

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, April 5, 2020
Palm Sunday**

**FOR SUCH A TIME
John 12:20-33**

As our time of mandated social distancing wears on, you may be feeling a bit lonely, or more lonely than usual. I want to assure you in the name of Jesus that you are not alone. You are not alone, because God has promised to be with you. You may be missing some of the human contact you are accustomed to, or that you desire, and that sense of loneliness is real. In the midst of it, though, remember that God is right there with you. He is never more than a prayer away. You are never out of His sight. You are always on His mind, always in His heart. The Bible says that He watches over all your comings and goings (Psalm 121:8). He knows when you sit down, when you lie down, and when you get up; He is familiar with all your ways, routines, and habits; He knows every thought you think and every desire of your heart (Psalm 139:2-4).

Reach out to Him. Draw near to Him. He has already drawn near to you. Cast all your cares on Him, because He cares for you (1 Peter 5:7). Take time every day to read and meditate on God's Word, to be comforted, encouraged, nourished, fortified, and renewed by His Word. Set aside time each day to pray. If you feel anxious, as many of us do in these days, if you struggle with worry or fear, "let petitions and praises shape your worries into prayers, letting God know your concerns" (Philippians 4:6, *MSG*). Don't miss out on the privilege and blessings of spending time with God at the throne of grace (Hebrews 4:16).

I want to say this, also: If you are feeling lonely and cut off from others (or even if you're not), think about others who may be feeling that way – friends or neighbors, people you know who are quarantined by choice or necessity, or other members of our church family who could use some human contact. Since we can't get together in person, use the resources you have – a phone call, text, or email; a note or card in the mail; an offer to pick up groceries or to help in some other practical way. Let's see how inventive we can be in loving one another and our neighbors during this time. Ask the Lord to show you how you can bless at least one person every day, and then follow the promptings the Lord gives you.

We're all dealing with numerous disruptions and disappointments. So many things we are accustomed to are temporarily unavailable to us. So many things we were looking forward to have been canceled or postponed. Mission trips, vacations, proms, graduations, weddings, anniversary celebrations. Millions of Americans have lost their jobs or businesses, either temporarily or permanently. None of us has been unaffected by the impact of the coronavirus on daily life, just as none of us is immune to the virus itself. Not only is this coronavirus "novel," so are the measures being implemented to slow and ultimately halt its spread.

At a personal level, Mary Sue and I are disappointed that we have not yet been able to meet our new grandson, Henry, in person. We don't know when we will have the opportunity. Our daughter Erin gave birth to Henry Knox Stonecipher last Wednesday morning in suburban

Philadelphia. Henry is doing fine. He is healthy and handsome (of course!). We've seen him on FaceTime and in pictures, but it is not the same as holding him in our arms, or being there with Henry's big brother Grant. But God, in His wise providence, has prevented us from being there. We don't know why, and we are sad to not be there, but we trust God and His gracious, loving purposes in this, as we want to trust Him in all things.

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As we think about Palm Sunday and Jesus' dramatic entrance into Jerusalem, I want you to think about the fact that when He arrived in Jerusalem, Jesus knew that He had less than a week to live. This morning, unpleasant as it is to think about, it is possible that you or I may have only a week to live, or less. It is not a pleasant thought, but it is possible. Some COVID-19 patients may have only a week, or less, to live. The coronavirus is now claiming more than 1,000 lives a day across America. And the numbers continue to increase. We don't know who will get it or who will die from it. It is a sobering reminder of the temporariness of this life, and of our need for God and His grace.

Jesus, however, knew the end was near. He knew the Hosannas on Palm Sunday would be replaced by calls for His crucifixion in less than a week. He knew, as He said to Andrew and Philip in verse 23 of our reading from John 12, that "the hour (had) come for the Son of Man" – the title Jesus often used to refer to Himself – "to be glorified." A little later, in verses 27-28, He said: "Right now my heart is troubled." "Storm-tossed," it says in *The Message*. "And what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour?' (MSG: 'Father, get me out of this?') No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify Your name!"

"For this reason," says Jesus. For "this hour." What He is referring to, of course, is His impending sacrifice, His suffering and death on the cross for us. It was, to borrow an expression from the Old Testament, "for such a time as this" that Jesus came.

The phrase, "for such a time as this," is from the keynote verse in the Book of Esther (4:14). If you're not acquainted with the story of Esther, read it this week. It might take you a half hour or so. If you've forgotten some of the details in the story, get reacquainted with it. Here is a quick synopsis of the story:

Drama, power, romance, intrigue – this is the stuff of which best-selling novels are made. But far from a modern piece of fiction, these words describe a true story, lived and written centuries ago. More than entertaining reading, it is a story of the profound interplay of God's sovereignty and human will.

