

A bride, just a few days before her wedding to a wonderful person who she loves very much, gets a bad case of “cold feet.”

A college freshman, having worked hard to graduate from high school and longed for the freedom that comes with adult life, feels terribly homesick during her first month at school.

A doctor, looking forward to retirement after many years of practicing medicine, wonders to herself, “How can I possibly leave this amazing job behind?”

These are all examples of very normal hesitancy that arises naturally when human beings are faced with a major change in life. Almost everyone, to some degree or another, will experience something like this hesitancy at some point in their life. It's normal and it's healthy because it means that one is thinking hard about these big moments in life and taking their importance seriously.

When such moments arise, it's like your own soul is checking in with you to ask, “Are you sure?” It doesn't necessarily mean that you're about to make the wrong decision, but the weight of this decision is enough to make one stop and consider the consequences. Any good carpenter can tell you that it's wisest to live by the maxim, “Measure twice; cut once.” Such moments can feel uncomfortable, but I would be more worried about someone who had never had second thoughts about anything.

In today's gospel, Jesus Christ himself has just such a moment of hesitancy as he begins the final stage of his earthly ministry, which he knows will lead to his crucifixion and resurrection.

The story opens as Jesus is visiting Jerusalem with massive throngs of pilgrims on their way to celebrate the holiday of Passover. Mixed in with this group are a number of Greek pilgrims. They weren't ethnically Jewish, but they had come to believe in and respect the monotheistic faith of Judaism rather than the many gods worshiped by their own people. These Greek pilgrims wanted to take part in the Passover festivities as well, but they were only allowed to go so far. Jewish law prevented them from entering the great Jerusalem temple. There was one, single area set aside for them at the very farthest back end of the temple. We would call

the nosebleed section. They called it the Court of the Gentiles. Unfortunately, even this one distant space had been taken away from them and filled up with all kinds of vendors exchanging foreign currency and selling animals for the ritual sacrifices. Feeling like the odd ones out, these Greek pilgrims were definitely getting the message that there was no place for people like them in God's holy temple.

In the midst of all this, these Greek pilgrims somehow managed to hear that there was this remarkable new rabbi named Jesus who happened to be in Jerusalem for the festival. They were intrigued by what they heard and wanted to meet him, so they tracked down someone from Jesus' entourage. They found Philip and said, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." I can't imagine what the look on Philip's face must have been in that moment. He probably thought, "Why would these foreigners want anything to do with Jesus?" Philip was confused enough that he thought he needed a second opinion, so he went and talked to Andrew, another one of Jesus' disciples. Even together, they still couldn't figure out what was going on, so they decided to bring the issue to Jesus himself. Jesus' reaction to this news probably shocked them even more. He said, "The hour has come."

What does that mean? Well, there's a lot of talk about Jesus' "hour" at several points in John's gospel. Early on, when Mary asks Jesus to show his power by changing water into wine at a wedding, Jesus refuses saying, "My hour has not yet come." Later on, when people try to get Jesus to use another Jewish holiday as a publicity platform, Jesus again refuses saying, "My hour has not yet come."

Finally, when he had enraged one crowd to the point where they tried to kill him, the text notes that they were unsuccessful because "his hour had not yet come." It was like the whole book had been building toward this big moment that was about to happen. According to Jesus himself, the appearance of these Greek pilgrims was the "hour" he had been waiting for.

But that's where things get really interesting. That's the moment where Jesus has his own moment of hesitancy. He says, "Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say: 'Father, save me from this hour'?"

Jesus Christ, as human as any of us, experiences a moment of hesitation before fulfilling his destiny as the Son of God. The reason for this is twofold. First, Jesus knew that the path of crucifixion and death would be difficult beyond all imagination. No one could blame him for wanting to avoid it. I imagine that Jesus was like Dr. Martin Luther King, who kept on speaking up for civil rights, even

though he knew it might eventually get him killed. Second, I think Jesus experienced this moment of hesitancy because he realized that his vision of God's big family went against the long-established boundaries of his particular culture and religion. The guardians of orthodoxy had whole chapters of Scripture and centuries of tradition in their favor to say that their people were God's only chosen people, out of all the nations of the Earth.

But Jesus says, "I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." He didn't say just the people of his nation, his religion, his ethnicity, or his political party. He said, "all people." Jesus was driven by his conviction that God's loving arms are big enough to wrap around the whole world. Jesus believed this so strongly that he was willing to stake his life on it, and that's exactly what he did.

I think of this faith that Jesus had every time I drive by our church's sign on Napier Avenue that proudly says, "The Episcopal Church welcomes you." There is no asterisk by that sentence or fine print at the bottom that lists the exceptions to that rule. "The Episcopal Church welcomes you" is an absolute commitment that applies to every human being who walks through our doors and every person that Episcopalians encounter in their life outside this building. When we abide by it, we are following in the footsteps of Jesus himself, who gave his life to make this dream a reality. "The Episcopal Church welcomes you... no exceptions."

This vision of God's love is a tall order. It asks everything of us. Therefore, I don't blame anyone, not even Jesus, for taking a moment of hesitancy to wonder whether they are up to the challenge. The fact that we hesitate means that we are taking the moment seriously.

But the main thing is that we not let our moments of hesitancy stop us from fulfilling the purpose that God has set before us. The virtue of courage is not the same thing as the absence of fear. Courage is not a feeling, but a choice. Courage means that you feel the fear and then do the thing anyway, even if you have to "do it scared."

That's what Jesus did. He asked himself the question, "And what should I say: 'Father, save me from this hour'?" And then he answered his own question, "No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name."

And that, in the end, is the point of all this. Jesus staked his life on the welcoming of everyone, not because he was some loosey-goosey liberal, but for the sake of the

glory of God. Jesus refused to believe in any God who loved anything less than the entire universe. He did not ask to be spared from the hour of his suffering, but only that the true nature of his loving Father would be made apparent to everyone... no exceptions.

Friends, the message of this sermon is the same as the message of every sermon that deserves to be heard: "Follow Jesus." Be like Jesus. May the same courage that he demonstrated in his life become apparent in your life. When you face moments of hesitation at the major changes in your life, acknowledge the fear and then move forward in faith. When you encounter people who are different from you, welcome them with the same love that Jesus showed to everyone. Live not for the sake of your own safety and comfort, but for the sake of the glory of God, whose love is big enough to embrace the entire universe. Friends, in an age of fear, choose courage, choose life, choose God, choose to be like Jesus, and remember always: The Episcopal Church welcomes you... no exceptions.