

Joey, a first grader was being coached by his older brother for his first day at school. Their pastor had the custom of visiting the class on the first day of school. And he always followed the same routine. He asked each kid their name, how old they were, do you say your prayers at night, and what can happen if you don't. So Joey practiced and practiced until he had it down pat. He was so excited that the next day when the priest called on him, he stood up and shouted out: "My name is Joey, I'm 6 years old, I say my prayers every night and you can go to hell!"

Let's start with the gospel text. Taken out of context, the story begins in a rather strange way. Some 'Greeks' came to celebrate the Passover and told Philip that they wanted to see Jesus. Why Philip? All we know is that he had a Greek name and had once invited Nathaniel to 'come and see' Jesus (Jn 1:46). Philip told Andrew, and Andrew went to Jesus with the news. Although we hear nothing more of these Greeks, their request and the process serve 2 purposes in the story. First, this confirms what the Pharisees had just said in the verse immediately preceding where we pick up the gospel today: "Look, the whole world has gone after him." (Jn 12:19) Secondly, the complexity of the process of getting to Jesus recalled the difficulty with which the Jewish-Christian community accepted the people labeled as 'foreigners' or 'outsiders.' Theologically, John is making the point that the Gentile or non-Jewish world was seeking Jesus. And it was these foreigners' desire to see Jesus that became the occasion for Jesus to make one of the most important announcements in this Gospel: "The HOUR has come for the Son of Man to be glorified."

In John's Gospel, the HOUR is Jesus' greatest moment – and it is His moment on the cross, a time of deep testing and great pain. It is when Jesus triumphs completely over the forces of sin and evil – and He fulfills His Father's will in loving the world to the very end – to giving over His life for it. And here we get the only glimpse John gives us that Jesus struggled with the coming of His 'hour.' At first, He simply taught His disciples what He thought about the coming of His hour: Referencing Isaiah's Fourth Song of the Servant of God (Is 53ff), Jesus taught that a grain of wheat must die to bear fruit, that whoever hates their life in this world will preserve it for eternal life, and, most ominously for His disciples -- and us -- "Where I am, there also will my servant be." He then told them how HE felt: "I am troubled now."

This moment is John's alternative to the Synoptics' – that's Matthew, Mark and Luke -- agony in Gethsemane, and just as in the garden Jesus chose His Father's will over His own (Lk 22:42), here too He alludes to God, but starts out like a teacher. He asks if He should call on God as Father to rescue Him from what is to come, but then repeating that this is His hour, He speaks directly to God: "Father, glorify your name!" With that, just as happened in the Synoptic Gospels at Jesus' baptism and transfiguration, a voice came from heaven, this time saying "I have glorified it and will glorify it again." Then, Jesus explains what His hour and God's glory mean: "Now is the time of judgment on this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out." Jesus is about to complete what He has come to do. John uses this scene as one which reveals Jesus as the utterly faithful Son of God, the one for whom loss of everything for the sake of faithfulness and trust was not abandonment by His Father, but glory. John's depiction of Jesus' utter freedom and even joy at approaching His passion does not contradict the other Gospels, but reveals a different dimension of the same truth they tell. (adapted from CELEBRATION, March 2018, p. 25)

Second, so what? This gospel brings us to the deep truth of the Gospel. The Catholic tradition calls this the Paschal Mystery, and we summarize it every Sunday in the heart of the Eucharistic prayer when we respond to THE MYSTERY OF FAITH: When we eat this bread and drink this cup, we proclaim your death O Lord, until you come again. We proclaim your death O Lord and profess your Resurrection, until you come again. Save us, Savior of the world, for by your cross and resurrection, you have set us free. The Paschal

Mystery teaches us that the hard parts of life are not the end, but rather an invitation to join our lives to Christ's – and to surrender, as he did, to a plan and purpose often far beyond what we can see at the time. In our sufferings, there is a promise of healing, in our dyings there is promise of life. But what is the first question we usually ask when we suffer? WHY ME? Or, HAS GOD ABANDONED ME? Or, WHAT DID I DO TO DESERVE THIS? If we understand the paschal mystery as the template for our own lives, we can see trial and suffering not as abandonment or punishment – but rather as an invitation to glory.

The Paschal Mystery teaches us that within sorrow, there is grace. When we come close to those things that break us down, we uncover our true nature. Within every story, there is the person in the story. The word 'person' comes from the Latin 'personare,' which means 'sounding through.' There is an emptiness, a hollowness through which our experiences may pass without ultimately defining us. Our life, our experiences, our joys and our sorrows can sound through us without naming us. Sr. Joan Chittister puts it this way: "Life is not what happens to us; life is what happens IN us." This is the point of healing: When we have told the story, we can leave the story behind. What remains is a hidden wholeness, alive and unbroken.