The Book of Esther begins with Queen Vashti refusing to obey an order from her husband, King Xerxes, the King of Persia. She was subsequently banished from the King's presence, and the search began for a new queen. Eventually, a young Jewish

woman named Esther (Hadassah in Hebrew), who had hidden her Jewish identity, was chosen by Xerxes as his new queen.

Meanwhile, Esther's older cousin, Mordecai, who had raised Esther after she was orphaned, became a government official and foiled a plot to assassinate the king. But he incurred the ire and hatred of Haman, who rose to the position of second-in-command in the Persian Empire. Haman determined to get rid of Mordecai and came up with a plan to exterminate the entire Jewish people. It was an ancient "final solution" that predated Hitler and the Nazis by about 2,400 years.

To accomplish this, Haman deceived the king and convinced him to issue a decree condemning all the Jews in the empire to death. Mordecai told Queen Esther about the edict, and urged her to plead with the king to save her people from destruction. To do so – to approach the king without having been invited – would mean risking her life. In his appeal to Esther, Mordecai said: "If you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?" (Esther 4:14)

Persuaded by Mordecai, Esther agreed to go to the king, 'even though it is against the law. "If I perish," she says, "I perish" (4:16). Esther did go to the king, who held out his gold scepter to show her mercy and permit her to come into his presence uninvited. After inviting the king and Haman to special dinners on consecutive days, Esther made her appeal to the king and fingered Haman as the mastermind behind the plot to annihilate the Jewish people. In a radical reversal of fortune, the king sentenced Haman to die on the 75-foot high gallows Haman had built to put Mordecai to death.

In the final act of this real-life drama, Mordecai replaced Haman as the king's closest advisor, and the Jews were guaranteed protection throughout the empire. To celebrate this historic occasion, as a reminder of God's deliverance of His people, the feast of Purim was established, which Jews continue to celebrate to this day.

Though Esther did not know it until the crisis arose, God had made her the Queen of Persia "for such a time as this," in order to serve God's purposes for the protection and deliverance of the Jewish people throughout the Persian Empire. God demonstrated His

providential care and sovereign power by using the influence of this young woman to spare the Jewish people from the anti-Semitic animus of Haman.

(Adapted from the NIV Life Application Bible, Introduction to Esther.)

One thing that should be obvious to us from this is that anti-Semitism (hatred of Jewish people) is not a recent development. It is thousands of years old. And it is wrong. Anti-Semitism is always wrong. It always has been and always will be. It is never right. It never was and never will be. The Jewish people have a special place in God's heart. To hold any prejudice against any Jewish person because they are Jewish is antithetical to the teachings of Jesus and the Christian faith. Do not let any seed of anti-Semitism take root in your heart and grow up to cause trouble. Do not grieve the Holy Spirit in this way (Ephesians 4:30). Are you with me? I know you are.

Throughout history, God has placed innumerable people in positions of influence for just such a time. Think of Joseph, Moses, Caleb and Joshua. Rahab and Deborah. Samuel and David. Elijah and the prophets. Think of Mary the mother of Jesus. Think of Peter and Paul. Think of Reformers like Luther and Calvin. Think of missionaries like William Carey, Adoniram and Ann Judson, and Hudson Taylor, all of whom did hard things for the sake of the gospel. In our country's history, think of the founders used by God to establish our union, and the leadership of men like Washington, Adams, Jefferson, and Franklin. Think of Abraham Lincoln, thrust into leadership when our nation endured a horrible Civil War. Think of Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr. Think of unsung heroes who have stood in the gap at critical moments in the history of our nation and the world. Think of doctors and nurses and medical staff putting their lives on the line in this current crisis in order to save others, as well as people in other professions working long hours and putting themselves at risk to insure that we all have what we need in order to make it through this crisis.

Then there is Jesus. In language similar to that of Esther 4:14, He says that He came into the world for such a time as this. Why *did* Jesus come into the world? Why did He come to live among us? Why did He become flesh and blood and move into our neighborhood?

He came, He said, "to seek and to save the lost" (Luke 19:10) – like Zaccheus, a short in stature (both physically and morally), friendless tax-collector who had gotten rich by cheating people, who, by God's grace, became a follower of Jesus and mended his ways.

When His disciples argued among themselves about which of them deserved to be most highly honored in Jesus' coming Kingdom, He said that He "did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45).

In his first Epistle, 1 John 3:8, the apostle John says: "The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work." "The Son of God entered the scene," it says in *The Message*, "to abolish the devil's ways."

