



IS THIS US?

March 18, 2018, The Fifth Sunday in Lent

John 12:20-33

Kimberly L. Clayton, The Brick Presbyterian Church in the City of New York

Sometime last fall, I kept hearing a few friends talk about a TV show they liked. In its second season, there was some long-awaited mystery that would be revealed when the show aired following the Super Bowl. My friends said the show, *This Is Us*, depicts families in all of our real-life complications, with equally good writing and acting. So, when the Super Bowl ended and the show began, I settled in to watch. I didn't know who anyone was or what the plotlines might be, but I was drawn in and got to see the mystery of the past two years explained.

What I was not prepared for—what none of my friends had mentioned—was how time is construed in this show. As I watched that night, I assumed it was showing what was happening in the present time. But at some point, the scene shifted and I realized the mystery that had been revealed had actually happened long ago, and we were now in the present. Then, just as suddenly, the present dissolved into a moment much further in the future. Now I was no longer sure if the future was the present, but I definitely knew the past was still affecting everyone. Confused? Me, too, but also deeply intrigued. In *This Is Us*, time is not portrayed as linear, as we live it in our earthly lives.

There is actually something quite biblical and theological about this. Scripture even talks about two kinds of time—*chronos* and *kairos*. *Chronos* is our experience of time—that it is chronological: the past, the present, and the future in sequential order; and while we can remember the past and may anticipate the future, you and I can only truly live in the present moment. *Chronos* time is quantitative. You can count or measure it. But *kairos* is altogether a different kind of time. It is qualitative, not quantitative. *Kairos* means something more like “a



fitting time,” an “opportune” moment or “season.” In *kairos* time, things happen in deep and decisive ways. Past, present, and future are all gathered up into the wholeness of God, time in its fullness. *Kairos* appears 86 times in the New Testament.

Today’s lectionary reading messes with the chronological order of things. For us, today is the fifth and last Sunday in Lent, but this story from John 12 actually takes place just *after* Palm Sunday, which we will observe next week. And what we come upon here is one of those *kairos* moments in the New Testament.

The crowds who had come to Jerusalem for the Passover festival were filled with excitement about this promising and long-awaited king of Israel. Many of them had been recent eyewitnesses when Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. If this Messiah could bring the dead back to life, just think how quickly and easily he might overturn political and religious corruption! Word about Lazarus spread, bringing even more people to the parade that day, all shouting out to Jesus. Meanwhile, a small group of the religious establishment stood at the edge of the parade route. Sizing up the situation, the Pharisees said with resignation, “Look, the world has gone after him.”

And when our story opens today, truly the world has come to Jesus. Some Greeks arrive, and they are the very first non-Jewish people to appear in John’s Gospel. It has taken twelve chapters for gentiles to make their entrance. They find the two disciples with Greek-sounding names, Philip and Andrew, and tell them they wish to ‘see’ Jesus. The arrival of these Greeks heralds a decisive moment for Jesus, because the minute he is told about them, Jesus announces that his hour has come. Ever since the wedding in Cana back in chapter 2, Jesus has been performing ‘signs’; but Jesus makes it clear each time that it is not yet the hour for the Son of Man to be glorified.¹ Now it is time. A kind of *kairos* hour has arrived when the fullness of God is gathered up and decisive action is poised. It is the opportune, fitting time for the Son of Man to be glorified by God in the presence of the crowd. And what will be revealed is the shocking glory as God defines glory. With

* Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation.



implications for all of us, whether we are onlookers, confirmed believers, or those who half-believe or merely among those who hope it is all true.

Kairos moments are rare...an hour, a day, or a season, perhaps, when so many things come together in a kind of fullness no one could have anticipated or manipulated. When it seems a spirit greater than our own, perhaps even the Spirit of God, catches us up together and propels us into something we might never have done on our own otherwise. I began to wonder these past weeks if we were seeing a kind of *kairos* moment that culminated on Wednesday as hundreds of thousands of young people led peaceful demonstrations all over the country, demanding an end to gun violence in our schools. Children, middle and high schoolers, college students joined in. Many were supported by their parents, school administrators and teachers, government and religious leaders, and passersby, too. I know not everyone saw this as holy, or even wise. Yet I couldn't help but think back to the young children in my hometown of Birmingham who, in May of 1963, dressed in their finest church clothes to take part in the Children's Crusade for civil rights. In dresses and white gloves, coats and ties, they marched, and were marched into police wagons, many of them spending time in jail cells.

This past Wednesday felt like another time when the children and youth were leading us adults into a future that can surely be better than our present.

In West Haven, CT, Notre Dame High School placed 17 empty desks outside of its building, surrounding a statue of Christ, his head downturned, with palms reaching out and upward.ⁱⁱ And here on our corner, I was proud and grateful that our church bells rang out at 10 a.m. on Wednesday. We tolled the bell 17 times in memory of the latest victims of a school shooting. It was a public witness honoring lives lost, but it was also a hopeful peal bearing testimony that we desire a better world where life flourishes.

