

March 21, 2021

Lent 5

John 12:20-33

Today we meet Jesus and his friends during what will turn out to be the last week of his life. They have come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. Jesus has already worked what John's Gospel calls The Seven Signs – what we sometimes refer to as “miracles” – of God's power in the world. The last of these signs, just days before, has been the raising from the dead of Jesus' friend Lazarus. He's gotten quite a reputation and large crowds have gathered from far and wide to get a look at this remarkable man.

Those who have come to take a look are some Greeks – foreigners – and they come to Philip, one of Jesus' friends, and say, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” And when this gets reported to Jesus, he says something pretty enigmatic.

“Very truly, I tell you, 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. Those who love their life will lose it, and those who hate their life in this world, will keep it for eternal life.”

Jesus sees what's to come. Jesus sees that the signs of God's action in the world are so threatening to the Powers That Be that they will do anything to resist it, including putting to death the One who incarnates God's love. He sees this clearly and so he turns to his friend and begins to talk about his death. All throughout John's Gospel we've heard Jesus speaking of his “hour.” And his hour has finally arrived – the hour when his life's work will be fulfilled, the hour when he will be “glorified.” He doesn't mean that in an egotistical, self-aggrandizing kind of way. No, his glorification will result in the overcoming of the “world” and in driving out the “ruler of this world.” The Greek word that gets translated here as “world” is “kosmos.” It doesn't mean God's creation. The kosmos is all that separates itself from God and is organized to stand against God's purposes for creation. Let's call it the Powers That Be. And the Powers That Be are driven by a spirit or force that Jesus called “the ruler of this world.” So Jesus' crucifixion, in John's Gospel, is really a judgment on The Powers That Be, and the driving force of the Powers That Be will now be driven out by the Cross.

So how do these Powers That Be capture us and take us down the path of death rather than the path of life? How do the Powers That Be separate us from our True Selves? Think about consumerism and consumption and their first cousin “addiction.” All of these behaviors – whether they objectify acquiring lots of things and goods as leading to happiness, or whether they objectify using another human being for our own satisfaction as the road to happiness – all of these behaviors separate us from God and from our true selves. And they are all encouraged by the Powers That Be. And think about domination and hierarchies that create winners and losers that create “them” and “us.” The Powers That Be create structures that perpetuate racism, sexism, misogyny, homophobia – it's divide and conquer. Once again, human beings become objects to be dominated and controlled, to satisfy our own egoic desires.

And this domination and these hierarchies are perpetuated by violence. In fact, I would say that one of the primary myths of the Powers That Be, is the myth of redemptive violence. The way to bring order out of chaos, so the myth goes, is to violently defeat the “other.” That’s how we get rid of threats and enemies – just like the Powers That Be seek to do to Jesus. And it’s right here in our backyards today. Domestic terrorism, fueled by the myth of white supremacy – think divide and conquer – give rise to the Proud Boys, The Oath Keepers, The Three Percenters and encourages individuals like Dylann Roof, who slaughtered nine Black Christians at Mother Emmanuel AME church in Charleston, simply because they were of a different race. And domestic terrorism is on the rise.

The myth that the only thing that can overcome violence, the only thing that can bring order out of chaos, is more violence creates an ever decreasing spiral which pits one group against another – one human being against another – which paradoxically serves only to deepen the chaos, and to maintain the Powers That Be.

But it’s just this myth of redemptive violence that the Cross rejects. Jesus refused to respond to the Powers That Be on their terms. He refused to meet violence with violence. Later in John’s Gospel, when Jesus is questioned by Pilate, he says:

“My Kingdom is not from this world (not from this Kosmos, not ruled by the Powers That Be). If my Kingdom were from this world (this Kosmos) my followers would keep me from being handed over to the religious authorities. But as it is, my Kingdom is not from here.”

Jesus rejects the myth of redemptive violence and on the cross, dramatically judges the Powers That Be for what they are – opponents – enemies of God’s purpose for Creation. Enemies of true life and agents of death. Jesus calls out the driving spirit of the Powers That Be because once we have seen them for what they are, we can be set free from them. We can die to the world of the Powers that Be and be born into a new world where we can live fully and freely as followers of Jesus.

John’s Gospel makes it clear that the Cross is how God reconciles humanity – humanity that has fallen subject to the Powers That Be – back to God. Jesus’ surrender, his self-emptying offer of complete love, his offer of his whole human existence, draws unto himself the whole human condition, makes it possible for all of humanity to be returned to God in an unending future, in an Eternal Now.

And then the message of the Cross, within this mystery of true redemption – not the myth of redemptive violence – within this mystery of redemption and salvation, there’s one final message for us:

“Whoever serves me must follow me and where I am there will my servant be also.  
Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.”

His friends will be asked to drink the same cup as Jesus, to carry the same cross, to make the same surrender to God. On the cross all of humanity is called to participate in the new life of Jesus, the Risen Christ.

“And when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself.” Jesus says. The grain of wheat has to die – it dies, though, so that it can bear much fruit.

Such a magnificent story. Such a *hopeful* story. A story to give our lives to. The story that the cross overcomes the forces of domination by hatred and control by violence. The story that surrender of our selfish, ego-driven lives to instead live in communion with God in Christ and with the humanity created by God is the story of true freedom, the freedom to be who we truly are and not what the Powers That Be want us to be.

In Copley Square in Boston stands Trinity Episcopal Church. It's a magnificent piece of architecture and a Boston landmark. Inside, the pulpit stands high above the nave. As the preacher ascends the stairs, she or he is greeted by a brass plaque on the lectern where the sermon notes will rest. The plaque reads:

"Sir, we wish to see Jesus."

That's a mighty task for the preacher, yes? And those Greeks visiting Jerusalem 2000 years ago speak for us today. They had heard that there might be a new way of seeing, a new way of being in the world. A world not dominated and controlled by violence and division, but instead a world marked by abundant love and healing and communion. A world where the Powers That Be have been driven out and compassion and community abide.

While it may be the preacher's task to open up that world, it's our task to live as if that world has already come to pass. It's our task to surrender our self-centered wants and desires, to allow the grain of wheat to fall to the ground so that it might bear much fruit. Yes, we wish to see Jesus. And yes, my dear sisters and brothers, Jesus is here, right here among us on this day, this first day of spring – lifted from the earth.