

FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT, B
Jeremiah 31:31-34
Hebrews 5:5-10
John 12:20-33

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It's wonderful when a project comes together. But sometimes it takes a while to get there.

At our house we got the idea to put up some tall shelves in the basement to try to contain the thousands of toys and cars and Lego projects we've accumulated. We decided to use some of that modular wooden shelving they sell at IKEA, but it wasn't as simple or as quick as we thought it might be.

We started back last summer, measuring and planning to figure out what size and shape of shelves we would need. By winter we got around to buying materials. I won't give you all the gory details of our trip to IKEA, except to say there were hordes of people there that Saturday, we took the kids along, and it took three hours instead of the one hour I'd imagined. We got so tired and hungry we had to stop for lunch in the conveniently located cafeteria. When we finally got to the warehouse we counted out a certain number of pine shelf pieces from one bin, upright pine posts from another bin, hardware and 2 cans of beeswax finish from the next section down, put them all on a flatbed cart and trundled it out to the car.

This big pile of wood and hardware then sat in the garage for a couple of months, waiting for the right moment I guess. When we found some free moments we sanded each of the pieces and finished them and let them dry. Then, in the fullness of time, came the weekend when my wonderful husband got out all the hardware and tools and assembled those components methodically, section by section. I have to say it was very satisfying to see the whole project finally come together -- all those assorted pieces finally fitted together into the sturdy, useful shelves we had envisioned so long before.

Our scripture today is about a master project finally coming together. It's been a long time coming, but now the moment is at hand.

God began this master project long ago, when God shaped a universe that would one day contain human beings, and God began to imagine carrying on a loving relationship with them. God started the project by reaching out to people, calling Abraham and Sarah to follow. Over the centuries God made covenants with the Hebrew people. God said, "*I will write my law in your hearts. I will be your God and you will be my people.*" And it was God's faithfulness that kept the project alive through times when the human beings were fickle or outright rebellious, when they turned

to other gods or mistreated the vulnerable people they were commanded to protect. God took the people back time and again, God forgave them and repaired the relationship and let them start over. It was God's steadfast love that kept the magnificent master project going all those years, until the fullness of time when God's Son would complete it.

All through Jesus' life the suspense was mounting. Everyone could see his ministry was leading to something big. But time and again, Jesus said "Not yet." At the wedding in Cana, when the wine ran out, Mary asked for a miracle but Jesus said, "My hour has not yet come" (2:4). The disciples urged him to show his power in Jerusalem, but Jesus said, "My time has not yet come" (7:6). Two times, the officials were getting ready to arrest Jesus, but "his hour had not yet come" (7:30, 8:20).

Now, today, Jesus finally announces: "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified." God's magnificent master project is about to be completed, as Jesus prepares to go to the cross.

Did Jesus say he was going to be *glorified* on the *cross*? That sounds strange. We think of the cross as an instrument of torture, a terrible tragedy that God has to intervene and set right. But John's gospel, the one we're reading from, doesn't see the cross as a tragedy. Instead, the cross is a victory. The cross is the whole reason for Jesus coming to earth. The cross is where everything comes together.

On the cross God accomplishes what God's been preparing since the beginning of time. Jesus says, "when I am lifted up [on the cross] I will draw all people to myself." That's it! That is the deepest desire of God's heart, that all human beings will come to know God in loving relationship. God's grand, magnificent project is "to draw all people to Godself."

And it's already happening. That's how Jesus knows his hour has come. He knows because "some Greeks" show up and tell Philip and Andrew: "We want to see Jesus." This is the symbolic moment Jesus has been waiting for. What it means is that the whole world is now ready to receive him. If these "Greeks", these world travelers from across the sea, these lovers of trade and business and ideas... these historians, philosophers, seekers of truth... If these non-Jewish "Greeks" have crossed over from another culture with open hearts and minds and are now "wanting to see Jesus," then it's high time for Jesus to be lifted up in glory – on the cross, and in the resurrection -- so that everyone in the world can know him in the fullest way, now and forever. In fact, his dying and rising is the only way that anyone beyond Jesus' own time and place *can* be able to know him. It releases Christ's saving power in a whole new way, across the nations and across the years.

I was still pretty new in Portland when a young man made an appointment and sat down in my office to ask, "So, what is your church all about?" Then he looked at me expectantly, waiting for an answer. I mean, he really wanted to know. It was a burning question for him. "What's your church all about?" Believe it or not, in 14 years of being a pastor (at that time) I had never been asked that question before. We moved here from New Mexico where it seemed like everybody *knew* what church was about. Spirituality was part of the landscape, religious symbols were common, there was a sense of the holy that seemed to pervade things. But not here in the Portland. Here I've met all kinds of people who have grown up without a faith tradition and are genuinely curious about what it's all about.

Do you get what I'm saying? This guy who came to me, to our congregation really, was one of those "Greeks" — a thinker, a questioner, a seeker with an open heart. He was saying what they said: "I want to see Jesus." And I have to say I took that encounter as a powerful sign — for myself, for all of us — that the hour has come when people are hungry for God's good news. People are hungry to know about God's magnificent master project, stretching from eternity to eternity, God's amazing, loving, continuing effort to draw all people to Godself. *All* people, young and old, rich and poor, gay and straight, single and married, people who are down, people who are up, people who are hurting, people who are healing, all people are being drawn by that irresistible love that emanates from Christ, drawing us to the cross and to the empty tomb where hope is born. It's our calling to let all people know and feel that they truly have a place in God's grand design, a place in God's heart, and a place here in community with all of us who have found our home in the goodness of God's love.

In the years since I spoke with that young man, I have met many more people of all ages who are saying "We want to see Jesus." And I believe we should count ourselves among them. Because what is it that's drawn us here this morning if *not* our wish to *see Jesus*? To receive our Lord in bread and wine. To hear the stories of his life, and make them our stories. To sing the songs of faith and make them our songs. We come here each week looking for a window into the Life that created this universe, a glimpse of the God just beyond our view, and a taste of the new world God is bringing into being. *We want to see Jesus. We want to see Jesus.*

And do you want to know what I *truly* believe draws us here? I believe it is Christ, who is determined to *be seen -- by us and by everyone*. Because Christ is still working at that glorious project of drawing all people to himself. Christ keeps on bearing with us even when we are fickle or outright rebellious, even when we are afraid or confused, or lonely or isolated or just plain lost. Our faithful God is still writing God's name on our hearts, still forgiving our sin, still calling us God's treasured people. Still drawing us closer in Christ. God has been at this work a long, long time,

and God will keep at it until all of us are one human family united in a love that will not and cannot die.

The hour is at hand for all of us. We are coming into the highest holy days of our church year, when Christians around the world are turning their eyes toward the cross, to see God glorified.

The hour has come for us to contemplate the deep mystery of Christ giving his life for us. It's the hour to be thankful in quiet prayer for a work of love that's really beyond our understanding. To be attentive as everything God has been working at through the centuries comes together. And to let God's work be real and renewed in our lives.

It's all coming together. By God's power it does all come together. Amen.