the awesomeness that is God. To “glorify” is to reveal, to show forth, to make manifest. The composer Johan Sebastian Bach famously said that the purpose of ALL music is to glorify God. For Bach, music expressed the magnificence of God, or at least that what he aimed to do with his music, to “glorify” God.

So, for Jesus to be “glorified,” means Jesus’s essence as God’s Son to be made manifest, and that, at the same time, glorified God, revealing God’s goodness. God glorified God’s name before through the healing and life-restoring ministry of Jesus. When people were healed, they experienced God through the healing power of Jesus. Jesus had shown God’s power by healing the sick and driving out demons. And that makes sense. No wonder the gentile Greeks wished to see such a powerful rabbi.

But then, it gets stranger. In this passage, Jesus is telling his disciples that, now that the time has come for Jesus to be glorified, that is to say, time has come for Jesus to be made known as the beloved Son of God that he is, he must die, like a grain of wheat that falls into the earth and dies.

But it dies in order to bear much fruit. Anyone who clings to life would lose it, and those who hates, or do not hang onto the life of this world will keep it for eternal life. It sounds a bit like a riddle, doesn’t it?

You have heard it said: Jesus died for our sins. And perhaps you’ve heard it explained in different ways, such as a sinless sacrifice to cover our sins before God, or as a payment for our sins. But Jesus did not just go jump off a cliff to die for our sins. Rather, he kept teaching, loving, healing and saving, until it got him in trouble, a real big trouble.

How he died matters. He died crucified on the cross at the hands of those who hated his teaching of love that seemed to them to defy the law and broke boundaries, pushing them beyond their comfort zone. The power that be that brutally executed Jesus were those who were threatened by Jesus’s policy of love, justice, mercy, forgiveness and peace that was winning the people’s hearts, over and against their policy of domination, fearmongering and violence.

And this Jesus who died, falling to the earth like a grain of wheat, was glorified when God raised him from death and higher still to eternal life in heaven. It was God who glorified Jesus, so the world could see on that cross and in that empty tomb, the system of oppression and death doesn’t rule the day, God of Love does.

So, Jesus said, “I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” Those Greeks, they were just the beginning.

And there is one more piece to this riddle like speech by Jesus to his disciples. He also says, “whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also.” Jesus

fully expects his followers to do the same, which is to glorify God with their lives. And they will be where Jesus is, in the kingdom of heaven, living the eternal life.

Jesus's heart was troubled when he knew the end of his life on earth was near, but he obeyed what he knew to be God's will for him and he was obedient to his death, even death on the cross. In this way he glorified God, showing the world God's mighty power over death, the power of self-giving life for the sake of others, and forgiveness and mercy over the cruelty of the world.

When asked how he wanted to be remembered after his death, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said "I'd like somebody to mention that day that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to give his life serving others." Rev. Trey Hammond speaks about how he did not grow up in a religious household, but he was so struck by the life of Dr. King, that he had to know more about Jesus and his God in whom Dr. King trusted and he started going to church, then seminary, then to his life of ministry working with the community . For Trey, Dr. King's life glorified God in a way that he could see it and follow. There have been many others, famous and unknown, whose lives glorified God, I bet you know who they are for you. And Jesus says we can, too.

We may not feel courageous like Dr. King or others who lost their lives glorifying God. But the Days Are Surely Coming, the Lord says through Prophet Jeremiah, when God makes a new covenant and God's law will be written on our hearts. No matter how we leave this world, God's Word written on the tablet of our hearts will guide us to glorify God every day of our lives, dyeing to our self-will and living in service of others.

For Jesus, that hour has come, and he is, even now, drawing all people to himself, to his life. May we walk the remainder of our Lenten journey with hope and assurance that our God of the new covenant will do this.