In the story today from John's Gospel, Jesus knows that he, and the world for that matter, are at a critical moment. Despite the cheering crowds, Jesus understands what is ahead for him. The worldly powers bent on destruction and death will not



bow in obedience before even the glory of God. While other gospels may let us see Jesus in anguish in the Garden of Gethsemane, John does not. Instead, Jesus remains obedient and resolute. Verse 27 is the only hint of emotion we will get, and it is fleeting to be sure. “Now my soul is troubled,” Jesus says, but the fear or sadness evaporates as soon as it is uttered aloud. With complete confidence, Jesus affirms that the “ruler of this world” will be driven out; then Jesus promises to draw all of us up with him. Or, as a new translation I just got puts it supposedly closer to the original Greek, “I will drag everyone to me.”ⁱⁱⁱ

This last Sunday in Lent prepares us for the Holy Week to come. Jesus reminds us that if we are to follow him, we will also encounter hardship, maybe even something that will cost us our life. Before we get to green palms or the fragrant lilies of Easter, Jesus puts before us a very different image. A single grain of wheat. If it remains tightly closed, Jesus says, that closed up little seed will not become its fullest self...and it will certainly never produce anything that can become bread for the world. It will just remain a solitary grain, safe but also shut up in its own little death. But when that single grain falls into the earth, it has the chance to become more than it would otherwise have been. The seed opens, sinks deeper into the soil around it...mixes with other seeds...and then there is the possibility of a bumper crop of wheat that becomes food for many!

So, Jesus asks us to lose our lives instead of saving them, if saving our life means we remain all sealed up in our safe little selves and locations and habits and ideas. Jesus says that if we want to serve him, we have to put ourselves, our bodies, our priorities, our resources wherever he is. As the Spirit moves and calls and we open ourselves to God’s *kairos* season, in our individual lives and in our corporate life together, too, we may fall into new relationships and places and experiences and ideas. Then, if we dig deep, mix it up, and join others, we may become food for many, bread for the world.

Our Presbyterian Book of Order puts it this way: “The Church seeks to include all people and is never content to enjoy the benefits of Christian community for itself



alone. ...The Church is to be a community of faith, entrusting itself to God alone, even at the risk of losing its life.”^{iv}

I read about a woman who took seriously Jesus’ call to become a grain of wheat that falls to the ground in order to bear much fruit. Her name is Maggy, and she is a Tutsi woman from Burundi. She survived the genocide there between Hutu and Tutsi people, though most of her extended family was massacred. Maggy had adopted seven Hutu and Tutsi children. She and her children barely escaped death, hiding in the sacristy of a Catholic church. Maggy was determined to rebuild her village, Ruyigi, as a place of peace. Over twenty years ago now, she began Maison Shalom, House of Peace. Since then, Maggy has adopted another 25 children and helped over 20,000 orphans. There is a school, a health clinic and microfinance initiatives. Maison Shalom teaches sustainable agriculture, and she even built a pool and a film theater. When rebel soldiers came, demanding payment in exchange for not destroying the theater, Maggy invited them in to watch movies instead. Once, a man came to Maison Shalom intent on killing Maggy. She talked him out of it, telling him he could not be happy being defined by hatred and violence. She invited him instead to come and live there, be her driver and help care for the children. And he did. She has said that God’s love made her an inventor.^v

When the Greeks appear in John’s Gospel, it is the sign that the hour has come for Jesus to be glorified. In this moment of the fourth Gospel, God’s glory reveals not only the death Jesus will die, but what will spring up in us from his death, resurrection and ascension among us. What will come into being is a church wider and more diverse than anyone had imagined or could contrive. The Spirit of God will bring together Jews and Gentiles, transgressing cultural and ethnic divides. It will reconfigure how males and females relate to one another, upending gender roles and prescribed limitations. It will put an end to the notion that some should be slaves while others are free, flattening socio-economic hierarchies and oppressive systems. A church like this cannot be triumphalistic, but is instead obedient, vulnerable and generous. It will be a church that does not always play it



safe, but opens itself, digs deep, mixes it up, and joins others in risky, welcoming, and challenging ways that provide food for many, bread for the world.

If those Greeks came here this morning and said to the ushers—or to any of you—“We wish to see Jesus,” where would you take them in this church? Which of the many ministries would you want them to see? What loving relationships and caring acts of service could give them a glimpse of Jesus, of the church that is his body at its most loving and generous witness?

This morning, we had our own kind of *kairos* moment as three generations of a family in the church came together for the Sacrament of Baptism. Grandfather, daughter and son-in-law, grandchild, all part of the liturgy...with more family members gathered, too, amidst the extended Brick Church family, and beyond what we can see in this sanctuary—the whole church in heaven and on earth. Perhaps I should have properly warned Nic and Alexa about it means for them to bring Landon to be part of a community baptized into Jesus’ death and resurrection. But the truth is, they are in good company because we are all still learning and practicing to be the church God intends. We will be at this every day for as long as we live. I look forward to seeing what Landon and all of our children and youth will teach us about the glory of God—even when we have to be dragged toward it by Jesus himself, high and lifted up.

Amen.

ⁱ See John 2:4; 4:21 and 7:30.



ⁱⁱ

ⁱⁱⁱ David Bentley Hart, **A Translation: The New Testament** (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), p200.

^{iv} The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Part II, The Book of Order, *F-1.0302a and F-1.030*.

^v L. Gregory Jones, “Maison Shalom” in *The Christian Century*, June 16, 2009, p29.