

“The Tenth Hour”

John 1:29-42

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Our scripture this morning from the gospel of John refers to Jesus' baptism, though it is an indirect reference. What is emphasized again and again in this reading is John's witness to Christ. John piles up image upon image, almost as if to convince us *who Jesus is*. The names he assigns to Jesus: Lamb of God, Son of God, Rabbi, Messiah, Christ, the one upon whom the Spirit descended, like a dove, the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit. After this pile up of names and images for Jesus, we come upon two disciples encountering Jesus in person..

The next day John was there again with two of his disciples. When he saw Jesus passing by, he said, "Look, the Lamb of God!" When the two disciples heard him say this, they followed Jesus. Turning around, Jesus saw them following and asked, "What do you want?" They said, "Rabbi", "where are you staying?" "Come," he replied, "and you will see." So they went and saw where he was staying, and spent that day with him. It was about the tenth hour.

When the two unnamed disciples encounter Jesus, it is the tenth hour¹.

To understand what this means, we have to understand the Roman system for counting daylight hours. In it, every day was divided into 12 hours, from sunrise to sunset. We can imagine how little activity happened after dark in those ancient times, with no electricity. The eleventh hour would be the LAST hour of the day; the last possible hour for getting anything accomplished before the day ended.

Many of us have heard the expression “the 11th hour” but rarely do we think about the 10th hour. The 11th hour is when most students begin studying for the big exam. The 11th hour is when you realize it's only a few weeks until that college reunion (the one that ends in a zero) and you decide you've got to lose some weight, fast. The 11th hour is when the copy editor rushes around at the very last second before something goes to press.

But with the 10th hour, there's still time. It's late, but there's still time. Even if it's not the best time, nor the optimum time, there's still time. Admittedly the 10th hour would not be the time we would choose for intense focus, not usually. The 10th hour is a time when the mind wanders.

¹ The NAS, NIV refer to it as the tenth hour, like the Greek. The NRSV has translated it as “about four o'clock in the afternoon. I prefer the drama and the story of the “tenth hour”, as well as its allegiance to the original language of the New Testament.

It is the 10th hour of your day, around 4 o'clock in the afternoon during a Texas winter. It is the time you think you're almost done with work, the hour when you're fatigued, maybe a little hungry. Not the hour to take on a new project. Not the best time to begin a meeting or launch a ministry. The 10th hour is the hour when you look forward to evening, to dinner, to rest. You're not quite there yet, but in your mind's eye, you take off your shoes, put on your sweats, put up your feet. It is a time to kind of "close in". Not an hour to go out and start something completely new. Not an hour to go out and meet the Messiah.

What we see here in John's gospel, the gospel that you know is pretty different from the other three—so different that the great Clement of Alexandria² called it "the spiritual gospel"³---what we see is a story of the calling of the disciples that is unique among the four gospels. Only in the gospel of John do we see the first disciples called away from being followers of John the Baptist. They switch allegiances! They join the other team! One scholar believes this probably reflects what actually happened, in that the very first followers of Jesus probably were first, followers of John the Baptist⁴.

And in the 10th hour, the two disciples (whose names we will learn later) go, see, and spend the day with Jesus. They follow.

Are you at the 10th hour? Perhaps you've grown weary of your commitment to Christ. Perhaps you're disenchanted with the all-too-human workings of the church.

You may feel, alongside the prophet Isaiah, that following God is not much use. Isaiah must have been pretty discouraged when he said this: "I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity". It's very hard to see the big picture. Yet Isaiah, even in his weariness, is called to a bigger job: "I will also make you a light of nations so my salvation will reach to the end of the earth". Even at the late 10th hour Isaiah is called to do more.

Or your story may be entirely different. Maybe you've struggled with faith all your life and you've never felt truly drawn to Christ. Maybe you think it's too late for that kind of experience.

On the other hand, I am sure there are those present here today who have been dealt a very difficult situation and who'd just rather give up than keep hoping for a cure, a deliverance, a change.

