

Lent 5 Year B 2024

March 17, 2024

Unless a grain of wheat should fall

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As I've preached here before, I'm not a gardener. In fact I don't have a lot of faith in seeds, despite the evidence of their success. I'm always amazed if something I planted actually comes up. Perhaps it's hard for me to believe in something going on beneath the surface of the earth, that I can't see right in front of me. They are a bit of a risk, seeds. Anything can happen to them.

Still, I love plants. I love the end result. So much so that I can forget about the seed altogether.

I do not think about them. I do not mourn the passing of the seed.

And that may be the way of the seed. They are transitional little packages that hold the promise of a garden yet to come. They contain within them fertilized embryos, and just enough food to keep them alive until they land in the right medium that calls forth roots and shoots from them.

Seeds are made to die. They are made so that the life within them can be released to become plants that issue forth fruit and contain ... seeds. And the whole thing starts again. No miracle there really, just the way of life in the plant world, where everything does what it was sent to do.

As we perch on the edge of Holy Week, the Gospel of John whispers to us that the hour is at hand – the time has come for Jesus' life to take on its fullest meaning, to complete the work that it was sent to do. And we know that it will be bloody story, one of betrayal and torture and execution. We often use the term sacrifice for what is about to happen to Jesus in Holy Week, seeing Jesus as a lamb that was slain to take away the sins of the world.

But today the Gospel of John gives us another metaphor with which to consider Holy Week, to help explain what happened to the world because of Jesus, to describe what was released into the world on Easter. He gives us the metaphor of the seed.

It's not new of course. Our Gospels are full of seed stories that speak of the Kingdom of God and way of Love. A Sower went out to Sow some seed... the Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed.... ... God's kingdom is like **seed** thrown on a field by a man who then goes to bed and forgets about it. ... One sows and another reaps...

And now in *today's* Gospel from the John, Jesus invites his followers to see him as a seed that will die in order for something entirely new to grow.

*"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."*

What is being propagated here? What is germinating in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, and in the lives of all who would be his disciples?

I would describe it as the longing, the dream of God to be one with us, not be carried in our hearts. Jeremiah described it as a new covenant with God that people carry inside of them. And so he quotes God as saying:

*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. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the Lord," for they*

*shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.*

If there was anyone who walked around with the law written on their heart in this way, it was Jesus. Jesus who knew his Abba God with an intimacy and wholeness that was best described as the love that parent and child have for one another. Begotten not made.

But God didn't enter the world as Jesus to have one perfect human with which to have the ideal divine love relationship. God sent Jesus to make that possible for everyone, to make God's dream come true. God wants to be known – to be seen, to be heard, to be touched, to be loved and to be lived.

That's why our Scriptures have so many instances of people being made to see and hear and speak and walk. All ways of knowing God and helping others to know God, of taking the message in and getting it out.

That's what it means to glorify God. It means to make God known, accessible, tangible.

That was Jesus' whole goal, that people could look at his life and see, and hear, and witness the activity of God, that they could look at his death on the cross and encounter the forgiveness of God, and that they could look at Jesus' resurrection and be invited into the ongoing life with God. This was what Jesus had in mind with a life that glorified God.

So when the Greek-speaking gentiles of Jerusalem came knock knock knocking on Heaven's door and said they wanted to see Jesus, this is what Jesus told Andrew and Philip that his visitors would see. It may be that they just wanted to get the autograph of Rock Star Jesus who had all that preaching and teaching and healing going on. But Jesus did not regard his life to that point as the sole point of his life – despite the miracles and preaching tours and the crowds drawn to them. Rather Jesus understood that the whole purpose of his life would happen at its end, like a seed that had been planted deep into humanity and was just waiting for the roots to get established and the shoots to break ground. That was just waiting to no longer be a seed.

Jesus did not want his followers to see him, he wanted them to see God. And he was so convinced of the law that was written on his heart that if they looked to him they would see his Abba and know God.

His own glorious human life, so spectacular and so brief, was not something to hold on to, this role was not something to be delivered from. Rather he saw it as the seed that carried the life of God in it. The death of that seed, would send that life shooting and vining through the world. That life would also be his life. Resurrection.

But in this moment, the beginning of the hour that is at hand, there is also a lament reminiscent of Garden of Gethsemane in other Gospels. For a moment Jesus mourns the death of the seed, the life he will lose and how he will lose it. It is not private lament, as in the garden. It is public intention for all to witness. What you will see oh Greek-speaking visitors will not be pretty, Jesus says.

It's interesting that Jesus didn't describe himself as any seed, but a grain of wheat. This was not just a self-propagating harvest, an invasive species like wild mustard to displace whatever was growing

there before. Wheat is food. Food is life. So some of this harvest would become bread for the journey and some would be seed for the future. We are that future field.

And that's why Jesus described himself as one grain of wheat. For the metaphor to work, there would have to be others. There would have to be other grains of wheat that fell to the earth and died to release what had been written on their hearts, to make an abundant harvest. And so Jesus said:

*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.”*

As followers of Christ who stand in this particular hour ticking down to Holy Week, what if we imagine ourselves as fruit, as carriers of the Word of God within our hearts? What if we see our very selves as seeds that walk, and fly and float, and speak and live our bit of Divine love into the world?

What does it mean to carry the Word of God, the love of God, the presence of God within us – not to store, not for ourselves, but to propagate, to spread and grow? What kind of personal and collective deaths release it into the world? What kind of transformations will we experience as we participate in the propagation – from seed to shoot to flower to fruit, to seed again?

That is the question the disciple faces during Holy Week, and that is the hope that beckons us toward Easter.

Amen.