

For This Cause

In a January sermon I asked, how can Christians—how can the church—be in the world but not of the world. Little did any of us realize at the time, how crucial could be the impact—how varied could be the ways—of our understanding and application of those words of Jesus.

Through the first three Sundays of March I was rejoicing, as most ministers would over a 18% increase in our worship attendance: from an average of 32 to an average of 38. Little did I realize at the time that, the very next Sunday, our pews would be empty, and yet our worship would be shared online more than 390 times.

On Sunday, that last week of Jesus' life, he rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, while people spread their cloaks in his path and children ran ahead of him waving palm branches and shouting, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" Little would any of them realize at the time that, come Friday, many of those same people would be shouting, "Crucify him!"

Life doesn't always come to us prepackaged and labeled. It doesn't always fit our personal calendars or coordinate with our schedules. Sometimes it doesn't even have the decency to come at us one thing at a time! The wisdom of the ages says, "Everything good is balanced by something bad." You know the clichés:

"You've got to take the bitter with the sweet."

"Into every life some rain must fall."

And who can forget the immortal words of the blessed sage, Erma Bombeck: *"If life is just a bowl of cherries, why am I always 'in the pits'?"*

The first words in Scot Peck's best-selling book, *The Road Less Traveled* are, "Life is difficult." We don't like that. To a large degree as a result of marketing strategies, we've been conditioned to expect life to be easy; and if it isn't, well, "That's not fair." We expect—some feel entitled to "the good life"—having money, material possessions, and leisure time.

The Greeks had a philosophy called "hedonism" that said the highest good is pleasure; the chief purpose of humanity is to maximize pleasure and minimize pain.

The writer Ecclesiastes wrote:

Ecclesiastes 2:4b-10 (NRSV) I built houses and planted vineyards for myself; ...I also had great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem. ⁸I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and of the provinces; I got singers, both men and women, and delights of the flesh, and many concubines... ¹⁰Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them; I kept my heart from no pleasure.

Some say King Solomon wrote this in his old age. Whoever wrote it, you'd expect to be happy, wouldn't you? And yet, over and over again he repeats the refrain: all is meaningless, all is vanity—a "chasing of the wind."

There's nothing wrong with pleasure or having nice things, unless that becomes your primary aim in life. What is your aim in life? Your primary purpose? What adds meaning to your life?

Last week and again today we're looking at the last week of Jesus' life. Twice in the space of twelve hours during that week, Jesus spoke of his primary purpose in life.

- **JOHN 12:27** *"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.”

“It is for this reason ...” In John’s gospel Jesus’ “hour” becomes a supporting theme. On several previous occasions, Jesus has said, “My hour is not yet come.” That’s reversed in this text: “...for this reason I have come to this hour.”

The general understanding is that he refers to his crucifixion; and probably the most common understanding is that crucifixion is the fulfillment of his purpose. To the extent that Jesus was human, yes, Jesus had to die. Every human dies. But most traditions have it that crucifixion was the reason, the purpose, for which Jesus came—it was “his hour.”

I think John had another idea: for John, Jesus’ “hour”, indeed, refers to his crucifixion; but his crucifixion was not the purpose for which he came; rather, it was the result of Jesus having fulfilled the purpose for which he came. Two sets of clues appear in the story immediately preceding this scenario—the story of the raising of Lazarus. We looked at that story last Sunday.

The raising of Lazarus leads many to believe, and that very belief in turn brings about the opposition of the Pharisees and religious leaders. “From that day on,” John tells us, “they planned to put him to death.” So, one conclusion John draws is that the “hour” comes because of opposition to Jesus.

A second set of clues focuses not on opposition, but on adoration of Jesus. From the triumphal entry and continuing through that last week, John several times comments that large numbers of people followed and adored him and believed. And just a few verses prior to this text I just read, the

Pharisees comment, "Look, the world has gone after him!" (12:19) They were right: in the very next verse some Greeks come to the disciples and say, "Sirs, we want to see Jesus."

A part of the "hour" that has arrived—a part of the purpose for which he came was to fulfill God's love for the world: a love expressed this way, "*God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*" (3:16)

In the same way the Wise Men from the East represent, in Matthew, the revealing of Christ to world, in John, that revealing—and thus at least partial fulfillment of the reason Jesus came is fulfilled in the person of these Greeks.

But there is a second time Jesus uses the phrase, "for this reason..." and this time it's clearer: JOHN 18:36-38 (BEFORE PILATE) "*Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here."*³⁷ Pilate asked him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "*You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth.*" ... Pilate said, "What is truth?"

Jesus came to testify to the truth; but truth is an utterly strange topic to Pilate, as it is to most imperial figures throughout history. Pilate operates in a carefully maintained world built on the illusion power, and the presence of one whose purpose is to strip away illusions poses a threat.

Truth always is threatening to power, and particularly so when one stands among us whose reason for living is to testify to the truth. His very presence calls into question the many illusions and fantasies on which our worlds depend.¹

¹ Adapted from Charles Cousar in *Texts for Preaching* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993) p.

Jesus' hour arrives because opposition to him reaches its inevitable outcome. But the "hour" also arrives through his very "success" with the world, because the world is fickle, seeking one tomorrow after another who might make the best offer. In the end, the world is not able to believe that Jesus is from God and to follow after him; and so, his popularity on Palm Sunday quickly fades and turns into hostility and a mob mentality that demands his crucifixion.

And it is precisely in the midst of the religious leaders' opposition, the fickle world's adoration-turned-hostile, and the politician's illusions of power that Jesus' purpose, his reason for being—his hour—comes.

In all four gospels, the Christian life begins by responding to Jesus' call, "Follow me." May your hour—and mine—come as a result of our faithfulness to that call: following Jesus... testifying to the truth... And in this day of alternative facts and partial truths and "fake news," if you, like Pilate have difficulty sorting out the truth, John's gospel gives us a clear definition: Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." Amen.