

Sunday, March 21, 2021
Fifth Sunday in Lent (Year B)
Jeremiah 31.31-34; John 12.20-33

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/1333323467039488>

(Sermon begins at about 12:30)

“Spoiler Alert”

I don't know about other clergy, but for me, one of the biggest struggles of preaching during Lent, particularly as we get closer and closer to Holy Week, is figuring out how much to reveal of the story. I mean, we all know how the story unfolds. We all know how the story ends. But I struggle with not wanting to reveal too much. I don't want to spoil the ending. Not that I can really do that, because, as I said, after 2,000 years of doing Lent and Holy Week, we know the story like the back of our own hands. Rather, I don't want to spoil the build up to the climactic ending that is Easter. Ideally, I want the events of Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, and Good Friday to slowly build in intensity: Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, his Last Supper with the disciples, his arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane, his trial before Pontius Pilate, his conviction and condemnation to death, his crucifixion. All building, only to leave us with that momentary pause—that pregnant pause—called Holy Saturday. That period where we feel abandoned. Where we feel all alone. Where we feel bereft of hope. And then BOOM, Easter! Resurrection! New life!

All that said, today, the last Sunday in Lent before Palm Sunday and the beginning of Holy Week, really should carry with it a spoiler alert. Our Gospel for today essentially tells how the story ends, even before the final act begins. Obviously not in detail. But all the clues are there, if you know what to look for. Jesus essentially spilled the beans about what is going to happen. He spoiled the ending. Or did he?

Let's start with the Old Testament reading from Jeremiah. Jeremiah was a prophet during the time of the Babylonian Exile. The section we heard this morning is part of a collection of short oracles intended to give comfort to the people. What we heard today started off “The days are surely coming says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah” (Jer 31.31). Indicating that the Exile would come to an end and the people would be restored to their own land, along with a new covenantal relationship with God. And while, strictly speaking, the oracle should be taken at face value—there will be a new covenant between God and the people of Israel—Christians see in this passage a foretelling of the new covenant between God and all people through Jesus Christ. Perhaps we have interpreted this as such because this is the only passage in the Old Testament that mentions a new covenant. And Luke, in his telling of the events of the Last Supper, have Jesus specifically saying that “this cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood” (Lk 22.20). So, it is easy to see how what is foretold in Jeremiah, while originally intended for the Jewish people, can be viewed by Christians as being extended to all people through Jesus' Passion.

Which brings us to the Gospel and the very beginning of John's telling of the events of Holy Week—and of Jesus' Passion.

Jesus has just made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem on what we now refer to as Palm Sunday—the event we will commemorate next Sunday. In today's Gospel reading, Philip, one of the Twelve, is approached by some Greek pilgrims visiting Jerusalem for the Passover festival: "Sir, we wish to see Jesus" (Jn 12.21). Whereupon Philip takes them to Jesus. This encounter between the Greek pilgrims and Jesus is significant. Gentiles wanting to see Jesus, and Jesus engaging them in conversation—and not just polite chit-chat but a poignant discussion of what will happen to Jesus—points to the fulfillment of universal salvation. That what Jesus is about to accomplish is for ALL people, thereby marking the beginning of a new age in God's relationship with humanity.

It is, therefore, quite appropriate that Jesus reveals what is about to happen—albeit in cryptic terms—not to Jews, but to these Greek pilgrims. He starts off by declaring for the first time that "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified" (Jn 12.23). A clear statement that he is near the end of his journey. That he is near the end of his earthly life.

The Greek pilgrims wanted to see Jesus. They get more than that. Jesus gives them an up close and personal look at what it truly means to see him. To see him as he truly is. To see what is about to happen and just what that will mean for them. What that will mean for all humanity. He does this using agricultural imagery: "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" (Jn 12.24). He is indicating that he must die. That just as it is necessary for the grain of wheat to die before it can bring forth new life, so too, will his death bring forth new life. That his death will produce new life through his Resurrection.

