

Lent 5B - March 21, 2021

“Drawing All People To Jesus” © - Rev Seth D Jones

Today is the 5th Sunday in Lent. Next Sunday is the beginning of Holy Week with Palm Sunday. Ed will be preaching for us that day. And so, this is the last Sunday in Lent.

In our readings today, you can hear the suspense build, you can sense the pressing into the future, the call of God drawing us forward into the holy spaces of the Lord, the darkening of the life of Jesus, the nihilism of the death of a savior, and then the surprise of Resurrection.

Each point along the pathway serves a purpose. Each way station of the Spirit is meant to resonate into our lives. Certainly, this is the lesson of the Cross, isn't it? That God through Jesus experiences all that which humankind experiences, the sign and the symbol that in the loneliest, most abandoned suffering, God is with us.

One might think, hearing Hebrews 5, that Jesus and therefore God glorifies suffering. We hear in verse 8, “Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered...” and we believe that we must seek out suffering, we must suffer in order to follow Jesus. But this is a mistake. It is a mistake made by all kinds of movements in Christian thought throughout the centuries.

As Lee H Butler, Jr. tells us in his commentary on these verses¹, there is a difference between remaining faithful in suffering and glorifying in suffering. Jesus exemplifies faithfulness through suffering, not the experience of suffering. Why would Jesus spend so much time alleviating the suffering of others just so we could emulate the suffering of others?

Instead, as we pointed out last week, God and Christ heal us and seek the healing of the world. God does not cause suffering. Suffering comes in this world through the fallenness of the world. But God suffers with us by way of Jesus for our healing and redemption.

All of which is not to say that following Jesus as he speaks of today will not cause some of us suffering. Jesus tells us “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies it bears much fruit” (Jn 12:24). It is the dying part we don't like, and it is the dying part that can cause a lot of personal suffering.

The question is, how shall we remain faithful during that suffering? Or, let's rephrase that:

We are just beginning to re-open our church again. We have been in the pandemic for just over a year now. In what ways have you suffered during this time? What has died for you? Who has died whom you know? What dreams have died because of the pandemic?

Now, before we go any further, I think it is of vital importance to recognize something called ‘disenfranchised grief’. I heard about this from an article in the New

¹ Found in: Allen, Ronald J., Dale P. Andrews, and Dawn Ottoni. Wilhelm. *Preaching God's Transforming Justice : a Lectionary Commentary, Year B*. 1st ed. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011. pg 301-308

York Times by Tara Parker-Pope, published on March 15th². You will know what disenfranchised grief is if I say some phrases to you. Perhaps someone has asked you how this past year has been for you and you may have answered:

“I am probably luckier than most...”

“I can’t really complain...”

“My losses are really nothing compared to people losing loved ones.”

These phrases are all examples of disenfranchised grief, griefs that do not have a ‘socially sanctioned’ place because we are under the illusion that grief is somehow a comparison thing between two people. But your losses, our losses, great or small, have a place in you, in God, and with Jesus. The suffering you have endured over the past year, great or small, has a place with Christ on the Cross. Our suffering seeks redemption and healing in the Lord.

As we let our sufferings be present, we let that seed fall into the ground, we let that death of dreams, death of relationships, death of people even, take root with Jesus. This is what Jesus means by following him. We recognize the suffering that has happened, we go through it knowing Jesus and God are with us, and we seek redemption in the smallest and greatest of ways.

Alicia Meyers says in her commentary, “we cannot avoid darkness and death, but instead, must trust that God will bring about life³.” It is the trusting part that is hard here, isn’t it? To be faithful in the darkness is the struggle of faith; it is the great work. John’s word for this, which he uses over and over in his Gospel, is ‘abiding’, which means something like ‘holding close to’ or ‘sticking with’.

Abiding is a word that hints at deeper and deeply conscious commitments, a word that suggests promises made and kept. We began Lent by talking about covenants and promises, and this is what abiding is meant to imply - God’s covenant with us.

God’s covenant with us gathered here in this church is a promise written and underwritten by Jesus so deeply that it is as if it were written on our hearts. That sense that Christ and God are present with us in our suffering is the experience of the fulfillment of Jeremiah’s words:

“For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after these days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts” (Jer 31:33).

How we hear this covenant and word from God is different for everyone, but it is clear from Scripture that we must listen for it. Sometimes, that word and confirmation of God with us will sound like thunder. After the voice of heaven says, “I have glorified it and I will glorify it again”, John puts it, “The crowd that stood there and heard it said that it had thundered” (Jn 12:28-29). But more often, we will hear that word or voice as a still, small voice, just as Elijah did when he was hiding out in the forest, suffering his own fears and terrors of the age.

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/15/well/mind/grief-pandemic-losses.html>

³

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/fifth-sunday-in-lent-2/commentary-on-john-1220-33-5>

In the Old Testament, that voice from heaven, whether it thunders or is a still small voice, has the same name. That voice is called a “bat qol”. “Bat qol” literally translates as “daughter of a voice”. Bat qols happen throughout Scripture. Maybe you have heard a bat qol in your life. Sometimes, the words are clear. Sometimes, the voice is loud. More often, though, the voice slips and slides between the wind in the trees and the rain falling on the roof and the running of the stream, like a young child’s voice winding through the other sounds until the words form in your ears to bring you the confirming and comforting promise of the presence of God into your heart and soul.

In the ancient world, the most trustworthy sense was hearing, was sound. This makes sense, because the entire creation of the universe begins with sound. God speaks and the vibration of sound resonates the world into existence. Something has changed, though, throughout the ages. Now, sight is the most trustworthy sense. We have been conditioned to believe we do not mis-see things. We say, “I will believe it when I see it.”

For some of us, though, we are holdovers from the ancient sensibility. Hearing is the most trustworthy sense for some of us. We don’t trust what we see. Maybe it is because of past trauma; maybe it is because of genetics; maybe it is because we know we live in an age of images and an age of digital power, and that the easiest thing in the world to fake now is an image of another person doing and saying something they have never done or said.

Listen carefully for when you are diminishing your personal grief for small things. Even there, the bat qol of the Lord may be seeking a willing ear, a deep hearing. Even there, the Christ of all things seeks to comfort and convict you.

And so we listen closely for the bat qol, especially in times of suffering. For it is the bat qol, the daughter of the voice of God, which draws us closer, so we can hear even better that

“The voice has come for your sake”.

As we draw closer to the Cross, and then endure the darkness to the Resurrection, give space for your listening and hearing. Listen for the voice that has come to you for the sake of the world.

And then we will know that just as we are not alone in our suffering and the Lord is with us by way of Jesus Christ, we are also being drawn with all people into the deep and loving embrace of the Lord.

“And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself”.

Amen.