

John 12:20-33    5 Lent 3.14.24    Bill Uetracht

Enough. These words are enough.  
If not these words, this breath.  
If not this breath, this sitting here.  
This opening to the life  
We have refused again and again  
Until now.  
Until now.

I suspect that the writer of the Gospel of John would appreciate this poem by David Whyte. John is not a gospel waiting for some kind of future. John is not a gospel preoccupied with where you are going when you die, whether to heaven or to hell. John is preoccupied with the now.

“*Now* my soul is troubled,” Jesus says today. “*Now* is the judgment of the world. *Now* the ruler of this world will be driven out.” Now! Now! Now! The theologians call this “realized eschatology,” which is a fancy way of saying that what matters most in life is not what is yet to come, but what is now. John would in no way understand the kind of religion that we experience on television or throughout our culture that sees faith as primarily about reserving a place in the next life. Choose Jesus, and you get to go to heaven when you die. Don’t choose Jesus, then, well, you know . . .

John doesn’t talk about heaven and hell. His attention is not on the afterlife. His concern is about the now. Now is the time for salvation. Or as he likes to put it, now is the time for eternal life. Now also is the time for judgment. Now is the time for crisis, as the word for judgment is probably better understood.

Today in the life and calendar of the church is a NOW kind of time, which is why Jesus says, “Now my soul is troubled.” Something big is about ready to happen, something that has to do with the very purpose of Jesus’ life. This is a big, phenomenally consequential

moment. This is a moment full of what life is all about. This is the moment for Jesus to die. And this is not a sad moment in John. After saying, “Now my soul is troubled,” Jesus quickly moves from troubledness and confusion to confidence: “And what should I say—‘Father save me from this hour?’ No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour.” The purpose of my life is about to be revealed. The glory of God is about to shine.

Now admittedly, I struggle to understand John’s perspective on the cross. Crucifixion seems nothing like glory to me. I find Mark’s notion of the cross as abandonment, sadness, and horror, as much more convincing. But the church in all its wisdom gives us a variety of perspectives on the event of the crucifixion. For John, it is a matter of glory because it is love written large. It is love lifted high. Note what Jesus says today: “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”

What a vision of universality! The cross is love that is like a magnet that will draw all people to itself. Wow! This love isn’t just intended for those who raised their hand at the crusade and made Jesus their personal Lord and Savior. This cross-shaped love is like a magnet that draws *all* people to itself, all people to the one lifted high on the cross.

*Now* is the moment for the glory of this love to be shown. The way John sets up this NOW moment of greatness is quite fascinating. Our text for today begins with what are not inconsequential words: “Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks.” You hear that and you probably say, “Well, that’s great. The appearance of the Greeks at the party probably means a lot of baklava, hummus, lemon chicken, spinach pie, and feta cheese.”

Well, maybe. But that isn't the point. A Jewish festival is being celebrated. Only one part of the world is present. The arrival of the Greeks, the Gentiles, in a symbolic way (and John is really into symbolism), means that the whole world is now present. And remember what is about to happen is meant for the whole world. God so loved the *world* that he gave his only Son that all those who believe in him will have life, eternal life, life with God—not in heaven someday, but right now. Eternal life is not about where you go when you die. Eternal life is about life that matters, life that is good, life that is always full, life that is deeply connected to the source of life, God. That is the kind of life that we get in Jesus, John is telling us.

I have personally found John's message to be true. My experience is that in Jesus there is so much life. Oh, sometimes it is different than the life that the world promises. Sometimes it challenges the life that the world attempts to give us. In fact, sometimes it turns that life upside down. But to be in Jesus' community, to be "in Christ," as Paul puts it, is to be in a deeper place, a place that is not just about how good you look, how much money you've got, how powerful you are, how well you do at the polls. And while any of those things aren't all bad and they will provide you some temporary highs, they won't connect you to a life that *now* is really full and meaningful. They won't connect you to what is eternal. Yes, they may stroke your ego for a little while. But often you will find that these things are never enough, that you constantly have to buy more, get more, receive more praise, massage your fragile ego more. More, more, more, and especially more that is never content with the *now*.

That unsettled, constantly grasping, frequently malcontent and often violent life is what is revealed by the cross as empty and disconnected from that which is eternal, which is why Jesus today

tells us that “now is the day of judgment of this world,” that “now is the day when the ruler of this world is driven out.” Judgment for John is not about hell when you die but a crisis now that is created when you and all the systems of the world do not live out or trust the self-giving love of God.

Let’s face it. It’s a mess when love is not lived out. It’s a mess when self-preoccupation runs the show. It’s a mess when you live in light of “never enough.” It’s a mess when the systems of oppression, hatred, violence, and narcissism run amok. The current situation in Gaza, in Ukraine, and in our political system discloses that.

For John, the cross reveals that mess, shows what happens when the great love that God has for the world is not lived out. And like all the twelve-steps programs, John believes that until the light shines on the mess nothing will get better, the mess won’t be addressed. So, the cross is like a great big mirror. It reflects the truth to us. And only the truth can set us free. The cross in its truth-telling and its display of great love sets us free.

And that freedom is, John would have us know, a matter of dying. “Very truly I tell you,” Jesus tells us, “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains a single grain of wheat; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” Now is the time for Jesus to die. Now is the time for us to die. And this is the truth. We’re not going to get to where we want to go without dying. This insight is what Richard Rohr calls “necessary suffering.” Rohr says that there are only two things that truly transform people—great love and great suffering. Seldom do we grow, seldom do we experience real life without some kind of pain, which is why some of the most remarkable people are those who have been through so much. Their pain, their dying, if they have allowed it to take them to new places and not derail them or make them angry or bitter, truly can transform them.

By the way, this is not an invitation to seek out pain or suffering, to think that the more I suffer the better person I will be. Knock that kind of thinking off. But often in your life you will note after the fact that some of your pain and suffering is what has brought you here. They are what has made you a very different, more loving and compassionate person. Dying is often necessary for living. And that is especially true when it comes to your self-obsessed, self-protecting, vulnerability-avoiding ego. Only if it dies and is buried will it eventually bear fruit.

Now is the time for that kind of dying. Now is the time for letting go. Now is the time for vulnerability. Now is the time for giving up yourself to something bigger than yourself. Now is the time for the seed to be buried in the ground. And believe it or not, at least from the perspective of John, now is the time of glory. Now is the time for love to be written large, for love to be lifted high on a cross. WE have refused this love again and again. Maybe now will be different. Maybe the magnetic field of the cross will be so strong that we will just give into it, will just give into love...NOW! NOW! NOW!