



Image: Ojibwe woman tapping sugar maples using birchbark collecting bowls. Taken in 1908 by Roland Reed.

## What Hour Is It?

Sermon by Jan Wiersma

Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

5th Sunday of Lent - March 21, 2021

Texts: Jeremiah 31:31-34, John 12:20-33

### SCRIPTURE READING      Jeremiah 31:31–34

*During Lent, we have heard of God's covenant of peace with Noah following the flood, God's covenant with Abraham promising to make him a great nation, and God's covenant with the Israelites, giving them laws for human flourishing. Much later, God speaks through the prophet Jeremiah of a new covenant that will become part of them, written on their hearts.*

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. 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. 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. 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.

### GOSPEL READING      John 12:20–33

*Three times in John we have heard from Jesus that “the hour has not yet come.” Now, following the miracle of raising Lazarus from death, the authorities are fixated on arresting and punishing Jesus. Finally he declares, “The hour has come.”*

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

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

“The hour has come,” Jesus said. “Should I pray, ‘Father, save me from this hour?’ No, I have come to this hour to glorify your name.”

In John’s gospel, Jesus talks a lot about the hour that is coming but is not quite here. The hour that was to come would be when true worship will not be limited by time or place; when the dead in their graves will listen and live. Finally, today, he says the hour has come. The hour that *has come* is like a woman in labor, bringing new life into the world through pain. Jesus’ hour is like that: an hour of suffering but also glory, a contagious, magnetic glory that draws *all* people to him. Pain and glory, death and birth. It’s a mixed up, in-between sort of hour.

That’s something like the hour we’re living in now, isn’t it? The suffering of a year of covid, of perplexity and fear, of learning by trial and error, a time of separation and suffering and dying, but also the wonder of new vaccines, the promise of re-openings, the easing of restrictions. The hour of release from exile. The already - but not quite yet. What is the present hour like for you?

In Minnesota, March is maple sugar month, the time to harvest life from the trees. This is an in-between time, too, of freezing nights and thawing days, when nutrients sleeping in the roots awaken to send sap surging through the tree beneath the bark. It’s a miracle of nature that, in spring, swelling buds draw sweetness up from below while adult leaves of summer push sunshine back down to the roots, a balance of give and take, engineered by the Creator in ways we couldn’t invent. In this ragged edge of winter, life is provided in the hungriest time of the year. I found this photo from 1908: an Ojibwe woman collecting maple sap in birchbark bowls. Early settlers learned from Native Americans to tap the trees; Indigenous people say they learned it from squirrels. With their stores of seeds and nuts gone, the animals nibbled spring twigs that dripped sap to freeze on bark, intensifying sweetness. The next day, they returned to feast on it.<sup>1</sup>

What I love about this true love story is the harmony between roots and leaves and the trunks built-in conduits connecting them. I love the counterpoint of warming earth and longer days and the awakening of our relatives, the trees, that look dead in winter but flood with life again, and the abundance they share with anyone who knows how to ask the right way.

We have lived for a year on a diet of uncertainty and worry. Our stores of resilience and patience have been tested and depleted. We have lived in exile in our own homes. But spring is coming, the ice is breaking, sleepers are awakening: it’s time for a new diet of joy and trust. Imagine fully coming back. What would it look like for you? How would it feed you? Savor it for a minute.

I feel I’ve suffered so little this year compared to others. Many lost employment; I gained it. Many lost touch with friends and co-workers; I have come to know you. Many have lost homes;

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<sup>1</sup> *Braiding Sweetgrass*, “Maple Sugar Moon.” Author Robin Kimmerer is a member of the Potawatomi Nation and an environmental biologist. The most beautiful part is that trees are not damaged by tapping, though they may succumb to climate change.

my home has remained a warm refuge for me. Many have lost loved ones; no one I know has died. I have been healthy and well-cared-for. I couldn't possibly complain.

But recently, the Rochester Public Library opened for browsing. I went on Thursday. It's not like there was a book shortage in my life. Between curbside pickup and two sisters who read everything, one of whom works in a bookstore, I've been well-stocked with things to read. But when I walked through those doors, locked for so long, something numb in me came back to life. At first, I just stood in the lobby and smelled the books. Then I wandered through the stacks, picking out anything that caught my eye. I checked myself out at a self-service machine. Then I walked toward the front desk. A young man sat there quietly working, but he raised his head as I approached. From about 12 feet away, I could see his smile in spite of his mask. "Can I help you?" he asked. "I just wanted to say thank you," I said. "This is so..." good, I meant to say, but I got too choked up. I had to turn away. He probably thought I was one crazy old lady, but that's OK. I amazed myself by how moved I was to be there. Libraries have always been safe places, welcoming places, *home* places for me. That was an hour (actually less than half an hour) I won't forget. It was like the ice breaking on the lake, showing free rippling water or sweetness running from the tree, feeding me.

