

Palm Sunday Sermon, April 5, 2020
The Hour Is at Hand, Matthew 26:1-27:66

When a couple is engaged to be married, countless decisions must be made. Among them are the day and the time of the wedding. First, there's the day. What day works best for family and friends? What season of the year will make for the picture-perfect wedding? When is the church available? And then there's the hour. When should the wedding begin? Enough time needs to be allotted for pictures and for guests to go to the reception. Once day and time are set, wedding websites actually count down the days, hours, and minutes until the happy occasion.

On this Palm Sunday, we discover that our God is also concerned about time, in particular, not only the day but also the hour of his Son's death. The hour of Christ's death is the fulfillment of the Old Testament. When Adam and Eve sinned, God promised a time when the Seed of the woman would crush the serpent's head. This prophecy was the first of hundreds more to follow through the centuries. The prophets declare who this Promised One will be: the Messiah, the Son of God, the all-powerful King whose kingdom will never end, the faithful servant of the Lord, and yes God himself.

The prophets describe what the Coming One will do. He will proclaim the Gospel, heal the sick, and give sight to the blind. The prophets declare that the king of all comes to save not in power with horse and chariot, but in humility riding on a donkey. He will be betrayed for thirty pieces of silver. He will be despised and rejected, mocked, beaten, spit upon. His hands and feet will be pierced and his clothing divided by casting lots. He will be stricken, smitten, and afflicted as God lays our iniquity and the iniquity of the entire world upon him. He gives his life as the perfect offering for our sin so that by his wounds we are healed.

Our Lord's earthly ministry anticipates the hour of his death. Before his first miracle, the changing of water into wine, he announces that his hour has not yet come. There would be times when the religious leaders desire to arrest Jesus and put him to death, but it does not happen because his hour has not yet come. Finally, the chief priests and elders do conspire to put Jesus to death; they plan to do so after the Passover feast. But that isn't the divinely appointed hour either, for the Lamb of God is not to be sacrificed after the feast but during Passover. So after earnestly praying in the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus then declares to his disciples: "See, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners" (Mt 26:45). Now it is God's time.

The entire Old Testament and all of human history, centers on the hour, the ninth hour on Good Friday, three in the afternoon, when Jesus died. His death was preceded by three hours of eerie and unexplainable darkness, a sign of God's judgment and wrath over sin. Then at the ninth hour, the hour when the lamb was slaughtered at the temple, when all that was prophesied was fulfilled, Jesus yielded up his spirit. No one took his life from him, but he gave up his life of his own accord.

The death of Jesus at the ninth hour on Good Friday fulfills prophecy and is the climax of our Lord's earthly ministry. This event was the culmination of history. But, not Only Is the Hour of Christ's Death the Center and Focus of the Scriptures and All History, but the Hour of Christ's Death Is the Hour of Your Salvation.

At that hour, the Lamb of God shed his blood and offered his life as the sacrifice for your sin. Your perfect Passover lamb has been sacrificed. All your iniquities were placed on him. Good Friday is your day of atonement as Christ offered himself as your substitute. The blood of the Lamb is the means by which your sin-stained clothes are washed and made white. His blood is not only on you but in you, as during this hour you receive his body and blood for the forgiveness of your sins.

The hour of Christ's death is the hour of your salvation. When Jesus died, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, top to bottom. The hour of his death not only reveals that he is the perfect Lamb but also your Great High Priest, who has offered the atoning sacrifice for your sin. The way to the Father has been opened for you through the flesh of Jesus. Your sin no longer separates you from your Creator. Instead, you have access to the Most Holy Place, the heavenly temple, where you will dwell in the presence of God for all eternity.

The hour of Christ's death is no coincidence. The very hour, the very moment of his death was planned from eternity. This is good news for you because the hour of Christ's death is the hour of your salvation. The hour we commemorate Jesus' death is at hand. He enters Jerusalem on the donkey's colt, his eyes fixed on the cross. In the coming days, we walk the way of sorrows with him to the very hour of his death, confident that the moment he yields up his spirit is the hour of our salvation. Amen.