

SERMON for Sunday, April 2, 2006
John 12:20-33

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Madison, Wisconsin

Now!

Life's decisive and inevitable moments. We all have them, when it is time for a clear yes or no, to removal of life support, to a marriage proposal, to a major purchase. Or when it is time to sign on the dotted line for a loan, for your will, for your college acceptance, for your job contract. Or waking up and knowing that in the day ahead you will bury a loved one, or prepare for surgery, or move away from your parents' home. There is a certain clarity, that what you do will chart your life's course. And there is the inevitable knot in the pit of your stomach, for you cannot change what must be decided, what must be done.

This is the week of dread in Lent, the week before the passion, the week of inevitability. Jesus knew that his time on earth was coming to an end. "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified." The moment of dread, the moment of hope, the moment of promise. All of the wonderings about this unusual son of Mary and Joseph, all the misgivings about a messiah who did not fit the ruler mold, all the questions about this Jesus would be answered now. And nothing would ever be the same again. Not for the disciples, not for people everywhere, not for us.

It all begins with an innocent request. It is a phrase that has been inscribed on pulpits in some churches, usually from an earlier time, a small brass plaque attached where only the preacher can see it. "We wish to see Jesus." It's a pertinent reminder that those who worship have come to encounter the living Christ, not the preacher. And it was Jesus whom the visitors to the Passover festival wanted to see. They were Greeks who had come to the city, and had no doubt heard about how this Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead, and over whom the fuss had been made as he entered the city. So these visitors asked the disciple with a Greek name, Philip, if they could have an introduction. Philip was happy to oblige, and dragged his brother Andrew along with him to deliver the message. They were most likely quite enthusiastic, that the person with whom they had traveled and whom they followed was at long last getting his due, and gaining in popularity, in political stature, and power. But Jesus proved to be a disappointment. He did not answer the question directly, and certainly not in the way that was expected. Instead he spoke of death.

The commentator on this text from the *Calvin Institute on Worship* colorfully describes the scene, "So they rush to Jesus to give him this good news only to hear Jesus say, 'My hour has come.' And I can almost see the disciples standing around Jesus, eagerly rubbing their hands together, grinning like Cheshire cats, and thinking, 'Yes indeed! This is the moment we've been waiting for!' But wait a minute. Jesus did not stop with talking about his hour arriving at last. Now he's talking about death, about a kernel of wheat falling to the ground and dying. Then Jesus says something that seems calculated to alienate the eager crowds, not whip them up: if you love your life, you'll lose it. But if you lose your life (in a way similar to how Jesus seems ready to lose his own life), then you'll find it back again. No sooner does Jesus lob that solemn thought into the crowd like a verbal hand grenade and he says, 'My heart is troubled.' Troubled? Jesus is supposed to be happy! Jesus alone seems to know which direction his steps are taking him, and it is straight toward a cross." Jesus knows that the hour has come, that the time is now, and there is no way to escape it, only to embrace it. The request from those who came to

Jerusalem is ours, and a particularly poignant one in this time of Lent, in this time of deep longing. We wish to see Jesus.

Do we look for Jesus in the times of waiting? This is an expectant time of year, especially here in a colder climate. We just know that underneath all those piles of wet leaves and junk in the yard and gardens and woodlands are bulbs and seeds and green shoots ready to be revived, to shoot up. And we lie in wait, impatient and anxious, for the first sign of life and color. However, we can't move too quickly. If we rake off the protective coverings, the tender shoots can be exposed too quickly to the chilly air, and the soil can be compacted if we stomp around as we heartily attack the planting beds. (And since I have just exhausted my knowledge of gardens and gardening) – are we not also too anxious for faith and its answers rather than lingering with the doubts and questions, too anxious for results and not leaving time for growth, too anxious for success and not spending time in nurture? In a recent gathering among pastors and lay leaders from a group of churches, time was spent in sharing reflections and personal stories centering on the question, "What does it mean to you that Jesus is Lord?" Incredible testimonies were shared of childhood experiences, even of abuse and of abduction, and of mentors in college, of tender memories of grandmothers and absences from the life of the church. Some stories of conversion were dramatic, like we read in the New Testament of Paul's experience on the road to Damascus. Many were far less so. And the group discussed the similarities and differences, since that is one reason the group was gathered, to find common ground. And very quickly it was apparent that for each person, faith was and always is growing underground, awaiting a blossoming and a coming forth, that in the wanderings in and out of the church, in and out of certainty, in and out of doubt, in and out of a world that often doesn't make sense of God's love, each one would see Jesus.