But there is more to the story, more to the imagery Jesus uses, more to the intended meaning of his death, than may appear at first glance. Taking a closer look reveals that, as with so much of what Jesus says, there are additional layers of meaning. The passage concludes with John saying that Jesus' explanation to the Greek pilgrims was very intentional, "to indicate the kind of death he was to die" (Jn 12.33). As one commentator notes, this "passage invites a fresh look at how we understand his death. First, for John, the focus is not on the death per se but rather on what the death makes possible: the resurrection, the ascension, and not least, the bearing of 'much fruit,' the birth of the church who will do even greater things (14:12). This is what Jesus has in mind when he says, 'when I am lifted up' (12:32)."¹

Jesus is seeking to explain to the Greek pilgrims that his death will achieve something greater than just him being raised to new life. As if that isn't pretty awesome in and of itself. He is seeking to explain what his death and new life means for them. For those, like them, who wish to see him. What it means for those who follow him. What it means to live for him. This same image of a grain of wheat dying in the earth gives an indication of what is required of his followers. That to follow Jesus—to follow him into new life—one must die to self. That in dying to self and following Jesus, new life is possible. This new life carries the possibility of bearing much fruit. As one commentator notes, this bearing of fruit and "being 'glorified' will look like a

human life freed from self-centered isolation, a generous life lived for others in community, in which both self and others flourish.”²

Jesus’ death and his life are not the final objective. These are merely a catalyst for something far greater. Something going back to what the prophet Jeremiah foretold in the oracle we heard today: “I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people” (Jer 31.33b). Through Jesus’ death and Resurrection, the law of God’s love for us will be written in our hearts. It will become a part of who we are. That we will be permanently connected to God through Christ’s actions. Not just in that we will have eternal life. But that in this life, we are called to live out of the fullness of God’s love, out of the fullness of Christ’ love, and to build a community that operates out of that love. That is the fruit that will be borne from Jesus’ dying on the cross and from our dying to self so that we can truly follow him. In this one image of grain, of seed, “Jesus teaches that his death will bring new life because it produces fruit, a symbol for the community of faith.”³

There is a certain irony to what Jesus foretells and in the specific imagery Jesus’ uses. After his crucifixion, when he was buried in the grave, the Temple authorities and the Romans undoubtedly thought they were rid of Jesus. That he was out of the way, no longer a threat to them. What they failed to realize was that in burying Jesus in a tomb in the ground, they were actually planting a seed. A seed that would sprout through his Resurrection. A seed that would grow and bear fruit through his followers, who would take up his mantle and continue the ministry and message of love that he proclaimed.

As one commentator so poetically summarizes: “What kind of death did Jesus die? A fruitful death, a death that subversively enabled even greater things, including a new community: men and women, young and old, Jews and Greeks.”⁴

So, yeah, spoiler alert. Next week when we gather for worship, we will witness Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem. We will commemorate his Last Supper with the disciples, complete with washing of feet and the giving of a new commandment. We will witness his arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane. We will watch as he is put on trial before Pontius Pilate, found guilty on trumped-up charges, and condemned to death by crucifixion. We will watch him die. We will watch as his lifeless body is placed in a tomb. And just when we feel utterly hopeless, that he has left us for good, when we have been left all alone, some women will go the tomb on Easter Sunday and find it empty. And then BOOM! Resurrection! New life!

When that happens, remember what Jesus said to those Greek pilgrims in today’s Gospel. How he told them, albeit in cryptic terms, that with his death there would be new life. New life that will bear much fruit. And remember that we are the ones he was talking about. We are the ones who have the power to make that happen. If we have the courage to follow him. If we have the courage to write the ending of the Lenten and Easter journey with our own lives.

¹ “The Hour Has Come: SALT’s Lectionary Commentary for Lent 5,” SALT, March 16, 2021.
<https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/lectionary-commentary-lent-5>.

² “The Hour Has Come: SALT’s Lectionary Commentary for Lent 5.”

³ *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with Apocrypha* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003), 1933.

⁴ “The Hour Has Come: SALT’s Lectionary Commentary for Lent 5.”