Where is it for you? What place will draw you like a magnet, what hour will break this long year's worth of ice and exile? Maybe it's the Nature Center at Quarry Hill, or your workout gym, or the long-term care center where your mom lives that will crack you open. Maybe it's that first full-body hug you share with someone outside your household. Maybe it's being here, in this shared holy space, unmasked, singing out loud together.

In the beginning of our reading, Greek people visiting Jerusalem asked to see Jesus. If visitors from another place asked you, where would you send them? Would it be too much of a stretch for you to say, "Go, look at the maple trees? Like Jesus, they die and rise again? Like Jesus, they draw goodness into themselves, and give it away for free?" I might mention that young librarian, just sitting there waiting to *help* me. Or would you point to the Asian American women killed in Atlanta? Would you say that, like Jesus, they died of misdirected hate but their lives will live on in those they loved? Their deaths strip away one more shroud of ignorance about how we regard and treat our Asian sisters and brothers.<sup>2</sup> Or would you point our present-day visitors to the cross and say, "There, hanging there like strange fruit on a dead tree, there is Jesus, there is the life of the world?" Could it be that we can see Jesus in all those places, and many more? "The hour is coming," Jesus told the woman at the well, "when you will worship neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem, but true worshipers will worship in spirit and in truth." (John 4:21-23)

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<sup>2</sup> Say their names: Soon Chung Park, age 74, **Hyun Jung Grant**, age 51, Suncha Kim, age 69, Yong Yue, age 63, **Delaina Ashley Yaun**, age 33, **Paul Andre Michels**, age 54, **Xiaojie Tan**, age 49, Daoyou Feng, age 44.

Jesus spoke of the hour still to come; the prophet Jeremiah wrote of days to come when hearts would break open to welcome God. Jeremiah wrote about hearts as indicators of the people's spiritual condition: stubborn and rebellious hearts; bitter hearts; devious and deceitful hearts; sick, sad, crushed hearts. "But the days are coming," God says, "when I will write my promise to you on your hearts, so that you will know that I am your God and you are my people."

This part of Jeremiah is called the Book of Comfort - comfort for exiles separated for generations from the places that meant home and love and safety to them. In the days to come, Jeremiah assured them, all that goodness would be written on their hearts, all that sweetness enfolded within them. Like Jesus' promise to draw *all people* to himself, Jeremiah's prophecy was inclusive: "You will all know, young and old, from the least to the greatest, that I belong to you, and you belong to me, and you all belong to each other." There's a prayer I like to say every day that begins like this: "May the hearts of all beings be full of lovingkindness" and goes on, "May all beings know the touch of the deep stream of being" - touched by the universal life that unites us all. This is an intimacy of knowing closer than the blood in our veins, closer than the sweet maple sap flowing from root to bud and overflowing into our lives.

To fall in love, we sometimes say, is to lose your heart to someone. To fall in love with God is to find your heart again, to find your heart full and bubbling over with the things you most want inside you - home and happiness and a heaven that begins now and never ends. May this in-between hour show you that this hope is yours, now and forever. Amen.

### Prayer

We thank you, great Creator, for trees and lakes and squirrels and the peace of wild things; for birds in migration, for the Spirit that lives within all things, and the God of our salvation, whom we worship in spirit and in truth, wherever we are.

With sorrow, we remember the eight lives cut short in Atlanta this week, and those who grieve for them. We remember, too, the young man who ended them; may we as a nation pursue understanding and justice, remembering we are all part of one deep stream of being.

As we look forward to the hour of re-opening and release from restrictions, let us not forget the lessons learned in this time of exile and upheaval in our society. May we go forward with renewed dedication to the ideals of your justice and your peace for all the earth.

We ask your for your healing presence to accompany all who come to this city or simply to you in search of restored life. We ask that you walk with all who are nearing the end of life and those who love them. All this we ask in the name of our Savior Jesus, whose Spirit lives among us and prays with us still, "Our Father...."