Hosea 6:6, John 3:25-36

“Decreasing so God will increase”

 For the past 5 years or more our family has spent the 4th of July out West in Washington State with Stacy’s family. We had a wonderful time again this year. The evening of the 4th the cousins go down every year to the dock and set off fireworks. It really is an amazing scene as you have a panoramic view of the Puget Sound and you can see fireworks going off all around the coastline with Mount Rainier in the background. There’s a bit of competition as well cause whenever someone sets off a firework then someone tries to do one better and so it escalates.

 This year at the peak of the fireworks when the entire sound was lit up and exploding, right in front of us this enormous, orange harvest moon made its slow deliberate ascent into the sky. It was stunning as it reflected off the water. It was almost as if God were saying you go and have your fun, but just try and match this.

 Stacy and I came home alone after a week out there and we had a few more days off, just the two of us, while the girls were still in Seattle. We were amazed by how much our garden had grown in all the heat. We had worked so hard to set up a rabbit fence to keep them out, and tended the garden so faithfully, but when we got back it was a jungle. But the fence was still up, and that was our major preoccupation, and we knew that as long as we kept the rabbits out we could get the garden back in shape.

 While Stacy was watering the cucumbers she thought she saw something move, she looked closer and there was a nest of rabbits with 3 babies looking back out at her, well protected, and we had fenced them in where they had access to a buffet of vegetables. God outshone the harbor and the rabbits outsmarted the Bronkemas.

 Our Scriptures today, both of them, speak to this common variable in our lives of always trying to be the ones who are smarter, harder working, and better all for the purpose of increasing our status and our value and our worth. But the Scriptures teach us something that is completely counterintuitive which is the more we allow Christ to increase in our lives and the more we are able to decrease our desire for our personal gain and notoriety, then the more God will be revealed in our lives. Let’s read John.

 **READ**

So much happens behind the scenes in this church that it is hard to capture in a simple enews or a simple sermon all that happens. But one event that took place this past week lifted up to me the theme of these Scriptures that we just read, this theme today of allowing Christ to increase ion our lives and the only way to be able to do that is to allow ourselves to decrease. The passing of Bill Oliver took a toll on a lot of us this week, of course, not nearly as much as it did to his family. But you need to know that the day he passed away, on Wednesday, one after another while he was still living and holding on, a steady stream of men came to be with him, completely unplanned, during his last hours.

 Less than a week earlier he had been to breakfast and told the boys that this would be his last one. It was, but the silent powerful witness of those men who came and prayed, some cried over him, will never be forgotten.

 The Gospel of John today teaches us in the last words of John the Baptist, what it means to allow ourselves to decrease so Christ can increase. The scene is set in our Scripture when an argument breaks out among John the Baptist’s disciples as to why every0one is now flocking to Jesus to be baptized. Their teacher tells them, you know, this is why I came so that he, Jesus can be proclaimed.

 He says, let me give you an example. The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. Who remembers who the bride is? Ephesians chapter 5 states that the church is the bride and Jesus is the groom. This church is married to Jesus, we follow and serve no other lover. In vs. 29 he calls himself the friend of the groom or what we call the best man.

 Now today, the best man sets up the bachelor party, and gives the speech at the post wedding celebration. In Jesus’ day it was the best man and his guys who completely organized the wedding. From start to finish. Now, my best men at my wedding were my three brothers and I am so thankful that Stacy’s mom organized our whole wedding. We got married our second year in seminary and so she basically did it all, start to finish. I don’t even want to think about what it would have looked like if my brothers had that responsibility.

 But this image of actively preparing the setting for when the groom comes to take the bride is the scene that John builds up. And then his joy is complete based upon the fact that someone else has their wishes realized and not their own. What a great image that is for us. We are the maids of honor, the best men whose responsibility it is to prepare our lives and this earth for when Jesus dwells. We aren’t seeking our own spotlight, the center of attention. In fact, when the groom has come then we love to quietly and quickly fade into the background.

 If Jesus has come into your life then it is time to fade away so that Jesus can take center stage. We have to find pleasure in seeing Jesus get the glory while we look on. You know Jesus’ birthday is December 25 which is the winter solstice which means what? On December 26th there will be a little more light all the way until when, June 24th. Guess whose birthday is celebrated on that day in the church’s calendar? John the Baptist. See, not all tradition is bad. John spends his days decreasing, Jesus increasing, Are you getting the message?

