FMC March 17, 2024

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The Hour Has Come

The hour has come! The hour has come! What hour? Proclamation time? Daylight savings time? The long-awaited arrival of a child? The dawn of a new age? The end of time? Decision time? Perhaps it is helpful to think of the Gospel of John as a great drama being played out on the world’s stage. Likely written in the AD 90s, after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, the Gospel plays out as readers are asked to choose between light or darkness, God’s way of sacrificial love or the way of self-indulgence, prestige, and power.

John’s gospel has no birth story. The drama begins as the logos, the Word, becomes flesh and enters the created world as a human being. God’s self-revealing begins in Jesus. From that point on, the suspense builds. At the wedding in Cana, Jesus tells his mother Mary “my hour has not yet come.” (John 2:4) Still, he turns the water into wine. Unlike the other Gospels, John places the cleansing of the temple at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, not near the end. During Passover Jesus goes to the temple and drives out the money changers and the merchants. Disciples gather around Jesus. Crowds listen to his teaching. Jesus heals the sick and the lame. He talks with Pharisees like Nicodemus and with outsiders like the Samaritan woman. He heals on the Sabbath. Crowds follow him. The blind see but the religious leaders do not. The authorities notice and are not pleased. In John 7 verses 6 and 8, Jesus tells his brothers that he will not go with them to Judea for the festival of booths, “for my time has not yet fully come.” Later Jesus goes secretly. He appears in public about midway through the festival, teaching in the temple. People are talking about him. “How does he have such learning?” “Is this the Christ, the Messiah? John 7 verse 30 tells us the authorities try to arrest Jesus, “But no one laid hands on him, because his hour had not yet come.” John 8 verse 20 reports that Jesus is teaching in the temple treasury, but “no one arrested him, because his hour had not yet come.”

The first eleven chapters of John focus on Jesus’ public ministry. Jewish festivals play a major role as Jesus participates, teaches, heals, gathers disciples, and confronts the Pharisees and leaders. Lazarus becomes ill, dies, and is raised by Jesus. The leaders plot to kill Jesus. The suspense builds. Who is this man? Is he the one who will deliver the Jewish people from Roman occupation? Is he the Christ, the Messiah? What does he mean when he says his hour has not yet come?

In chapter 12 the drama shifts to Passover week in Jerusalem, the last Passover before Jesus’ crucifixion. Six days before Passover we find Jesus in Bethany, at the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Mary anoints Jesus’ feet, the chief priests plot to kill Lazarus as well as Jesus, then Jesus enters Jerusalem on a donkey as the crowds shout, “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—the King of Israel.” They are looking for a deliverer, a leader who will free them from Roman occupation. Perhaps this is the time. Perhaps the hour is coming! But the leaders are worried. The acclaim of the crowds for Jesus can only bring trouble. The Pharisees exclaim (v. 19) “You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him.”

And that is when some Greeks come to Philip saying, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” Philip finds Andrew, and together they go to tell Jesus. We don’t know who these Greeks were…Hellenistic Jews, Gentile proselytes who converted to Judaism, or simply God-fearing Gentiles who come to attend Jewish festivals in the outer Court of the Temple, the Court of the Gentiles. We don’t know who they were, but their coming is important. They represent the world coming to Jesus.

In John “seeing” is connected to “believing.” The arrival of the Greeks seeking Jesus signals a shift. Jesus physical presence and ministry among the Jewish people in Judea and Galilee is coming to an end. Jesus now belongs to the world. Willard Swartley puts it this way in the Believer’s Commentary, “His ministry in Judaism is finished and he now belongs to the wider world…Israel’s covenant God is no longer Israel’s sole possession. Greeks now wish to see Jesus.”

We don’t know if Jesus met with the Greeks, or if he did what their conversation was like. The Greeks disappear from the story. We do have Jesus’ response to their coming. Now is the time! Jesus declares, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.”

