

## THE GRAIN THAT MUST DIE

5 Lent – B     March 18, 2018

John 12:20-33

It's difficult to call an account "gospel" when it is so sobering. Jesus "said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die." It sounds like grim news, rather than good news, except for this: Jesus tells us that this is meant to be. "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified." This is how God's plan unfolds.

When we think "glory" we don't think about a humiliating death on the cross. For Jesus to be lifted up on the cross and to be called "glorified" seems to go against our logic. This is a tragic and humiliating death, after all. That hardly seems like glory.

But glory, in John's gospel—and glory, as the Letter to the Hebrews explains, has a deeper meaning. Our "usual" way of thinking about glory tends to skip past the hard work, the pain and suffering—the sacrifice that is the necessary path to glory. To be glorified means to follow the road where God leads and to take on the burdens that come along that path. Being "glorified" means this is about more than me. Jesus understood that. To be glorified is to reach outside self for the sake of the world.

That was an important part of John's theology in presenting us his gospel. Jesus did not simply come for his own people. He did not live for his own sake, but for the sake of others. It is in John's gospel that we read: "For God so loved the world..." Or in the prologue of John's gospel, where the writer reminds us that this living Word is the light of the whole world. Even today's gospel begins with Greeks telling Philip "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Jesus' response is to tell the world just what kind of Jesus they are about to see.

The Jesus the world sees is not what they expect. He is Messiah, but way beyond the people's idea of what Messiah was to be. The Messiah will go where they would rather not travel, and lead them where they do not want to go. Little wonder that Jesus' disciples have a tough time bearing (dealing with) what Jesus is telling them. They're afraid for him. And, they are afraid for themselves.

*"The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. 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 lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also."*

"...[A]nd where I am, there will be my servant also." What should sound like words of comfort brings discomfort, because Jesus' friends suspect (and we know) where Jesus is going. He calls us to go there, too. The Savior of the world, and those who follow in his stead, must be willing to put it all on the line. The grain of wheat has to fall into the earth and die.

This is the Good News: Jesus' death becomes the necessary ingredient in the formula for the resurrection. This is the way God announces ultimate victory over the powers of this earth—even over the power of death. Through the cross this story becomes Good News for the world. "God so loved the world," we heard earlier in John's gospel. "God so loved the world that he gave..."

And the giving is giving *all*. In the passion story, Jesus shows us—through his trial, his execution, and his death—how he must be glorified. In John's gospel, the words "It is finished"

mean “The mission is complete; the work of salvation is done.”

And it’s this entire work of salvation, not just the empty tomb, that Jesus, in the gospel of John, calls “being glorified.” Glory that comes out of being whipped and humiliated and spat upon and hoisted up on a cross. God reveals real glory where it is least expected: through agony and the sting of death.

Jesus’ own description of the necessity of it all comes in words that resonate with the Greeks who want to see Jesus. He uses philosophical words for philosophical people: “Unless a grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies....” Something/someone is given up for the greater good. God sacrifices for the sake of the world.

But, from the dying seed, new life sprouts. The seed is planted and dies to itself: no longer a seed, but bursting forth into something far bigger, far greater.

As we know, the seed becomes what it is called to be, precisely because it no longer remains a seed. Its glory is revealed in its transformation.

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

It’s tempting to be like a seed—still in the packet—that won’t become anything more if it remains unplanted. “Playing it safe,” trying to maintain our present (and familiar) existence might seem to be less risky, as though we are insulating ourselves from pain; but that ultimately leads us nowhere. And that might be more like dying than living.

Jesus understood that. His life, his mission, his destiny...were not about maintaining the status quo, but about allowing God to redefine life. This “seed” had to give itself up in order to become something much greater.

To make the point, Jesus uses some pretty strong words, like “hating this life” and giving up everything in service. Often, our way of living is more about being bound than being free. We seek security in the usual, the comfortable, but these things keep us chained. Jesus challenges us to set aside our usual comforts and securities if we are to follow him. To risk by dying and rising: “...unless a grain falls into the earth and dies....” To be raised with Jesus, we must be able to go the whole distance with Jesus, including, as some have suggested, “the first 10 feet” (in other words, *the cross*). In dying, we will find new life, as we are buried (“planted”) to grow into something greater.

New things are happening. In our readings we heard of a new covenant, a new and clean heart, and the promise of new life that comes from the grain of wheat that gives itself up. New life awaits us, but to fully experience it, we have to open ourselves to Jesus’ power to transform us. That means dying to the old self and the old ways, and letting go of the old (false) securities. Then we will see that God is making all things new.

As we move toward the end of this Lenten journey, we move closer to the cross where we bring our pains, our disappointments, and our unmet needs. We place them at the feet of Jesus, planting each, like a seed into the ground. And we wait. And we trust. Out of these dying seeds, new life will spring forth. Our Easter is coming. This *is* the Gospel of the Lord. Amen.