

Sermon for 3-18-18
John 12:20-33
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Today is the fifth Sunday in Lent. If the Season of Lent were a home run in the baseball game of Christian living, we'd be rounding third base right now, psyching ourselves up for the home stretch of Holy Week. In fact, Holy Week is precisely where we find Jesus in our Gospel passage this morning; he and his disciples have already entered Jerusalem for the Passover. The end is near -- although for Jesus, the prospect of nearing the end involves a far greater challenge than any of us will (I hope) ever have to face.

This is John's Gospel, so of course Jesus is using mystical and symbolic language (just like he did in last week's reading). It's impossible to know exactly what he meant with any degree of certainty. But the language he uses ("The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified") and the metaphor of the grain of wheat that dies in order to bear fruit both point to a particular conclusion -- in these final days of his earthly life, Jesus knows what is going to happen to him. He knows how the story ends. Of course, we know how the story ends, too, but the stakes aren't quite as high for us.

This must be significant, because the Gospel author takes the highly unusual step of spelling it out for us with his explanation in verse 33: "[Jesus] said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die." A statement like this, interpreting what Jesus has said for the audience, is WAY out of character for John. John's is the most mystical, symbolic, esoteric of the Gospels, remember? John doesn't explain very much for us... so the fact that John makes this explicit suggests that he believes it is essential information.

A fair question, then, is: why? Why does it matter that Jesus knew about his Passion before it began? What does it matter whether or not he knew he would be nailed to a cross? Whether he had foreknowledge or not, the facts of our faith and the record of history prove that yes, the man known as Jesus of Nazareth was executed on a hill outside Jerusalem for crimes against the Empire. An innocent man, one who preached the dignity of all people and healed those who were broken in mind, body, and spirit was executed because he was a threat to the power structures of his day. What difference does it make if he knew how he would die before it happened?

This is the kind of question theologians can debate endlessly. How does our Lord's foreknowledge (or lack thereof) affect our understanding of concepts like sacrifice, obedience, covenant, and atonement?

But wait! Before your eyes start to glaze over -- don't worry. I'm not going to attempt to answer those questions. This is not that kind of sermon. And I am not that kind of theologian.

I am a theologian, yes; and you are too. We are all theologians, because we live and move and think and speak, and because we are all (whether we know it or not) creations in relationship with a Creator. We are human beings, made in the image of God. Jesus alone was both fully human, like us, and fully divine, like God.

It is precisely because of our humanity, and Christ's acceptance of our humanity with all its limitations, that this question of foreknowledge matters at all. To put it another way, Christ's choice to undergo betrayal and suffering and death matters to us because we cannot avoid betrayal or suffering or death ourselves. We have no choice; and he, who had a choice, chose to suffer and die with us. Solidarity is a powerful thing.

Here's a little story that every parent can understand, along with anyone who remembers being afraid of the dark as a child. A mother sings lullabies to her 5-year-old daughter and says a bedtime prayer, reminding the girl that God loves her and God's presence is with her as she sleeps. A kiss goodnight, and mom leaves the room; and in 30 or 40 minutes, the little girl appears in Mom's doorway. "What's wrong, sweetie?" Mom asks. And daughter replies, "Can I sleep with you? I don't want to be alone." "But you're not alone, remember? God is with you all night long." Daughter's response? "I know, but I need someone with skin on."ⁱ

We all need someone with skin on to help us face our fears and stay strong in times of trial. We need to know that we are not alone. Jesus is our God with skin on! Jesus knows our pain and fear and suffering, not just in some ephemeral, symbolic way but in the flesh. Jesus knows our pain, yours and mine, because he lived it. He knows the sting of betrayal because he was betrayed. He knows the experience of approaching certain death -- he knows what it feels like to die -- because he died.

Jesus chose to submit himself to betrayal and suffering and death for our benefit... not to satisfy the bloodlust of a vengeful God (remember what Bishop Breidenthal said in his sermon to us last month?). Jesus offered himself on the cross not to rescue us from an abusive Creator but to save us from the overwhelming, incapacitating powers of despair and sin and suffering and death.

"The hour has come," he says, "for the Son of Man to be glorified... [T]he ruler of this world will be driven out... And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself."

Jesus Christ is glorified in his death because it is through his death on the cross that he is transformed; his choice to become Emmanuel, God

with us, is complete. Jesus alone is God with us, and God for us, and God of us. He chose, through his suffering and death, to liberate all creation from the mighty powers of sin and fear and death. Never again will any of us be alone, for God is with us, and stays with us, to the end.

This is what it means for Christ to be glorified -- not to be crowned with gold and adorned with precious jewels and surrounded by luxury -- our Lord had no need of those things in his earthly life, nor does he need them now. Christ is glorified in his death on that old, rugged cross because his death allows him to draw us to himself, to shelter us under his wings, to call us out of our fear and brokenness into unity with God.

"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."

The grain of wheat bears fruit, it multiplies and brings newness of life, through its selfless death -- just like our Lord. According to John, this was his last public teaching before his death. This message of self-emptying generosity, of ultimate concern for others, of hope in the midst of grief and loss -- this was the last lesson Jesus gave in his final days.

I want to close this morning with words from another final teaching... from the late Roman Catholic Archbishop of El Salvador, advocate for the poor and oppressed, Oscar Romero. His final homily, delivered on March 24th, 1980, was on this same Gospel text about the grain of wheat which, through death, bears much fruit.

"Dear brothers and sisters, let us all view these matters... with that hope, that spirit of giving and of sacrifice. Let us all do what we can.... We know that no one can go on forever, but those who have put into their work a sense of very great faith, of love of God, of hope among human beings, find it all results in the splendors of a crown that is the

sure reward of those who labor thus, cultivating truth, justice, love, and goodness on earth. Such labor does not remain here below but, purified by God's Spirit, is harvested for our reward."ⁱⁱⁱ

Moments after finishing this homily, an assassin's bullet fired from the back of the chapel in San Salvador ended Romero's earthly life; but of course no bullet, nor any force on earth, could stop this holy man's grain of wheat from bringing forth its blessed fruit, even today. May we all have the wisdom and courage and selflessness to live lives that bear Godly fruits, now and long after we have departed this earth. Amen.

ⁱ from Edwina Landry (<https://aspaceforgrace.wordpress.com/2015/03/22/seeing-jesus/>)

ⁱⁱ text at http://www.romerotrue.org.uk/homilies/163/163_pdf.pdf