So what is this hour? Jesus explains with a metaphor. “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.” My father was a wheat farmer. Harvest time was always exciting. The single seeds, the grains, that had been planted had now grown and ripened, the heads of wheat holding many grains. Each one had become many. But the only way for that to happen required the seed to die. The resources within the seed nourished the resulting plant as it grew. Jesus was referring to his death.

“The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified,” Jesus declared. Jesus’ life reflected God’s glory. In his compassion and care for people, God’s compassion and care are revealed. As Jesus welcomed outsiders and offered acceptance and forgiveness, God’s acceptance and forgiveness is revealed. As Jesus healed the sick, cast out demons and raised the dead, God’s authority over the powers of darkness, even of death itself, is revealed. As Jesus chose to ride a donkey and not a warhorse, God’s desire to end the cycle of violence is revealed. Jesus reflected the Father’s glory, glory that is most fully revealed through sacrificial love.

Jesus lived in God’s light. His followers must also live in God’s light. To follow Jesus means we, too, must live as Jesus did. To do so puts us in conflict with the powers that oppose light, just as Jesus was opposed by those who rejected God’s light. Jesus declared, “Those who love their life will lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.” Jesus, the Word made flesh, is linked to the Father. Jesus’ disciples are linked to Jesus in the same way. We cannot follow both Jesus and the world, that is the values and priorities and powers that promote self, prestige, power, security, the things that the world values.

John tells us that Jesus was “troubled.” Jesus knew that God’s way is not easy. Facing the cross was not easy. Crucifixion was an agonizing, painful, shameful way to die. Jesus declared, “What should I say—Father save me from this hour? No, it is for this reason I have come to this hour. Father glorify your name.”

Sacrificial love is more than merely random acts of kindness. Sacrificial love carries a cost. When we love sacrificially, we may be called to sacrifice our homes, our livelihoods, our possessions, even our families or our very lives. Tertullian said the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church. I have been told that at one time every Mennonite family had a copy of Martyr’s Mirror. We know stories of the early church martyrs and of our Anabaptist forebears. We also need to recognize that such costly discipleship is not confined to the past. It can happen today, even in this country. One current example recently in the news: Annunciation House in El Paso, Texas, is rooted in Catholic social teaching. Their mission statement reads this way: In a Gospel spirit of service and solidarity, we accompany the migrant, refugee, and economically vulnerable peoples of the border region through hospitality, advocacy, and education. We place ourselves among the poor so as to live our faith and transform our understanding of what constitutes more just relationships between peoples, countries, and economies.” The Texas Attorney General is attempting to close Annunciation House, citing illegal immigration at the border…even though the migrants are placed there by Border Agents themselves.

When we live into Jesus’ words about loving our neighbor, feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger, we can expect opposition from those who, for whatever reasons, feel threatened or insecure, or fear the loss of power.

When Jesus said, “Father, glorify your name,” a voice came from heaven, saying, ‘I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” This is the only time in John’s Gospel that a voice speaks from heaven. John does not tell of the voice at Jesus’ baptism or transfiguration. Only here do we have the voice from heaven. Swartley writes, “ This distinctive feature of John’s Gospel further highlights the crucial significance of his (Jesus) suffering and death. *This* is when heaven speaks.”

The crowd did not understand. Some thought it was thunder. Others thought an angel had spoken. Though they did not understand it at the time, the disciples remembered. Jesus said, “this voice has come for your sake, not for mine.” Then Jesus explains. “Now is the judgement of this world. Now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”

Through the cross, God reveals a love that reaches beyond death itself, into a life that is abundant and welcoming, drawing all people. The voice is for us. The hour has come, and we must decide. Do we choose darkness, or light, the world’s way or God’s way? The world’s way values money, military might, prestige, fame, self-indulgence. God’s way values the cross, sacrificial love that draws people, creating community that includes former enemies, different cultures, many languages, strangers and friends, who together by their love for each other reflect God’s glory to the world. God’s way is not easy. It is like the grain of wheat that falls into the earth and dies, and in so doing, produces much fruit. May we follow Jesus’ example of such love, dying to self so that Christ lives in us, revealing God’s glory to the world.