

It's Time!

Fifth Sunday in Lent
The Rev. Dr. J. Stewart Hardy

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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 51:1-12;
Hebrews 5:5-10; John 12:20-33

Grace, mercy, and peace to you, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

“It’s time,” my mother would call, “it’s time!” That was the signal that a summer vacation was about to begin. It was a call to summon me to the front door of our home with my suitcase neatly packed along with whatever else I was taking with me.

Summer vacations, at least in my home, were often months in the planning. My mother had seven sisters and seven brothers, so there were fourteen possible places to go with my mother on a summer vacation.

For my mother, it was an opportunity to spend two weeks with a brother or a sister. For me, it was a great adventure. Sometimes to get to play with cousins (I had numerous cousins), and sometimes for me to be on my own and look for new friends in the neighborhood where I was staying. But best of all, was the chance to stay with Aunt Chris and Uncle Gordon.

You see, their kids had grown up and moved on and left home, which meant I had a whole bedroom to myself. And since their kids had grown up, Aunt Chris had no one to smother with love and affection, and so I got it all, along with various sorts of goodies.

Even better, Uncle Gordon was a police officer in charge of his district. And sometimes . . . sometimes he’d let me ride in his patrol car with him. And at other times I would sit beside him as he regaled me with hair-raising police stories.

But best of all, they lived seven hundred miles away on the North Island of New Zealand, and we lived on the South Island. And that meant a passage on one of the inter-island ferries which carried passengers and cars. The journey always began with the ferry around supertime and ended just after breakfast the following day.

“It’s time,” my mother called, “it’s time!” The taxi was at the front door to take us to the train, which would take us to the ferry, which would take us to two glorious weeks with Aunt Chris and Uncle Gordon. I could barely contain my excitement.

Surely great excitement was in the air in Jerusalem, as well. Jews from far and wide had gathered to celebrate the Passover. It must have been something like my vacation adventure for the Greeks, who had made their long pilgrimage all the way from Greece, across the Mediterranean, to Jerusalem. These Greeks, these non-Jews (at least by birth), these Gentiles, had converted to the Jewish faith. The Gospel recognizes them not only for their nationality and their for pilgrimage to celebrate the Passover, but also because they come in this Gospel to

represent the whole of the Gentile world. Their request to see Jesus indicates that at last, the world is coming to him.

And I think, beloved, it's true to say, that the same thing may be said of us right now. We began our Lenten journey four Sundays ago, and we have arrived at the point where Jesus is poised to enter Jerusalem. In fact in the Gospel story, we are about to receive Jesus' instruction as to how His celebrating the Passover in Jerusalem marks the pinnacle of His ministry. Of course, His mission is not yet fulfilled; that will only come with His resurrection.

The best part of my trip to Aunt Chris and Uncle Gordon was the overnight voyage on the inter-island ferry. I found myself sharing a cabin with two medical students who set out to give me some medical instruction – hopefully terrifying me along the way. They produced a human skull, which fascinated me, being the adventurous 12 year old that I was. I think the students were somewhat disappointed at my reaction. It was then that they unfastened the top of the skull, and produced from it a selection of neckties. It was so cool! I pestered and pestered until I had the skull in my hands and was able to satisfy my curiosity. But the real fun was yet to come.

Sometime during the night the ship on which we were traveling encountered very foul weather indeed. The ship began to heave and roll, and my cabin companions began to demonstrate some serious unease. Much to their chagrin, I was having the time of my life! It was close to being on an amusement park ride, and I was enjoying every second of being heaved around in the small, cramped cabin. Seasickness is a terrible thing for those who suffer from it. Ah, my poor cabin companions.

In a sense our Greek pilgrims were about to experience a dizzying time as well. Approaching Philip, they asked to see Jesus. Philip goes to Andrew, and they both go to Jesus. It's almost as though Philip doesn't have the courage to do it on his own, or has to follow some sort of hidden protocol to get his message to Jesus.

But before we get carried away speculating, let's go back to the scripture and think for a minute. Do you remember at the beginning of this Gospel, when Jesus called His first disciples? One of them was Andrew, and the call to join Him was offered in an invitation of three words, "come and see." Later in the Gospel, Philip called Nathaniel with exactly the same invitation, and now we have some Greeks coming and asking to "see" Jesus. And so the Gospel makes the connection for us, between the call of the first Jewish disciples and the arrival of some Greeks, which the Gospel suggests, were the first Gentile disciples.

Jesus responds to the appearance of the Greeks with the words that His hour has come; it's time, is what He's saying. Time for what? Their appearance and Jesus' response mark the completion of Jesus' ministry, and brings about the crucial time of His glorification. But what does that mean?

It simply means that the hour is the time of Jesus' passion, the time of His arrest, His trial, His suffering, and ending with His crucifixion. What Jesus says next leads us directly to the cross. First He utters a brief metaphor – just as a seed must die in the ground before it can grow and

bear fruit, so must humans die first before they gain life and produce fruit. What on earth is he talking about?

To assist the Greeks, the disciples, the crowd, and us, Jesus explains what such a death entails, for it's not physical death to which He refers. Simply put, what He is saying is this, if you love your life more than anything else, you are bound to loose real and authentic living. His invitation is for us to subordinate our lives to His, to put the needs of others before our own if we are to follow Him and serve as his disciples. Then what seems to be an enormous loss – the loss of life – is converted by the divine mathematics of grace into real and authentic human living.

That sort of life is experienced now, and awaits us after we have passed through the portals of physical death. In the mysterious way of God, eternal life doesn't just mean life beyond the grave, but rather a quality of life here and now, in a relationship with God that survives death.

Such a life, however, does not come without a price, but it's a price that comes with an astounding promise. Jesus says this: "Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor." It's an invitation, you see, to follow Jesus, which includes not only victory, but suffering along the way, and with the blessing – to be honored, loved and forgiven by God as we make the journey.

And our response? Simply to follow, not as we ought but as we are able, in the footsteps of Christ. It's no cakewalk to which we're invited; we're in this together, caring for one another, reaching out to those we encounter in our daily living, and gathering here for an hour a week to hear again the promise and the challenge and to find ourselves refreshed and forgiven and sent forth on our journey.

The self-sacrifice and suffering we encounter will not, or may not ever be, monumental. More often our sufferings will come in smaller bites which, in themselves, may have great influence.

Earl Palmer in his book entitled *The Enormous Exception* tells the story of a pre-med student at the University of California at Berkeley, who became a Christian after a long journey through doubts and questions. When Palmer asked the young man why he had chosen to follow Jesus, he said that what had tipped the scales in his spiritual journey were the actions of a Christian classmate. During the previous term, the pre-med student had been very ill with influenza, and as a result missed ten days of intense medical studies. Without any fanfare or complaint, his Christian classmate carefully collected all his assignments and took time away from his own studies to help him catch up. The pre-med student told Palmer, "You know, this kind of think just isn't done. Medical school is so competitive. I wanted to know what made this guy act the way he did. I even found myself asking if I could go to church with him on Sunday." A small act of love, you see, but a friend saw Jesus there.

And so you and I beloved, are confronted with this question: Can others, when they look at us, see Christ in us? If we were the only Jesus people ever met, would it be enough to tip the scales?

I wonder what difference I might have made on that stormy night on the inter-island ferry? The medical students with whom I traveled really suffered with their seasickness. I lay in my bunk

feeling very superior, smiling and gloating at their illness, and I didn't lift a finger to help them. I wonder now, what difference I might have made if I had hopped down from my bunk and offered to comfort and assist them?

Amen.