The Paschal Mystery teaches us that sorrows do not have to break us. Our pain is rarely strong enough to quench the fire of our souls, the resilience of our spirits, the essence of our true nature. Even in the midst of the most horrible anguish, the most unimaginable loss and suffering, the light still shines, the spirit remains. Not only are we strong enough to bear the pain we are given, but our sorrow can actually become a bridge to a deeper and richer life. (adapted from Wayne Muller, HOW THEN SHALL WE LIVE?, p. 26) When I come upon this question of suffering, I often think of those who survived awful tragedies like the holocaust. We had a couple in the parish in Fayetteville that had escaped the Nazis in what was then Czechoslovakia. They lost their home, all of their possessions, and all of their relatives. They fled to Argentina, learned Spanish, and began a new life. Then strife there forced them to Brazil, where they had to learn Portuguese and begin yet again. Eventually they fled the corruption there and came to the United States, ending up in Fayetteville because of the husband's work with the US Army. I asked them how they did all of that. "Oh Father," said Blanche, "We knew God was always with us. And we just had to go on. We've had a good life overall." HOW CAN THEY SAY THAT? AND HOW COULD THEY DO IT? Because life is what happens IN us, not to us. They understood the deep truth of their suffering in light of Christ. They embraced the Paschal mystery. They were like gold tested in fire. Wonderful people. And there suffering had made them into saints, truly.

The reality is, we all will face our moment, our hour, which in many ways can define our lives and our very souls. Suffering comes to us all; there are no exceptions. As the line in STEEL MAGNOLIAS says "If you have achieved puberty, you have achieved a past." It's not long before life begins to kick us all around. And then what? Who do we become? Bitter and angry? It's a choice. And today's gospel reminds us that as followers of Christ, we too will have our hour. "Where I am, my servants also will be." Who we become will be determined by how we respond. By our decisions to do the right thing – and to stick with our principles and our mission on this earth, just as Jesus did.

Third, a story to conclude. In 1966, the United States was deep in the war in Vietnam. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, sent a Marine-turned-researcher named Daniel Ellsberg into Vietnam to assess the war and the chances for success. After accompanying American units fighting and dying in the jungle, Ellsberg realized that the war was all but lost. Privately, McNamara concurred with Ellsberg's assessment – but, publicly, the secretary continued to grossly mischaracterize American progress. Ellsberg was so appalled at the carnage taking place because of such dishonesty that he secretly turned over to THE NEW YORK TIMES the official reports he and other analysts had compiled – what became known as 'The Pentagon Papers.' The 4000 pages were a detailed history of America's ill-conceived and disastrously managed war in Southeast Asia

over 23 years. The Nixon Administration obtained a court injunction stopping the publication of the documents by the TIMES.

The editor of the WASHINGTON POST, Ben Bradlee, and one of his reporters, Ben Bagdikian, then came into possession of the papers. They desperately wanted to publish them. To do so could lead to imprisonment – and, in all likelihood, the end of the POST. Bradlee went to the publisher, Katharine Graham, for permission to publish.

The story of what happens next is told in Steven Spielberg's acclaimed movie THE POST. The timing could not have been worse for Mrs. Graham. She had just become publisher of the paper, following the death of her husband, and was in the midst of taking the POST company public in order to guarantee the paper's financial survival. She knew she was out of her depth; she was patronized by her executives and bankers – all men – who considered her a wealthy society matron not to be taken seriously. Publishing the Pentagon Papers could kill the stock offering. And further complicating the matter was her long-time friendship with Robert McNamara, who served on the POST company board.

A particularly moving scene in the film is Katharine's meeting with McNamara himself, when Katharine confronts him not as a newspaper publisher but as the mother of a son who served in Vietnam. How could the government – how could MCNAMARA – lie to her and the mothers and fathers of sons who fought and died in a land so far away, for a cause they all knew was doomed?

Katharine Graham overruled her lawyers and accountants and gave her editors and reporters the go – and took the fight to publish all the way to the Supreme Court. In her courageous stand, Katharine Graham became one of the major figures in American journalism in advocating for the freedom of the press.

All because she met – and faced – and surrendered – to her hour. She took on the unique challenge confronting her with clear determination and conviction, despite the potentially disastrous consequences for her, personally and professionally. Like Jesus – like Mrs. Graham – every one of us will, at some time, face our own 'hour,' when our faith must become more than words, when we must profess our convictions in actions that could have devastating consequences. Our 'hour' may not be as dramatic as either Jesus' or Mrs. Graham's – but it may well require us to put on the line our safety, our security, our comfort for what is right and just. (adapted from CONNECTIONS, March 2018, p. 3) "Where I am, my servant also will be." The hour comes to us all. Whether it is a moment of defeat or glory depends upon the choices we make. Amen.