

*Thy Will Be Done*  
*Sermons for the Lenten Season*

*God's Will and Honoring the Hour*  
Jeremiah 31:31-34; John 12:20-33

March 18, 2018

By Dr. David B. Freeman, Pastor  
Weatherly Heights Baptist Church

This speech was given on April 3, 1968. Its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary is nine days away. It was delivered at the Mason Temple in Memphis, Tennessee, by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Today we refer to it as the “I’ve Been to the Mountain Top” speech, and it is identified by American Rhetoric as one of the 100 greatest speeches of all times. It begins this way:

*Something is happening in Memphis; something is happening in our world. And you know, if I were standing at the beginning of time, with the possibility of taking a kind of general and panoramic view of the whole of human history up to now, and the Almighty said to me, "Martin Luther King, which age would you like to live in?" I would take my mental flight by Egypt and I would watch God's children in their magnificent trek from the dark dungeons of Egypt through, or rather across the Red Sea, through the wilderness on toward the Promised Land. And in spite of its magnificence, I wouldn't stop there.*

He spoke of moving on to Greece and seeing Plato, Aristotle, Socrates and other Greek philosophers debating the “great and eternal issues of reality.” But, he says, he wouldn’t stop there. Nor at the heyday of the Roman Empire, as great as it was. Nor the Renaissance, when culture and aesthetic life blossomed. He said he saw in his mind Martin Luther tacking the ninety-five theses to the door of the church in Wittenberg, precipitating the Protestant Reformation. But, again, he wouldn’t stop there.

Finally, in the masterful rhetorical style of Dr. King, he reached his destination and said,

*Strangely enough, I would turn to the Almighty, and say, "If you allow me to live just a few years in the second half of the 20th century, I will be happy."*

A few years in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century? Why? 1968 was a time of violent unrest for African Americans in this country. Bull Connor turned the fire hoses and dogs loose on them. They were thrown into paddy wagons and carted off to jail. Their churches were bombed. Some were lynched. Others beaten. Some spat upon. Yet he would tell the Almighty that that is the age he would choose to live in. Why? Because he glimpsed freedom. He tasted justice for his people. He believed our country was almost there. He ended the speech this way:

*Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop.*

*And I don't mind.*

*Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land!*

That was April 3, 1968. The next day an assassination's bullet would find its mark, and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., would be dead.

It was as if he knew his "hour" had arrived.

Jesus at first said that his "hour" had not yet come. He was at a wedding in Cana of Galilee. The host ran out of wine. Mary, Jesus' mother, told Jesus, "They have no wine." Listen to his response to Mary:

*Woman, what concern is that to you and me? My hour has not yet come.*

Some time later Jesus was teaching at the temple in Jerusalem. A group was trying to capture and kill him. They tried to arrest him that day, and this is what John records:

*But no one laid hands on him because his hour had not yet come.*

Yet another time Jesus taught openly in the temple. “I am the light of the world,” he told all who would listen. “Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” They tried to arrest him again but could not “because his hour had not yet come.”

In John 12 for the first time, Jesus acknowledged that his hour had come, that hour that drove his life. Scholars think this was early in the last week of Jesus’ life, possibly Tuesday. Something happened that day to turn Jesus from “My hour has not yet come” to “The hour has come.” What was it? Professor Gail O’Day from the Candler School of Theology at Emory University helped me unravel this complicated text. She says the turning point had to do with those people who came to see Jesus that day, and Dr. O’Day says that this is very important.

They were Greeks, John says, Gentiles, those thought to be the “not chosen” by God. The Gentiles were believed to be outside “the family,” not a part of the chosen people. On Tuesday of the last week of his life, a group of Gentiles came to the disciple named Philip with this request, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.”

Pause for a moment. This is one of those occasions—I’ve mentioned them often—where a word in the Gospel of John has a double meaning. This group of Gentiles said they wished to “see” Jesus. “Seeing” in John is sometimes more than just seeing with one’s eyes. Sometimes “seeing” also means “believing.”

“Sir,” the non-chosen ones said to Philip, “we wish to believe in Jesus.”

Oh, my goodness! Was that even possible? Do you see what’s happened? And why this was so important? The ones who were expected to believe in Jesus, the Pharisees, did not. In fact, they were trying to capture

and kill him. And the ones who were not expected to believe in him, the Gentiles, did.

So Philip told Andrew. Together they went and told Jesus. And don't miss Jesus' response to them. Remember the request of the Gentile group: "we wish to see Jesus." You might expect Jesus to say, "Okay, send them in." Or, "No, I don't have time now. Have them come another time." But Jesus doesn't say that. In fact, his response doesn't even seem to match their request. Jesus said for the first time, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified."

What's he saying? Dr. O'Day says that Jesus' response did indeed match their request. How he responded was as important, she says, as the raising of Lazarus and Mary's symbolic anointing of Jesus' feet with oil. Here's what Jesus was saying: The hour has come for the world to know the depth and breadth of the love and grace of God. God's love and grace are not just for a chosen few. They are for these Gentiles too. The hour had come for the world to know that God loved and welcomed the Gentiles as much as God loved and welcomed the Jews. That was radical! Jesus' life and death would be a demonstration of God's love for all.

That day the world began to grow up to understand that God is not a nationalistic or territorial God among the gods. God did not withhold acceptance because of nationality, race, lineage, color, or for any other reason. In the shadow of his cross, with a group of Gentiles knocking on his door, Jesus wanted the world to "see," i.e., believe, the fullness of the love and grace of God.

I may not get there with you, Jesus was saying, but that's okay. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And he did.

It's a lesson we're still trying to learn this Lenten season, isn't it? It's still radical. That God loves all—straight people and gay people, blacks and whites, liberals and conservatives, Christians and Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, and all the rest. We honor Jesus' hour by "seeing" God's love and grace towards all. We can do that when we pray from the depths the prayer he prayed, "Thy will be done."

## Closing Prayer

Challenging Lord, expand our hearts to love all people as you did; expand our minds to understand God as you did; expand our reach that we might embrace all as you did. Amen.