Lay Episcopal minister Garret Keizer describes a Holy Saturday Vigil held in his tiny Vermont parish. When he arrived at the church, he found that only two other people, a husband and wife, had come for the service. As the three of them huddled together in the old church, Keizer lit the Paschal candle and extinguished the other lights, a symbol of hearing God's great promise of hope in the darkness. The Paschal candle sputtered in the dimness. As they prayed, the worshippers could hear cars passing by outside, travelers in a secular age oblivious to the ancient hopes being spoken in the little chapel. "There we are," Keizer wrote, "three people and a flickering light. This act of worship was so ambiguous because its terms are so extreme: the Lord is with us, or we are pathetic fools." Perhaps we are pathetic fools, hoping against hope for a vision of something different than the world offers us, something new. We want to see Jesus.

Do we look for Jesus in loss, in sacrifice? The pictures of Jesus that we have recorded during his public ministry, just three short years as far as we know, would make a wonderful slide show, or perhaps now a DVD. Pastoral scenes of shepherds and sheep, a large group picnic, a day of fishing and a beach fire, children gathered around. And there are the touching scenes of the healing touch and the renewing water. There are pictures missing in this slide show. Jesus says that to love life means you have to be willing to lose it. I don't know how to picture that. I have one picture in my mind that is a small snapshot, just a tiny piece of a whole picture.

Anna May and Jim had been married for more than fifty years and had retired, but were far from inactive. Jim had been a nationally-known and highly respected physician, dealing with the physically challenged in new and innovative ways. Anna

May was a super volunteer and advocate for her church, her community, for children. I got to know them later in their lives, when Jim's memory had started to fail and losses in their life's circumstances were rapidly accumulating. Anna May loved to entertain, and especially in these later years, where her great need for conversation and intellectual stimulation could be fed. At their home for dinner one evening, Jim began to tell a story, which soon deteriorated and rambled for what seemed an endless number of minutes. It was painful. But not for Anna May. This woman, who was a super talker, was utterly quiet, and gave Jim her rapt and devoted attention, as if what he was saying was the most important thing in the world, as if she was hearing it for the very first time. In a brief and flickering moment, I glimpsed Jesus. Certainly there are great acts of daring and risk to which we may well be called by God. But perhaps it is in our giving up of ourselves for the sake of others, in ways both great and small, that we would see Jesus.

Author and Presbyterian minister Frederick Buechner writes, "A friend of mine told me about a Christmas pageant he took part in once as the rector of an Episcopal church somewhere. The manger was down in front at the chancel steps where it always is. Mary was there in a blue mantle and Joseph in a cotton beard. The wise men were there with a handful of shepherds, and of course in the midst of them all the Christ child was there, lying in the straw. The nativity story was read aloud by my friend with carols sung at the appropriate places, and all went like clockwork until it came time for the arrival of the angels of the heavenly host as represented by the children of the congregation, who were robed in white and scattered throughout the pews with their parents. At the right moment they were supposed to come forward and gather around the manger saying, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace...' and that is just what they did except there were so many of them that there was a fair amount of crowding and jockeying for position, with the result that one particular angel, a girl about nine years old who was smaller than most of them, ended up so far out on the fringes of things that not even by craning her neck and standing on tiptoe could she see what was going on. 'Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace...' they all sang on cue, and then in the momentary pause that followed, the small girl electrified the entire church by crying out in a voice shrill with irritation and frustration and enormous sadness at having her view blocked, 'Let Jesus show!' There was a lot of the service still to go, but my friend the rector said that one of the best things he ever did in his life was to end everything precisely there. 'Let Jesus show!' the child cried out, and while the congregation was still sitting in stunned silence, he pronounced the benediction, and everybody filed out of the church with those unforgettable words ringing in their ears."

"We wish to see Jesus." We know that as we walk with Jesus in this time of Lent, the dreaded moment is now almost upon us. We have only ten days until we sit at the table and taste of the Holy Supper, until our room and hearts are darkened with the death of Good Friday. But the dreaded moment is a moment of promise. Jesus walks with us on our own sacred journeys in this world, in lonely stretches of waiting and in our sacrificial loving, in our deaths. And all we can do is say with confidence, Let Jesus show! Amen.