We don't yet see the devil's ways abolished, do we? It doesn't appear that the devil's work has been destroyed yet. But we believe that the devil's defeat and destruction are assured. They are a certainty. Why? Because in His suffering, death, and resurrection, Jesus dealt a death blow to Satan and all the forces of evil in this world. The events of Holy Week were the D-Day battle to overshadow all others.

Even before Jesus was born, an angel told Joseph in a dream that Mary was going to give birth to a son, who was to be given the name Jesus, which means "The Lord saves." Why? "Because," the angel said, "He will save His people from their sins" (Matthew 1:20-21).

Why did Jesus come? To save His people from their sins. To save *us* from *our* sins. To seek and to save the lost. Including us. To give His life as a ransom for many. To deal a death blow to Satan.

That is why Jesus came. That was His mission. The only way Jesus could fulfill His mission was by going to the cross. If there had been another way to save us, don't you think God would have spared His Son the unspeakable horror of what Jesus went through for us?

Jesus knew what lay ahead for Him. He knew what He had to do. He knew what was coming. And He willingly accepted His mission. There is a fascinating verse in Luke's Gospel that sheds light on this. Luke 9:51 says: "As the time approached for Him to be taken up to heaven" – in other words, as His death approached – "Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem." He didn't run the other way. He didn't try to hide. He didn't try to get out of it. He set His face resolutely, with total determination, to go to Jerusalem, knowing what was going to happen to Him there.

So, when Jesus arrived in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, He wasn't blind to what lay ahead. He wasn't in denial. He knew the hour had come. This was the very reason for which He had come into the world. Even though it meant unimaginable pain and suffering, and being completely abandoned – forsaken – by the Father as He bore the full weight of our sins, Jesus was determined to go through with it. Which He did, just a few days later, on Good Friday, when He was nailed to a cross and gave His life as an atoning sacrifice for your sins and mine.

It was for this reason that Jesus came into the world. It was for this reason that He came to this particular hour, this defining moment in His life that is *the* defining moment in all of history. He came for just such a time, for just such a moment as this.

And because He did, we worship Him. Because He did, we praise Him. Because He did, we shout "Hosanna!" Because He did, we sing "Hallelujah!" Because He did, we believe in Him. Because He did, we love Him. Because He did, we follow Him. Because He did, we serve Him.

I mentioned D-Day earlier. Here is a story from that day in World War II. Most (if not all) kingdoms or nations do all they can to protect their monarch or president. If you know anything about chess, you know that protecting the king is the premise of the game. When the

king falls, the game is lost. So the king must be protected at all costs. When the Allied invasion of Normandy took place on June 6, 1944, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill desperately wanted to join the expeditionary forces and watch the invasion from the bridge of a battleship in the English Channel. American General Dwight Eisenhower, fearing the Prime Minister might be endangered, was desperate to stop him. When Churchill would not be dissuaded, Eisenhower appealed to a higher authority: King George VI. The King told Churchill that if it was the Prime Minister's duty to witness the invasion, then it must be his own duty as King to join him on the battleship. At this point Churchill reluctantly agreed to back down, because he knew he could never expose the King of England to such danger.

Our King, Jesus, though, did exactly the opposite. As Philip Ryken said: "With royal courage (Jesus) surrendered His body to be crucified. On the cross He offered a king's ransom: His life for the life of His people. He would die for all the wrong things we had ever done and would do, completely atoning for all our sins. The crown of thorns that was meant to make a mockery of His royal claims actually proclaimed His kingly dignity, even in death." (Adapted from Philip Ryken's Sermon "Long Live the King!")

For such a time. For such an hour. For this reason. For you and me. Take time this week, while you are engaged in social distancing, to think about what Jesus endured for you. Take time to thank Him. Take time to get closer to Him. Take time *today* to come to Him in faith, if you have never trusted Him to be your Savior. Take time *today* to come back to Him, to come to Him again, if you have drifted away or in some way turned away from Him. If you're dabbling in sin, now is the time to stop. The hour to get right with God is now. And He is near to all who call to Him with a sincere heart in faith.

One last thing: You and I – all of us – are here for such a time as this. God has put each of us right here, right now, at this time and place in history, for such a time as this, to serve God's purposes in this generation. In this crisis. Ask God to show you His purpose for you in these days. Ask God to show you opportunities to bless others in Jesus' name. Ask Him for opportunities to love and talk to unbelieving neighbors or friends or family members about Jesus. Ask Him to show us as a church how we can better love and care for one another, and our neighbors in this time. Then step out in action. In the name of Jesus and for His glory.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.