

Lent 5, March 18, 2018. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Episcopal Church, Freeland WA
Nigel Taber-Hamilton Jeremiah 31:31-34, Hebrews 5:5-10, John 12:20-33

How can it be that we've already reached the 5th Sunday of Lent!! It feels like we're rushing with almost break-neck speed toward Holy Week – toward Jerusalem, toward the final conflict.

And we're not in control, either. This particular experience of time speeding up puts the lie to that phrase that "time flies when you're having fun," as if there are no other experiences when time flies – Holy Week is perhaps *The Example* of time flying and no one – except perhaps the Roman executioners – are having any fun at all.

We'll get to Jerusalem in seven days - 168 hours....or maybe 112 if you discount the hours when sleep takes us away from the Ticking Clock.

We'll arrive outside Jerusalem to a moment of false hope when the crowds exalt Jesus and he, in turn, puts on a display of civil disobedience that – he obviously knows, and probably everyone else does too – carries with it the threat of mortal danger.

Over these last weeks, as we've shared in the inexorable progress from the glory of the Mount of Transfiguration toward the looming threat Holy City, there's been this growing sense that the disciples don't want to go to Jerusalem, even though it's Passover and it's a Torah requirement that they, as adult male Jews, must go. They don't want to go as individuals; they don't want to go with Jesus – or, at least, not with this rather frightening, intense Jesus who keeps talking about death.

That the disciples still go is a testimony to the bonds of affection that bind them to him – the love they feel, which leads them to places that their waking minds shrink back from.

Today, as John reports it, the pilgrim crowd around Jesus is swelling; no longer a small group, they seem to have joined a larger stream flowing toward Jerusalem on the road from the Galilee region south toward Jericho. That larger group contained, in the words of John's Gospel, "some Greeks." They could have been Greek Jews, they could have been recent converts to Judaism.

And they have an interesting request. They want to "*see Jesus*." In John, seeing and hearing are theological 'trigger' words. The ways people come to know Jesus, to believe or trust in him, and to recognize his unity and singleness of purpose with the Father are through "seeing" and "hearing" Jesus. If you think back to the first chapter of John's gospel, when Jesus calls the disciples, he said to Andrew, "Come and *see*." The diversity and interest of this pilgrim crowd prompts Jesus – for the first time in John's gospel, after three previous denials – to say that "*the hour has come*." The Final Conflict, the place where all journeys converge, now lies close at hand.

Seeing Jesus. To see Jesus is to see God's vision for human life. To see Jesus is to catch a glimpse of the divine character. That, surely, is part of the quest we participate in, as people of faith.

Seeing Jesus, in John's gospel, is experiencing the interplay of freedom, suffering, and glory. Jesus has the freedom to choose whether or not to go to Jerusalem, with all the potential suffering and horrors such a destination – with its likely encounter with imperial might and brutality – with all the horrors and suffering such a destination promises. Like any human being, Jesus wants to avoid that possibility – one that, as it becomes more real at Gethsemane only days beyond this moment, will become even more frightening too.

The rubber is meeting the road, Jesus steels himself for what is to come. It is for this encounter, John reports him saying, that he has come. It is the intent of God, Jesus says, that his ministry of challenge in the seat of religious and political power must go forward. It isn't, notice, a divine demand that Jesus must suffer – this isn't a demand of an angry God for some sort of blood sacrifice. Rather, in the challenge, in the integrity, in the rightness of authentic human existence and action, Jesus becomes a vehicle of wholeness and salvation. It's what Paul recognizes, and repeats, writing to the Roman community (ch. 8): that in all things, even the conflicts of Jerusalem, God is working for good.

As one theologian has noted, "The cross of Jesus and our own struggles are rendered superfluous if they are predetermined." God's initiative both reveals and supports both Jesus' and our own freedom and ability to embrace our destiny in partnership with our Creator.

Being open to God's vision, being open to God's initiative, being open to following Jesus' own commitment to act with integrity, for justice, with mercy, is what it means to discover God's vision written on our hearts and embodied in the works of our hands.

In this sacred journey, we're coming to one of those moments – we may already be there – when we have to choose – to choose whether we really will follow Jesus, wherever it leads, what ever it leads us into.

That choice is spelled out in the language Jesus uses about rejecting or recovering authentic living. In the end, the choice is between rejecting – letting go of – a life that's self-focused, self-serving, self-satisfying and embracing a life that's focused on serving others, on celebrating with others the joy of relationship, of companionship, and of the joy of living a godly life.

In sacrificing our individualistic self-interest for the greater good of God's realm we "gain," we are enabled to live into and experience, God's good abundance – a new life long promised.

When, in today's gospel, that promise is described by the language of glory, spoken by God, the people around Jesus think that the Divine voice is thunder, or maybe an angel. They don't recognize that it is the unmediated voice of God and they don't know that it's for their benefit. They don't have ears to hear.

That's the question today's readings ask us: do we have ears to hear that promise?

And do we have the strength and commitment to respond positively to it?