

Lent 5, 2015, St. Augustine's in-the-Woods, Freeland. Nigel Taber-Hamilton
Jeremiah 31:31-34; John 12:20-33

We're approaching the final lap on our Lenten journey. We've mirrored Jesus' final journey toward Jerusalem and soon – next week, with Palm Sunday – we will, with him enter Jerusalem itself, enter not only the sacred place but also the sacred time of Holy Week, the holiest eight days of our lives.

Today's readings help us with those steps – heavy now, perhaps, since we know the hard times that are coming.

It should be no surprise – given that heaviness – that in the Old Testament we hear from Jeremiah. Jeremiah! Ever the prophet of judgment and doom! What is a surprise, then, is that his words are not. They're not about judgment and doom, but something quite different. They come from what scholars call "The Book of Consolation" (ch. 30-33). And they're all about the future, and the restoration that – in God's time – will follow the destruction of the present time.

They're very familiar words, aren't they? "The days are surely coming, says the LORD" – not just a hope, then, but a promise! What sort of days? Days with a new commitment from God, days that will be about, not the stale, rote religion of institution, but the Spirit-filled religion of the heart.

Great words! But also stunning words – go back and re-read them after the service; what you'll discover is almost shocking to us, we who are so obsessed with perfection, of sinlessness; we who find it so hard to forgive! Jeremiah says that the New Community God is forming is not born out of a sinless remnant but out of the sinful whole. And that is so, that it can only be created out of a sinful community, because its new identity is based on forgiveness for all.

To be the Community of the New Covenant – which Jeremiah must surely have envisaged as the Jews returning to Jerusalem from exile – required the very thing we heard about in Numbers last week – a willingness to look into the heart of our sin, as individuals and as a community – so that we are reminded of our human flaws and our need for forgiveness – from each other and from God. No one is exempt from this need for forgiveness; no one is exempt from what I believe is a fundamental prerequisite for that forgiveness, namely a recognition of, and an embracing of the ways in which we have fallen short and a strong commitment to try and set those before the God who forgives.

It seems pretty clear that Jesus's disciples – Good Jews that they were – understood that call to repentance and amendment of life – they, like us, weren't always that great about the implementation side of the equation!

But that was the vision, that was the hope – that they – and we – are shaped by the words of promise and the call to live in a different way so that everything we do and everything we say becomes a testimony to the forgiveness we have received, and the lives we are called to live.

All of which brings us very nicely to John's gospel! I wonder if these Greeks – these foreigners – really knew what they were asking for when they told Phillip they wanted” to see Jesus?”

They would obviously have come with expectations – don't we all?! To hear words of consolation? Words of grace? To find a community where we know we've come home? We come with expectations, and expectations are almost always about us.

If their expectations got the better of them – if our expectations get the better of us – can we actually hear what Jesus is saying to us? Probably not! Most of us can't hear past our own expectations, why should they be any different?!

Did they recognize their need for forgiveness? Do we? How often do we come to a place like this primarily because we recognize our need for forgiveness and new life?

I think the Greeks' "Wish[ing] to see Jesus" – and ours – fits neatly into that category of "what God actually does while we're busy making other plans!" We come for one reason, or a series of reasons, but something else happens – or can happen – instead.

Jesus told the Greeks that dying was – is – the only way really to see him – perhaps not literal death (or we're wasting our time here today!) But something so close to it, something that requires letting go of all the things we think are important, all the trappings of living, of being "as if we were dead," like grain planted in the soil – only then are we truly capable of seeing Jesus.

There's an old Doonesbury Cartoon about the Watergate hearings where two committee members, having heard outlandish testimony from a series of White House aids, wonder how much more crazy it can get, as they await Charles Coulson's testimony. The last panel is Coulson's opening remark: "Jesus asked me to be with you today!" For Doonesbury, that was the ultimate trick to avoid responsibility – to claim conversion. Yet for Coulson, everything he valued had been stripped away, his own sinfulness had been laid out before him in the national press, he had had to die to that self. Why should we be surprised when, having had to let it all go, he had finally, truly, been able to see Jesus? Isn't that the story of the Ten Lepers, or the woman with the flow of blood, of the Synagogue official with the sick daughter? Or the paralyzed man let down through the roof on a pallet? Or Peter after the cock crowed? Or Jesus himself in Gethsemane?

Perhaps its only when all else is stripped away that we can finally, truly see. And while, with Jesus, we might want to say "my soul is in distress.... "Father. Save me from this hour," maybe, just maybe, we'll be able to recognize that if we can face this hour then something truly remarkable can happen.

I don't know about you, but I don't particularly want to die! Doesn't sound like much fun! In fact it looks – feels – so, well, final!

Maybe my expectations of God are unrealistic! Or misplaced. I do believe that somewhere in all of this, God speaks, but so often all I hear is thunder. Today's gospel reading demands that I let

go of my expectations, and my pretensions about myself, and pay attention – Jesus is speaking plain words about plain things. As author Peter Woods has said, putting Jesus plain words into profound prose: “Death and life are a natural cycle through which the propagation of species occurs. There is no place for selfishness in the natural order. Little seeds packed with genetic coding cannot hold out for their own devised destiny or reward, but in the surrender of their very identity and existence they become the origin of new and verdant life. The caterpillar spins its own tomb and emerges as another being fecund with eggs to propagate life. The master dies and the disciples are thrust into being conduits of the truth he taught.” Just, in fact, as “a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies,” for if it dies, “it bears much fruit.”

The richness and complexity of this person from Nazareth who is also the Christ of faith and Son of God, is too much for any of us to be able to grasp fully. But I do know that if this Jesus were not the human being he was, he would not be able to relate to my existence, my fears and my horror about my own death. By his living and his dying he sets me free by showing how to be completely human, how important – essential – it is to let go of all of those defenses that I have surrounded myself with. By his living and his dying he shows me – and you – how to be completely open to the divine.

In the end, it’s all a husk breaking, thunderous and dim mystery! But when I close my eyes and still my mind from all its reasoning and overthinking, I notice that I can see dimly in the dark. Just enough light to take another step closer to this divine person. Just enough light to be able truly to see Jesus.

That’s the genuine hope we all have - that there will be just enough light to be able truly to see Jesus. That’s the promise of Easter. I wonder, can we get there?

