

“Seeing Jesus, Following Jesus”
March 21, 2021

Jeremiah 31:31-34
John 12:20-33

Five Sundays into Lent, let us recall once more the meaning and purpose of this season. These are days for us to prepare for the celebration of the resurrection. And yes, the path toward resurrection takes us through the valley of the shadow of death. This morning we listened as Jesus told those who would listen: “Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am there will my servant be also.”

We follow where Jesus goes. And we follow, knowing that “troubles don’t last always,” as we sang in the words of the opening spiritual this morning. Those words tell us we will come through to the other side of the valley of shadows.

There have been many days in the past year that we have needed the comfort of those lyrics.

Along with that comfort, the spiritual gives us a prayer: “Make more room, Lord, in my heart for you.” We recognize that our hearts, our souls, our spirits can always be stretched to a new capacity for God’s presence and power. And we recognize that fullness of life is more than simply an end to what troubles us.

So Jesus tells us: A grain of wheat dies—and bears much fruit. We hear the paradoxical invitation to let go of our life that we might in turn take up life—even for eternity.

As is often the case, the novelist and Presbyterian minister, Frederick Buechner, helps us understand this a little better when he says: We think of eternal life, if we think of it at all, as what happens when life ends. We would do better to think of it as what happens when life begins.... In other words, to live eternal life in the full and final sense is to be with God as Christ is with him, and with each other as Christ is with us.”¹

“Where I am, there my servant will be also.”

One day as spring was approaching some 2000 years ago, Gentiles at the Passover festival in Jerusalem came up to Philip and said: “We wish to see Jesus.”

Still today we wish to see Jesus and see him “more clearly.”

Jesus tells all who listen that if we want to see him more clearly, we must look at the One who is crucified. “When I am lifted up from the earth,” Jesus says, “I will draw all people to myself.” Then John’s gospel tells us, “He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.”

As one person put it: “Christ hangs there before us, beseeching us to stay and look, and as we gaze upon him, the awful picture...becomes at the very same time a shining image of the unconquerable love and mercy of God. This is how the redeeming work is still done today, if only we will stay long enough to see what is really going on”²

But let's be honest. We don't want to stay long enough. Usually, the last thing we want to see is Christ *crucified*.

Our world is still filled with Good Friday places—places where suffering and violence and death still rule. Many come to worship hoping for “good news”—not a recounting of the weekly horrors of the world or the tortured death of one man 2000 years ago.

Perhaps we have good reason to avoid Christ crucified. After all, the message that we proclaim is not death but resurrection. The Christ we want to see is not only crucified but risen as well.

But let us listen to Jesus. Andrew and Philip come to him with the request of those Gentiles: “We wish to see Jesus.”

And as is often the case, Jesus doesn't respond directly. He doesn't say: “Sure, here I am;” or “No, they'll just have to wait.”

Instead, Jesus starts talking about seeds and sprouts. Speaking out of the agricultural understanding of his time, Jesus says: “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”

A children's song asks: “Do you or I or anyone know/How oats, peas, beans and barley grow?”

The words sing of the mystery of growth and development. We get the desired result, but how? The song tells us that no one can be quite sure just what is going on.

Jesus points to something unseen, something unknown as the creative power of the living God. What God has done and is doing among us is always wrapped in this mystery. You know how difficult it can be to say with certainty something like: “Sure, this is what God was doing,” or “God was certainly present here.”

We speak from faith instead. We live our individual lives and our life together in faith. We act in faith, with the awareness that beyond all thanksgiving, beyond all regret are the ways of God.

Jesus' ministry of healing and compassion,

his display of God's mercy and forgiveness,

his bold announcement of the coming of God's realm of healing into a world of illness, God's realm of peace into a world of violence

Jesus' ministry ended so abruptly and brutally.

That disturbs us.

It should not surprise us, however. Unwilling to compromise his convictions, the way Jesus lived brought about the way he died. We need not think that his death was the result of an angry God demanding payment for sin. Human beings, always at odds with God's desire for abundant life, killed Jesus.

By God's forgiving grace, however, that death means life.

How?

Christians have never defined the doctrine of the Atonement—the affirmation that the death of Jesus somehow restores our relationship with God. We’ve never sought to be exact or precise in saying just how it is that the death of Christ means life for us.

Do you or I or anyone know?

Instead, we sing about this wondrous love in our hymns, we celebrate it in our worship, we act it out at the table, and we experience it in our lives. The death of Jesus somehow shocks us into an awareness of our own condition. And this is followed by the healing experience of genuine forgiveness and the faith that Christ is alive, Christ lives in us.

“Whoever serves me must follow me,” Jesus says, “and where I am, there will my servant be also.” If Jesus is with those who are suffering and dying, we will follow him there. If Jesus is raised to new life, we will find ourselves there as well.

One reason that I’m a minister is because I have seen the ability of people to reshape themselves by the grace of God, to find new energy and purpose; I’ve been instructed by relationships that are renewed after sinking into hatred or, worse, apathy. This often seems to happen at those times that seem least likely—when people hit bottom, when no life at all appears possible.

Something dies and bears much fruit.

This is what we mean when we talk about “new life in Christ,” or the “power of the resurrection.” It is the energy that makes new life possible.

We see that energy every time a green shoot rises out of the thawing, muddy earth.

In some places in rural southern Illinois each year in the spring you can find crocuses coming up in the middle of nowhere—my guess is that you can see something like this in Iowa as well. Usually they’re in two clumps. Decades ago—maybe a century—there used to be a house by these flowers. The bulbs had been planted on either side of the front door by someone who looked toward the future, someone who trusted that those shoots would rise in the spring.

And to this day they still rise.

Do you or I or anyone know how?

With those Gentiles long ago, we wish to see Jesus.

We will see him as we look at the cross.

We will see him as we serve him in the suffering of the world.

We will see him leading us to new life.

New life keeps rising from death, bearing much fruit.

Take up that new life and celebrate resurrection.

¹ F. Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*.

² Richard Holloway, quoted in *Bearing Our Sorrows*, pg. 150-151.