

Sermon – “The Hour Has Come”  
Sunday, March 18, 2018  
Scripture Readings: Jeremiah 31:31-34 and John 12:20-33  
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Our first reading comes from the book of the prophet Jeremiah, who spoke these words of promise at a time of great loss and destruction, as the Babylonians destroyed the holy city of Jerusalem. Listen for the Word of God here in Jeremiah 31, verses 31 through 34.

*<sup>31</sup>The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. <sup>32</sup>It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt — a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. <sup>33</sup>But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. <sup>34</sup>No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the LORD,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.*

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Our second reading comes from the Gospel According to John. It is set in the final days before Jesus is arrested, tried, and crucified, and we hear Jesus speaking to his followers about life and death, loss and gain. Hear God’s Word to you from John, chapter 12, verses 20 through 33.

*<sup>20</sup>Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. <sup>21</sup>They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” <sup>22</sup>Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. <sup>23</sup>Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. <sup>24</sup>Very truly, I tell you, 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. <sup>25</sup>Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. <sup>26</sup>Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.*

*<sup>27</sup>“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. <sup>28</sup>Father, glorify your name.” Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” <sup>29</sup>The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, “An angel has spoken to him.” <sup>30</sup>Jesus answered, “This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. <sup>31</sup>Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. <sup>32</sup>And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” <sup>33</sup>He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.*

Presbyterians do not usually emphasize as much as some other denominations the idea of giving something up for Lent. We're not always sure what to do with the idea. Part of our caution comes from our Protestant and Reformed theological heritage, which insists on remembering that we don't earn salvation, by obedience or self-sacrifice. But I do wonder if we aren't missing out on something of value.

I must admit that this year Lent snuck up on me before I knew it, before I had any time to give it adequate thought. But the years in which I have let something go for those 40 days, sometimes it has been a legitimate place of growth. Perhaps most interesting was the year I decided to completely give up making any unnecessary negative comments about anyone. That turned out to be an interesting exercise— if not always an easy one—and one I'd recommend. It turned out, more than most such things I have tried, to combine both improvement of my own mental and spiritual state with improvement of my moral self, by both discarding the tendency to dwell in judgment and applying some effort of practice toward treating others with grace.

Of course, no forty-day dose of self-denial or practicing virtue will perfect us. Despite the old maxim, when it comes to our moral selves or our spiritual selves, it is simply not true that “practice makes perfect.” Practice can better us, and is well worth doing. It can also put us more closely in touch with God's work in us, which is even more worth doing, for only God can perfect us.

Jesus, in the passage we have just heard, goes way past the little things. He is approaching the end of his earthly ministry, only a few days from crucifixion, and he is talking about the whole deal here, the very purpose for which he has come. He is not talking about giving up chocolate. “Very truly, I tell you,” he says, “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. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.”<sup>1</sup> And more: this is not just a bit of abstract philosophizing; it is specifically about us, his disciples: “Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also.”<sup>2</sup> To serve Jesus Christ means following him, and where he is going is the cross, where he is to give up life itself.

An interesting and reassuring thing to note here is that this *troubles* Jesus. Giving up life is no casual thing, done with the wave of a hand, as if it does not matter; it distresses him to his very core. “Now my soul is troubled,” he declares.<sup>3</sup> Jesus Christ, Son of God, is no stranger to knowing letting go to be tremendous loss, nor to feeling the full cost of committing to the path he is to follow.

One of the lifelong struggles of the way of discipleship is the readiness and willingness to let go of what it is time to let go of. Life is full of the need for giving up what it is time to give up. Daily we must give up our time of rest and sleep, usually sooner than we wish. At the close of each day, we must in turn give up the day. How sad the 16-year-old for whom the time has

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<sup>1</sup> John 12:24-25 (*New Revised Standard Version*).

<sup>2</sup> John 12:26 (*NRSV*).

<sup>3</sup> John 12:27 (*NRSV*).

come to leave behind her pillow! How sad the 4-year-old for whom the time has come to let go of his books and toys until tomorrow! We are all still there with them, as we encounter every day the limits and finite nature of things that force us, even in conducting our ordinary work and play, to be always leaving things behind, letting go of what we wish to hold onto.

Even the small things we need to give up are hard to let go. A day's plans made and hoped for; a thing we wanted to buy today instead of tomorrow. The big things can be truly heartbreaking when it comes time to give them up: a home we loved; a child to a far-away adult life in college and beyond. A loved one, to eternity. Our own lives.

This is why it is always a little strange and surprising when we read the Gospel accounts of Jesus calling those fishermen where they immediately give up their nets, family businesses, and livelihoods to go after him. We almost wonder if they are human in this readiness to drop everything, until we encounter the moment much later where they concernedly bring up the losses they have borne in order to answer the call.<sup>4</sup> Jesus offers them reassurance that it will not have been in vain.

One of the great hardships of life is that all times are moments in which it is time to let go of something, and that there comes for all of us a time in which we must let go of everything. Letting go means loss, and loss means mourning. This is true even when we are giving up something only to gain something greater. Any time we cut an attachment that matters to us, it is experienced as loss, and this can prompt grieving, even when we don't recognize or acknowledge it.

