

Jeremiah 31: 31-34 ~ John 12:20-33
Again & Again, We Are Reformed
 5th Sunday in Lent ~ March 21, 2021
 The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis

Introduction to Scripture

What does glory look like? God's glory, that is. We are about to see it in this story. It's not shiny and shimmery. Not today. We pick up the story in John 12, when Jesus' time on earth is running out. Today's lesson is a hinge narrative: it contains Jesus' final public words in the Gospel of John. After this he will only be speaking to his disciples, and then his passion begins. So today, in this text, "The hour has come," and Jesus knows it. This story happens moments after Jesus' protest march into Jerusalem. The air is charged with excitement, anticipation, perhaps bewilderment. Is he really the one who will restore us to our former glory? Glory like a grain of wheat falling into the earth and dying. This is a different kind of glory. Not the kind they were expecting, nor the kind of glory we prefer.

In this text you will hear the one time in all of John's gospel where it sounds like Jesus was having trouble with this kind of glory, too. You will hear him say to the crowd, "*Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—Father save me from this hour?*" This is Jesus' "Gethsemane moment" in John. There is no Garden of Gethsemane story in this gospel. Here is where we learn that glorifying God, doing God's will, following God's call is what Jesus will do, but at this moment we can see him struggling with that choice. We hear a voice from heaven affirming him (also the only time in John). Hard days just ahead. No way forward, but through. Where's the glory in that? Let's have a listen.

Sermon

"The days are surely coming, says the Lord," so wrote Jeremiah when his people were in exile and their temple in ruins. These days we say it more like this: "We can see the light at the end of the tunnel," And most recently, "We are at the five-yard line" How many times have you heard those phrases recently from our health experts, our news commentators, our politicians and leaders? More theological types have described these days when at last it appears the pandemic is receding being like the Saturday before Easter. The resurrection is near. But not yet.

But how could those who were still captive in Babylon see the new day coming? How can we see the touchdown from the five-yard line? We aren't quite out of the tunnel, yet? Not quite. So many signs of hope. Promising signs. 100 million shots in arms. But still we are not quite there yet. We can't quite see it. "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." said the Greeks to Philip that day. Foreigners, who had heard about, but not seen Jesus for themselves, yet. We homo sapiens do lead with our sense of sight. We trust our eyes. When you see something, it becomes real. But what about when we can't see and we don't know what's coming? Kind of like where we are now on the edge (we hope) of popping through to the other side of this pandemic.

Let's be honest, this state of not quite seeing, not really knowing what's next--that's really most of the time. When the walls of our temples, whatever they may be are crumbling, when we don't really know what to do next, where do we turn? There's always google. That's what one of our confirmands a few years ago replied when we asked them where they look for answers. Certainly, typing a question into google is easier than looking it up in the Bible. And it is true--Google will give you an answer (or 20) to any question you come up with. But Google cannot really help us discern God's will. Whether it is a question about the right way forward in a relationship, in a life change, or as a church.

Here's the thing: What God is giving us, what Jesus is preparing to die for, what the glory of God looks like, is closer than our next breath. God's steadfast love and mercy baked into our child of God DNA. Covenant upon covenant: God keeps trying one thing, then another---never taking away the older covenants. Yes, the rainbow one is still good. As are all the consequent covenants. The one we heard today in Jeremiah, was again unilateral. God is in, God will extend keep extending mercy. No matter what.

Jesus used the metaphor of a grain of wheat falling into the earth, growing into a plant that bears much fruit to give a picture that everyone could see to try and understand how God's glory works. In the faith story of FPC member Mike Schulein's life—it feels like his grandfather's hand when Mike was a little boy of four or five years old. He would hold his grandfather's hand to cross the street and sit beside him in the pew at St. Catherine's Catholic Church—just across the street and down a block from his grandfather's house.

Of course, he was too young to really understand what was being said or done during church, but he knew from that side view in the pew a few things: that this was important to his grandfather, had something to do with Jesus and it was special because it was special to his grandfather. He learned more about the sacrifices and giving his grandfather did after his death. As an adult now looking back, Mike realizes those early years of holding his grandfather's hand, crossing the street, week after week, taught him this lesson. "Being task-focused can get in the way of stopping, stepping back, and allowing a bigger picture to take shape." You can read the whole story written by Dan Crump this week when your First Press Spring issue arrives at your house.

What does God's glory look like? The answer on every page of our Bible, the experience that Christ seeks to draw all people into, the steadfast love and mercy of God for all people and all creation. God is drawing us into the giving, the letting go, the seeking of God's will, above our own. Yes, that's hard. Yes, we mess up. Again and again, we break God's covenant. Again & again, we break God's heart. And God is still here. God has not given up on us. Like a grain of wheat buried in the ground and then growing into itself to bear fruit, God's glory is a dynamic, organic process.

