The Fifth Sunday in Lent

Prayer: As we continue our Lenten journey with Jesus and as we now open your word, startle us, O God, by your presence. Silence in us any voice but your own, that in hearing your word we may see and know and better understand Jesus the Christ and the significance of his life for our own. We ask this in his name. Amen.

In a short story entitled Short Easter, John Updike writes about a man named Fogel who is sixty-two years old and nearing retirement. Along with his share of failures, he has achieved some level of success in life. But he worries about time, and more specifically, about the amount of time he has left. He fears that increasingly, time is getting away from him. Adding to his anxiety is the surprising discovery that the other cars on the expressway keep passing him by at such high speeds that he’s haunted by the feeling that he’s losing ground.

Not a man of faith, he nonetheless awakes on Easter morning, after the daylight savings time change has robbed him of yet another hour, and he briefly considers going to church. His wife is oblivious to the fact that it’s Easter and has planned a day of yard work for the two of them. And so throughout the day Fogel is troubled by the fact that it’s Easter, by the fact that he’s getting older, and by wondering what he’s done with his life. Time and the growing lack of it and the sense of his own mortality are weighing heavily on him.

Who among us doesn’t feel that weight from time to time? Only in the most artificial sense can we really “measure” time or even “tell” time. In the introduction to the book Tom Jones, author Henry Fielding writes to his readers about the passing of time as he portrays it in the book, advising,

My reader, then, is not to be surprised if in the course of this work he shall find some chapters very short, and others, altogether long; some that contain only the time of a single day, and others that comprise years; in a word, [as] if my history sometimes seems to stand still and sometimes fly.

Well I think time is like that. Sometimes it drags on slowly while other times it flies by almost faster than we can comprehend. Parents rarely have as many photographs of the second child as they do of the first one—they’re too busy—there’s not enough time. And before you know it, the children are grown and out the door and you wonder what happened to the time and the moment is gone. Older people tell me all the time how time just seems to be moving so rapidly.
In so many ways our lives are governed by a sense of time. And often we use our own busyness as an excuse for why we haven’t accomplished in our lives those things we vowed we were going to accomplish. I once heard writer Anne Lamott, who by the way will be here at The House of Hope this fall—I heard her encourage a group of would-be-writers to start wasting more time. She said that too many people use the excuse of not enough time as a reason why they don’t write. Then, in her own funny and quirky way, she stressed the importance of making time by letting go of the things that ultimately don’t matter—things like firming your thighs and rear ends, arguing that when you’re eighty, it won’t have made any difference and no one will care.

According to the Gospel of John, more so than the other gospels, Jesus is aware of time, making a strong case at least for his humanity. The significance of the hour is a major theme running through the fourth gospel. As a matter of fact, seven times prior to this text, Jesus warns his disciples about an appointed hour that is coming but that has not yet arrived. “The hour is coming…” he says over and over again. “The hour has not yet come…” And then finally today, in the twelfth chapter we get, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.”

Apparently, according to Jesus, this is the hour, in a lifetime of hours, or there comes a moment unlike all other moments when things become clearer than they’ve ever been before. A tipping point, as Malcolm Gladwell might call it—the point at which the momentum for change becomes unstoppable. There comes a threshold, a boiling point, a defining moment in a person’s life when everything changes. Do you believe that?

Is it possible to crystallize an entire life into a single hour? To look back and say with any kind of certainty that was the time…. It was at that moment that everything changed and became different—like a specific moment that further defines all other moments. Like the difference between B.C. and A.D.? Perhaps for you, it was the moment your spouse died or the day you embraced a life of sobriety? Maybe it was the day you finally admitted the truth about something, either to others or maybe even to yourself, and once you did that there was no going back. I wonder sometimes, when the history of this congregation is finally told, what, do you suppose, will have been our finest hour?

For Jesus, today’s text represents a turning point of profound clarity, but it is not without its sad and tragic poignancy. It is not unlike the scene that would take place in the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus retreated after sharing one last meal with his disciples. He suddenly finds himself in the in between place—between the beginning and the end, but much closer now to the end. It’s that time and place that comes to each of us at differing times and in varying ways, when we realize that our days are indeed numbered.

That sinking sense of inevitability hits us in other ways too. It’s the feeling you get when your teenage child is heading down the wrong road and you are powerless to stop them. It’s the time when you came to the realization that all of your hard work and dedication, and all of your dreams are not going to pay off like you had hoped. It’s the place none of us wants to be because time has run out and there will be no second chance or opportunity to do it over.
In the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus would pray and wait for the inevitable, but here, in today’s text, on what seemed like another ordinary day, he rather abruptly comes to the conclusion that the hour he’s been anticipating has arrived. And it makes you wonder what it was about that particular hour that was unlike all other hours leading up to it. All we’re told is that some Greeks came looking for Jesus, and instead of greeting them and interacting with them, perhaps answering their questions, Jesus interrupts the narrative and announces that the hour has come.

The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. 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.

A moment of clarity—the time in his life when everything changed and was put in its proper perspective. But make no mistake about it, when that happens—when you reach the conclusion God wants you to reach—that preserving your life, clinging to the status quo and only to that which you know and are comfortable with—or being afraid to step out in bold faith because it might cost you the life you know—living like that is no way to live as a follower of Jesus. It’s the conclusion Jesus came to when he announced that his hour had come, and naturally it troubled him in his soul.

And might I put it to you this way: If your soul isn’t troubled, are you sure you’re living the way God wants you to live? Are you living in the self-giving, sacrificial way in which Jesus dared to lived if you’re soul isn’t troubled? This is the challenge to each individual so busy and determined to protect and insulate their lives that they have no idea that they are really losing them along the way.

And his prayer, not unlike his prayer in the Garden where he’d be arrested, his prayer—his confession, if you will, was not a desperate request for deliverance, but one of honest, realistic resignation. And not resignation in terms of defeat or of seeking pity at the end, but resignation in terms of the sobering clarity by which he saw his life as it was now out of his hands and coming to an end. Annie Dillard says, “I think that the dying pray at the last not please but thank you, as a guest thanks his host at the door.” I think this is such a moment for Jesus.

The hour has come. There is no turning back. And that’s true for each of us at some point. We either decide to walk with Jesus or we don’t. You either decide that your life is going to drift along—business as usual, or it’s going to be about something radically new and altogether different.

What is it about you or your life that needs to fall to the ground like a grain of wheat and die in order for you to become more fully alive? What will it take for you to finally realize that in order for you to discover what real living is all about, you must first lose the life you know?
Sometimes visions of absolute clarity come to us in a single moment or hour and everything is put into context and our lives are never again the same. What we once thought of as important or something that we had control over falls away like scales from our eyes and we see with a clarity like never before.

Madeleine L’Engle once said,

God came to live with us as Jesus, to show us how to live and how to die, and that gives us assurance of the Resurrection, and of life in eternity—beyond time and all that is transient and into God’s love forever.

People of God, may the assurance of God’s love, which is beyond all time, be with you nonetheless in this time, in your time, and in all the hours of your life.

Amen.