² From Wikipedia: Clement of Alexandria (Titus Flavius Clemens) (c.150-211/216), was the first member of the [Church](#) of [Alexandria](#) to be more than a name, and one of its most distinguished teachers. He was born about the middle of the 2nd century, and died between 211 and 216. He united Greek philosophical traditions with Christian doctrine and valued [gnosis](#) that with [communion for all people](#) could be held by common Christians.

³ [Interpretation](#) Commentary, The Gospel of John, p. 26.

⁴ [New Interpreter's Bible](#) Commentary, Gospel of John, p. 530.

Or perhaps you're young and you still don't quite buy all this "cost of discipleship"⁵ stuff. You may prefer a comfortable faith that seems to emphasize God's giving grace rather than your faithful response.

As you learn more and more about what it means to be a follower of Christ, as you hear from the great pillars of the faith, like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, (who died in prison because he wouldn't cave in to the German corruption of Christianity) you may begin to feel uneasy about following Christ. Here's what Bonhoeffer had to say, in describing God's call: "The call to follow at once produces a new situation. The call to follow implies that there is only one way of believing in Jesus Christ, and that is by **leaving all and going with** the incarnate son of God"⁶.

Frankly, I have to agree with you: leaving work, and going home to dinner sounds much easier.

Eugene Peterson (Bible scholar, pastor, & author of The Message) wrote a book in which he dealt with the cost of discipleship in our current day and age. He subtitled it, "Discipleship in an Instant Society". In it he quotes the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche (often decried because of his perspective on the death of God) said, "The essential thing "in heaven and earth is. . .that there should be **a long obedience in the same direction. . .**" A long obedience in the same direction. Isn't this what is being asked of us in the gospel? To come, follow, stay.

Peterson makes the point that it is not "difficult in [today's] world to get a person interested in the message of the gospel; it is terrifically difficult to sustain the interest"⁷. This is part of why I am talking with you about the 10th hour. The weary hour. The hour when you just want to quit. The hour when your interest flags. When you think, "what's the use?"

No matter how young or how old we are, no matter how distant or involved we have been, no matter how much we've already given to God, it is, for you, for me, for all of us, the 10th hour. It is a decisive moment, a moment that goes beyond the clock, that pays no attention to lengthening shadows. It is a moment when God is more concerned with our hungry souls than with our weary bodies.

Christ calls us, even in the 10th hour: "Will you come and follow and remain in me, abide in me, as I will in you?"

⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer's phrase for following Christ. He wrote an entire book with this title.

⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship, pp. 62-64.

⁷ Eugene Peterson, "A Long Obedience in the Same Direction", p. 16.

It is a simple yet profound question he asks. “What do you want?”. “What are you looking for?” What do we want? What are we really hungering for? Most people come to church seeking something. It is not information. We are inundated with information. Most people in America already know the basic story of Jesus. People aren’t looking for ideas; they are *hungry for an experience* of the Holy One. They don’t want to memorize rules from a long dead society; they want to be *transformed today*.

What do we want? It is a simple yet profound answer he gives. “Come and you will see”. Not “come, and all will be right in your life.” Not “come, and the way will be crystal clear”. Not “come, and you will no longer be weary, no longer have doubts, no longer worry”.

Come and you will see. Look with the eyes of faith and you will know. Things will become more clear to you, some days, and you will feel quite certain. Things will be muddled on other days, and you will wonder. Staying with Christ, abiding with Him, is a permanent situation. It is not “now and then”, “when I feel like it”, “when I have time left over”. It is (ironically, in the words of Nietzsche), a long obedience in the same direction. It is for good. Christ had no home, nowhere to stay, and yet Christ seeks to stay with us in a permanent relationship.

The choice to hear and to follow is ours. At first, no names are given to the disciples here. They could be, and are, any man, any woman, any one of us. John never does tick off a formal list of the names of the twelve, anywhere in his gospel. I think this is purposeful. The circle of discipleship is wide; the net is cast broadly for disciples of all shapes and sizes, all walks of life.

Yes, it is the 10th hour. But it is not too late. It is never too late to respond to God’s call to a long and fruitful obedience in the direction of the One who calls, the Lamb of God, the Messiah, the Christ.