Perhaps it's easier to see and say what God's glory doesn't look like. Like the horrific shooting spree in Atlanta that killed 8 people, 6 of them Asian American women, who thought it was safe to go to work that day. This is not what God's glory looks like. Like the spike in hate

crimes against Asian Americans—something that has been going on in our country even long before the pandemic against Asian American; and the hate crimes against any targeted group. This is not what God’s glory looks like. Like the parents, driven by fear, poverty, desperation to send their children north with only a plastic sack of food and belongings, a hope, and a prayer. This is not what God’s glory looks like. Nor does our congress that refuses to work toward compromise in the name of the greater good and justice for all, look like God’s glory.

“My soul is troubled.” *Tarasso* which means to cause severe sorrow or pain. The English translation weakens the force of the Greek. Same word as in John 11:33 when he saw the people weeping over Lazarus’ death. In the next verse it is written that Jesus wept. Jesus is resolved, tears and all, he does not pretend to be happy about giving up his life. God’s glory takes guts, takes time, takes trust, takes dying to self. It is by holding too tightly to our lives that we lose them, and it is by letting go of our lives that we enter into life most profoundly. Self-giving love, Jesus seems to say, is the currency of the life to come. Letting go of our lives we enter life most profoundly. “The glory of God is a human being fully alive,” wrote Irenaeus of Lyon, (c. 130-202 CE, *Heresies* 4.20) The glory of God, I hear Jesus telling us here is to take risks, to make changes: in the name of the silenced, the marginalized, the powerless.

This is troubling work. Being reformed again and again calls forth the best from us. It takes faith to follow Jesus with enough courage to loosen our grip on the old, the familiar. We do this hard work best, together. We come together and learn how to become Jesus’ disciples, how to die to self, together in worship and in small groups, Lenten Dessert discussions, as a Session, a Board of Deacons, because we can’t do it alone.

It is like grief work. Death of any kind is hard: Death of a loved one or death of a bad habit, death of family system of abuse and neglect. All of us sitting in this room and those of you viewing this service on screen: all of us either have or will experience deep losses. You know a lot about grief. It’s hard, it’s painful, it’s uneven, and it takes time. We need each other to do grief work. The collective and individual grief experienced in the past twelve months is staggering. We need each other to access the power of the cross, the power of Jesus’ death, so that we can let our seeds fall to the ground and be transformed by Jesus from death to life.

Remember how as the weeks turned to months, since last March, we began to say and hear phrases like “I can’t wait for this to be over” and “I’ll be so glad when things go back to just the way they were before.” That was back when we thought of the pandemic as nothing more than an interruption. Just a temporary break in our normal lives that will soon be over so we can go back to doing our lives, to being church, like we did before. As Rodger Nishioka, my former professor and current pastor at Village Church in Prairie Village, Kansas puts it, “Lately though, it has become increasingly clearer that this is not an interruption, but rather a disruption. In a disruption, what was being done ceases in some ways small and in some ways grand, but the result is a change. It is clear that on the other side of this pandemic, we will not be the same.”ⁱ Yes, friends: we are being reformed, again, like it or not. Troubled or not.

Already we are learning new ways of being community. New ways of worshipping. To glorify God, friends, is to see how the lessons we are learning are calling us forward into a new future. “Rather than just hunkering down in a survival mode, waiting for this interruption to end, God is drawing us to live fully into this disruption expecting to be transformed. By the grace of God, we will never return to our old ways.” That is the message I hear in God’s new covenant promise to his people in exile in Babylon, that is the message I hear Jesus proclaiming as he speaks of his impending death to the crowd in Jerusalem. “Through the power of the Holy Spirit, we are being transformed and changed to be more just, more truthful, more imaginative, more wise and more faithful so that in years to come our grandchildren will speak of us in the post-pandemic years as the “coolest church ever!”ⁱⁱ

-  The days are surely coming, when we can have church on Sundays again—together in this sanctuary.
-  The days are surely coming, when everyone who can be vaccinated, has been.
-  The days are surely coming when we can gather safely for concerts, shows, sports.
-  May we be the ones who ensure that the days are coming when it is safe to go to work, or simply to go about one’s life, regardless of the color of your skin or where you’re from.
-  May we be the ones who help the days to surely come when our planet has a fighting chance of surviving again.

May we trust now before we get there, in the One who will draw all people to himself, whether we can see it yet or not. Amen.

ⁱ Rodger Nishioka, “Six Lessons Learned about Faith Formation in the Midst of a Pandemic,” (*Presbyterian Outlook*, March 15, 2021) p.22

ⁱⁱ *Ibid*, p. 23.