

The Fifth Sunday in Lent
5 April 2006
The Chapel of the Cross
Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary

Jeremiah 31:31-34/Psalm 51:1-13/Hebrews 5:5-10/John 12:20-33/Hymn of the Day, LBW 29

Almighty God, our redeemer, in our weakness we have failed to be your messengers of forgiveness and hope in the world. Renew us by your Holy Spirit, that we may follow your commands and proclaim your reign of love; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives, and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

We Want to See Jesus

From the very beginning of John's Gospel, it seems clear that just seeing Jesus changes people's lives. As you may recall, it is John the Baptist who first sees Jesus in this Gospel, and immediately recognizes him as the Lamb of God – the promised Messiah. Then Andrew leaves John the Baptist behind and begins following Jesus himself, wanting to see where Jesus is staying, to which Jesus replies with the apparently simple invitation: "Come and see."

Just a few verses later, it is Phillip this time, who having already seen Jesus for himself, invites Nathanael to "come and see," after Nathanael remarks that he wonders if anything good can come out of a place like Nazareth. Because of what **he** sees, Nathanael confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, to which Jesus replies, "You will see greater things than these." Wedding guests at Cana see water turned into wine and people in Jerusalem for the Passover witness Jesus' cleansing of the temple. These people, too, see Jesus and many come to believe in him. Even the Pharisee, Nicodemus, wants to see Jesus, having already perceived him to be a teacher sent from God. Seeing Jesus changes people's lives in John's Gospel. And so, in today's text it is no different. This time it is "some Greeks" [that is, some Gentiles] who want to see Jesus. Upon hearing from Phillip and Andrew that some Greeks wish to see him, Jesus declares, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified."

Now, those of us who have been on our Lenten pilgrimage together this semester may find ourselves both relieved and somewhat fearful to hear Jesus say that "the hour" has once again come – this "hour" that marks the beginning of Jesus' glorification, which is, of course the **same** "hour" that marks the beginning of his painful road to betrayal, torture, and death. We are relieved, perhaps, because the Lenten pilgrimage is nearly at its end [with the joyful events of resurrection and Easter just around the corner], but I suspect that perhaps we are also fearful. Do we really **want** to

see Jesus facing **this** hour and the hours yet to come **again**? Must we once again witness Jesus, God's own beloved, fall as a seed into the earth and **die**? Can we **bear** to look at it all again? Will we really have to struggle **again** with the difficult truth that God's **glory** is somehow revealed in such gruesome events?

If we want to be servants and followers of Jesus, I fear that the answer is "yes" to such questions. "Where I am, there will my servant be also," Jesus says. So, yes, we can look again – yes, we must witness again – yes we will have to struggle again to see God's glory in this hour. After all, that is precisely what Jesus himself is both **saying** and **doing** in this text. Jesus himself says that "unless a grain of wheat fall into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." Now the world says, life precedes death, but Jesus says it is the other way around for him and for his followers – it is death that comes before life. The world says, protect yourself from the pain and suffering of the world in order to preserve the best possible life for yourself. But Jesus says that surrendering one's life to God's will and sharing in the suffering of the world will result in a fullness of life and a fruitful harvest beyond the world's imagining. And, lest we are tempted to think that these words are easy for Jesus, as the Son of **God** to say, we do well not only to look at what he **says** about the grain of wheat, and about surrendering one's life, but also at what he himself is doing at this "hour," which has finally come.

When we look at Jesus now, what do we see? We see him genuinely struggle in this hour. "Now, my soul **is** troubled," he says. Jesus himself wrestles with the difficult truth that in order for God's glory to be revealed in the world, he will face death alone, just like a single grain of wheat. We are witnesses to Jesus' struggle. He is deeply troubled. However, he doesn't pray the prayer we might expect him to pray: "Why this? Why me? Father, save me from this hour." Rather, Jesus seems to face his "hour" willingly. How can he do that? I think it is because he sees this hour as both deeply troubling **and** as the glorious hour in which God's own deepest desire will be accomplished: the whole world will be saved. So, unlike the other Gospel accounts, Jesus does not pray, "Save me from this hour." Rather, Jesus says, "it is for this reason that I have come to this hour," and prays instead, "Father, glorify your name." Jesus recognizes that this painful hour, and those that will surely follow, are meant to glorify God and accomplish God's purposes. And so he prays a different prayer, "Father, glorify your name." Jesus prays this prayer, not because he is "above" it all somehow, but because he himself is committed to embracing the will of God in all times and in all places, for the sake of the world and its reconciliation to God. As the writer of Hebrews reminds us, "although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered."

Here, in this hour, Jesus is practicing his own obedience to God's irrevocable will for the redeeming of the world, and not to his own will for another less fatal outcome.

And so, Jesus sees his "hour," and lives into it, trusting in God's will for him and for the whole world. In so doing, Jesus says, the world and its ways **will be both judged and deposed** by God alone. In this "hour" – this way that leads Jesus toward the cross and his own death – Jesus trusts that he will become the promised Revealer of God's glory. The way of the cross, then, **is** God's answer to Jesus' prayer – "Father, glorify your name." And so Jesus, the Revealer of God's glory proclaims, "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself."

Right here we have come face to face with that difficult truth with which Jesus, and we as his followers, must struggle – and the struggle is this: to **see the way of the cross** as both the **pattern** and the **promise** of our own pilgrimage and our own discipleship. The way of the cross is the pattern and promise of Jesus' life and of our own as his followers. Death comes before life, for Jesus and for us. God's glory is revealed and God's name is glorified in obedience to the way of the cross and in no other way – not for Jesus and not for us.

"We want to see Jesus," say the Greeks in our text today. Perhaps they witnessed more than they bargained for with their request. And, perhaps we see more than we want to see as well. It is **difficult** to follow Jesus, which means to follow the way to his cross and to our own, trusting that God's glory will somehow be revealed there and God's purpose will be accomplished in our obedience to this costly way. As I grow older, I find myself having more sympathy for those who hear the Gospel message, and its call to a life patterned by the way of the cross, find it too difficult to follow. However, as the writer of Hebrews reminds us, by following the way of the cross and enduring its humiliation, Jesus becomes "the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him." In Jesus' death and resurrection, God has destroyed the ultimate power of death and has begun to reap the harvest of his deepest desire: the salvation of the whole world, and our own salvation as well.

And so, as we continue together on our Lenten pilgrimage, I pray that God will give us courage – courage to really look at Jesus in these next holy days – to see his struggles, his suffering, his death, and his faithfulness to God's will – and to see it all as both the pattern for and the promise of our own lives of discipleship. See Jesus in this hour and in the days to come. It will change your life. Come to the Lord's table – taste and see. Come with all your sins and all your sorrows and all your struggles to understand God's costly way of discipleship. Bring God your struggles and your grief. Come to the Lord's table. Love itself is present here. Come and behold the glory of Lord. Amen.