One thing which can be puzzling about disciplines such as Lent or other spiritual practices of self-denial is that we wonder, "What is the point of giving up things which don't seem to have anything wrong with them?" Sure, God would be pleased by us giving up sinful things, but how does it serve God to set aside habits which we enjoy and which hurt no one? Does God hate us being happy? What does God have against chocolate, that it would be a Godly thing to give it up for a while?

In fact, I don't think God has anything at all against such things. That isn't the point at all. Jesus goes much further than asking us to give up sweets; he asks us to give our very lives up for his sake. But it is not because God thinks life is evil, or because human happiness is not to be desired. Remember that God created life good, and that the Gospel is good news because it *saves* our lives and promises our tears shall be wiped away.

The issue, rather, is that getting from the here to the there necessarily involves giving up the here. The new life cannot come without the old life passing away. "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain." We know even from the passage of one season of life into another that this is so; we cannot gain adulthood without losing childhood. And as we aim for the large, fullness of the life promised in Christ, we are helped by self-denial of the small, everyday sort, like fasting or Lenten disciplines; firstly, by developing and practicing an attitude of readiness to leave behind any of the things of this world; and

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<sup>4</sup> See Matthew 19:27-30 and Mark 10:28-31.

secondly, by actively aligning ourselves in small ways with God's greater project within us—a process that opens ourselves to the possibility of that project being carried all the way to completion.

It is a long distance, perhaps, between dying to dessert for a few days and dying to our earthly life itself, but the smaller thing is not to be underestimated, as a tiny but real piece of the greater, and our willingness to model death in the very smallest way is a crack in the door of our hearts through we might find the Spirit moving, widening and opening us into a place of readiness to trust more fully and let go more completely. A willingness to let *something* go is a change of orientation, and we can pray God will carry us through to putting it *all* in the hands of Christ.

We also have plenty to give up which is not good. One does, after all, have the option to give up nagging for Lent, or gossip, for instance. And these are hard for exactly the same reason. Breaking our attachments to bad things is experienced as a loss no less than is breaking our attachments to good things. One, like the other, provokes mourning. We are sad and pained and feel a hole where we drop a bad habit or a harmful piece of ourselves.

The existence of all these things that are not okay in us, though, is the reason we hope for salvation in the first place, and even as we do grieve the loss of our vices and our sins, we can find relief in the promise of their eventual total disappearance, if we take them all to the cross to die.

It is no easy thing, giving up the bad or the good when the time comes. Letting go of what it is time to let go of is painful and a struggle, in both its daily form and as regards the whole of our lives. It can, for us, like Jesus, trouble our souls. C.S. Lewis, in one of his children's books set in the fictional world of Narnia, captures this process in allegorical form, with a boy whose bad natured elements manifest themselves in physical change, as he is transformed into a dragon. He is lonely, afraid, and powerless to become once again human.

Aslan, the Christ figure, appearing in the form of a lion, offers him restoration, but there is no becoming human without losing the dragon skin. The lion's claws tearing the awful dragon skin from him hurts more than anything he has ever experienced, for the dragon parts are not merely something he carries; they have become *part* of him. It hurts to have the malignancy cut out, even as it cures him and leaves him overcome with thanks to have the clean, healthy skin of a regular boy once more.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, in our own real-world stories, the pieces of ourselves which are not meant to be, the elements of our character which do not represent what we are created for but degrade us and harm those around us, are not just masks we wear, or things we carry. They may have begun as that, but we become what we live as. Giving up what has become a part of us is a painful, hard, and long process.

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<sup>5</sup> This story appears in *The Voyage of the Dawntrader*, one of the books in Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia*.

This is why I actually am not too sure some kind of notion akin to what the Roman Catholics call Purgatory isn't plausible after all. I don't know anything about what it would look like, if it is out there, but I do think there's one thing we fail to consider very often: if we all were to enter eternal life just as we are today, then our resurrected lives and the world to come would not be any better than the lives and world we have today. How could they be? How could heaven be any better than earth if it is made up of the exact same people as make up the earth? The promise of a better world requires relinquishing all the pieces of ourselves which make this world as it is. We have a lot to let go of. Our hope must include not only salvation by forgiveness, but also salvation by sanctification, or purification into holy beings.

Or, in other words, there is some journey ahead of us, of becoming the sort of selves who are fully good, righteous, and rid of all our dragon skin. If we shall not have achieved perfection of character before passing from this life, then we must believe and hope that this process, once begun and entrusted to Christ in the giving up of our lives to him, will nevertheless be carried through to completion even if death should intervene. It might be painful, but giving up things to which we've become attached usually is.

It will, we have been promised, be good. We heard, in our first reading, of a new covenant and a time to come in which every person shall personally know God, and in John's Gospel, a promise that God will honor those who obey Christ and follow him to the cross. And we surely know our lives are not ours to keep anyway. The hour has come to give them over.

But our Lord has gone ahead of us on this path. So let us pray for the strength and confidence in Christ to let go, to daily give up what it is time to give up. We are like hurt puppies, unable to walk straight for the thorn in our paw, growling and snapping angrily at anyone who comes near, determinedly guarding that thorn. May our Lord Christ, who is the great physician, draw us to him and give us the trust and hope to place ourselves in his hands, letting go, in faith. Amen.