 Our Old Testament reading you see a similar theme of the prophet telling us exactly what God wants. What is it? Not a sacrifice, that is public, something everyone can see, but a steadfast love that is invisible but binding. Not burnt offerings for the town to see your piety, but a passion for the knowledge of God that is manifested by praying in secret in your closet so that your heavenly Father who sees you will reward you. Hosea speaks about the difference between an exhibited faith and a lived faith.

 When I was 20 I was given the incredible opportunity to be the primary gopher and helped to organize a conferred that would gather Christians from Easter and Western Europe for the first time since the wall fell down. It was exciting to be co-opted staff for the Conference of European Churches. I worked my…I worked hard. I spent three months basically by myself pulling everything together for 10,000 delegates to come and move into the University campus that we had rented for the event.

 Two weeks before the conference the support team arrived and the conference started and it went really well. I got to eat with the Archbishop of Canterbury and Patriarch Alexi of Russia. It was all heady stuff, but I couldn’t wait for the last day. It came and they were calling out in front of all the thousands of delegates the names of the people who had helped pull this thing together. I looked out at the stage they were on and realized it didn’t collapse because of something we noticed earlier, I looked at the 60 banners that we had to jury rig because they had spelled something wrong on each one. I was feeling pretty good about myself waiting for my name to be called so I could be recognized, but it never came.

 I know, it sound small and petty, but I was mad and hurt. I went back to my dorm room and there was Hosea opened up from that morning and these verses popped up. God doesn’t want our sacrifice to be recognized, but rather wants us to recognize his sacrifice and to know it and love him for it. That experience, and others like it along the way where I seem to want to be noticed, have shaped me early to take pleasure in being the one who works behind the scenes to prepare, the back stage guy, as long as we can see it as an act of decreasing who we are so Christ can increase in our lives and in the life of the church.

 But how do we decrease? How do we avoid the pitfalls of pride and self-righteousness that so many of us struggle with on a daily basis? There are two ways to ensure that Jesus our Savior increases in our lives and the first we find in vs. 27. This verse is key to it all. John the Baptist sounds a bit like Yoda here where you know he said something important and meaningful but you’re not really sure what he said.

 How do we decrease? Read vs. 27. Basically we have to start with the realization that everything we have in our life is a gift from God, everything. I don’t care how hard you have worked in your life, if you don’t realize that tomorrow it could all be gone, all of it, then Christ hasn’t taken over your life. You still think you control your future. Whatever you have has been given by God.

 Your family, your kids, your job, your health, your house, your money, your things, your car, the list goes on. The moment you think you are entitled to any of it is the moment you have placed yourself on a pedestal. Christians have historically and notoriously tried to displace Jesus for themselves. This verse has to drive it all.

 The second way in which we are able to decrease I discovered a few weeks ago spending time with Bill and Lorraine. Look at Psalm 27:13. If you believe that you will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living, here and now, then you don’t mind decreasing for the sake of Christ. If we spend our lives trying to force our version of God’s will on humanity then we are going to miss the true goodness of the Lord.

 Do you see the distinction John makes here is not between belief and unbelief but it is between belief and, look at vs. 36, someone read it for me: Belief and Disobedience. You can believe in Jesus and have him as your Savior but if he is not Lord, if he hasn’t increased while you decrease then you are going to disobey. That’s what happens when we sin, we put our desires and our wishes ahead of what God wants in our live.

 You know, Christians agree and disagree on all sorts of topics and the good news is that abortion, death penalty, homosexuality, politics, taxes, none of these issues are salvation issues. That doesn’t mean that they don’t matter, they do, but they don’t matter eternally. We are Christians who disagree. But the key to any of these issues as we decide where we stand are we looking to subject our will, our understanding, our desires to God’s or are we, maybe even unknowingly, disobedient even in our beliefs. When we raise our desires above God’s, we disobey.

 I want to leave you with the words of St. Augustine that I hope will capture the essence of our Scripture today:

 I listen, he is the one who speaks,

 I am enlightened, he is the light

 I am the ear, he is the Word.

May God bless us and keep us as we look to decrease over our life so that Christ can increase. Amen.