“Sir, we would see Jesus.” It is a well-known statement, that plaintive request from the Greeks in Jerusalem to Philip of Bethsaida. It has been the cause of much speculation and many sermons about how Jesus did indeed draw all people to himself, about how we, too, should seek him out, no matter the obstacles. The speculation has been both on the origin of Philip’s interlocutors (Were they from Galilee or farther afield? Greek-speaking Jews of the diaspora or Gentile God fearers? Curious celebrity hunters or true believers?) and on their eventual fate. Did they actually see and hear Jesus or not? And, if so, what was their response?

It is entirely possible, after all, that they heard the words from Jesus that you just heard and immediately ran for the hills or wherever they had come from. These are not comfortable words from Jesus. He’s talking about his death again, about being “lifted up” and dying and being buried like a seed. And he’s talking about the deaths of his followers as well. “Those who love their life lose it… Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also.” As Dietrich Bonhoeffer famously said (and my apologies for the gender-specific language), “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.” And, as it has been said more recently, “If you want to fly off into glory with Jesus, you've got to be part of the first ten feet of the trip as well. You can't prop up a stepladder on the side of the cross, climb it, and then meet Jesus at the top for the balance of the journey to glory. You've got to be crucified with him. You have to be the kernel who gets buried into death with him. ‘Where I am, my servant will also be.’ But as a servant, it is not up to you to pick and choose the times and places you want to be with Jesus. You are with him always and everywhere or you are with him never and nowhere.”

This is scary stuff, daunting even for the most dedicated. Jesus’ willingness to pay the ultimate price to bring a new awareness of God’s love and mercy to his friends and foes alike and his insistence that those who followed him would have to be ready to give up all has chased away would be followers from his own time down to our own. Following Jesus is demanding. Another quotation that I love by a 20th century follower of Jesus is from the British writer, G. K. Chesterton: “Christianity has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and not tried.”

At least, that is one aspect of it. There is also this, from the same passage: “…those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” There are the other promises of Jesus: “My yoke is easy and my burden is light… I am with you always, even to the end of the world.” There is the affirmation from Paul: “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” There is the sense that whatever we have to give up, there will be more life, more beauty, more glory waiting for us if we abandon our lives into the keeping of God.

Our incipient celebration today has caused me to wax nostalgic. I’ve been thinking a lot of late about the last 10 years and, indeed, about the last 54 or at least as far back as I can remember. You see, this passage has deep resonance for me in my life and so I thought, since we are celebrating each other today, that you might put up with a little self-reflection from me this morning. I want to tell you about some of the times in my life when I have tried to live up to the challenge of Jesus here, sometimes quite against my will. I’m not telling you these stories so that you’ll head back to Fellowship Hall in a few minutes saying, “Boy, what a great guy! Didn’t we get lucky?” In fact, I think you’ll quickly see that I’m no stronger, no smarter, and have no deeper faith than anyone else here. But, as Brother Paul also wrote, “This is a faithful
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saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief.”

When I think about Jesus’ challenge to us that we should be ready to “die to self,” to lose our lives, it seems to me that it is not at all about losing what is true and best about ourselves but rather dying to the expectations that the world’s broken system puts on us and to what is selfish and grasping in us. Then we can live into the best part of ourselves, the part that shows forth the image of God. When I graduated from Rice University in 1983, with my self-designed Bachelor of Arts in Theatre, the Houston theatre scene was wide open to me. In those days, the Rice Players’ productions were almost always covered by both daily newspapers (remember when cities had two daily newspapers?) and I had acquitted myself fairly well for five years in the eyes of the critics. By fourteen months after my graduation, I had added four professional acting credits to my résumé, quickly rising from small supporting roles to (and the notion seems ludicrous now) romantic lead. I had directed to good reviews the professional U.S. premiere of a British comedy that later became a TV series in the U.K. I was, dare I say it, a hot property and I had the option of work in Los Angeles with my former acting teacher and fellow Rice alums. Instead, I dropped it all to go to seminary in Kentucky.

You see, I was convinced that’s where God wanted me. I had experienced a “call” to ministry when I was a teenager and since then I had decided that the pastorate was not right for me but I did feel that God wanted me to do something for God’s people through the gifts which God had given me in the theatre. And now that I had good training and good credentials in the theatre, I thought it was time for me to balance the equation by learning more formally what went into being a servant of God. My colleagues in the theatre community were aghast, although I am pleased to credit most of them with an open-mindedness about the intersection between our art and my faith that I did not find in many of my coreligionists at the time. Nevertheless, at least one of them asked me if I’d lost my mind. In their eyes, I was walking away from a promising career – I was giving up my life.

Here’s the funny thing: in some ways I got to The Southern Baptist Seminary in Louisville at the worst of times – at the first Opening Convocation which I attended, then-Seminary President Roy Honeycutt preached his famous sermon, “To Your Tents, O Israel,” declaring “Holy War” on the fundamentalists who were rapidly taking over the Southern Baptist Convention. I saw friends, colleagues, and professors suffer for their loyalty to Honeycutt and to our historic Baptist distinctives. It was a dreadful time, as Pam and Charlie can also tell you. But it was also, for me, the best of times. For a few, brief years, the Seminary invested in exactly what I had come there to learn: how to serve God in artistic communication. Ragan Courtney was there as guest artist and professor of theatre. It turned out that Ragan and I had very similar training, although a couple of decades apart, and I was his teaching assistant for his first two years on faculty. There were classes in opera and I was a paid assistant for the first opera production at the seminary. There were courses in radio and television production and I was part of the production team for a pilot for the new American Christian Television System, a fledgling project of the Radio and TV Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention. And when I went looking for a part-time job to help Connie keep the three of us fed, housed, and clothed, I ended up with a full-time job on staff at Actors Theatre of Louisville, the Tony-winning regional theatre famous for its new play development. And after two promotions within a year, I was Festival Coordinator, in
charge of press and professional relations for that same famous new play project. What I was willing to give up in service of God was returned to me tenfold.

There were some tough times in Louisville. We were desperately poor that first year. We ate enough government surplus food, especially the infamous government cheese, that it took me a long time after to be able to stomach “pasteurized process cheese food.” But really, it was an amazingly positive time. I’d like to be able to say that every time I broke away from what the world deemed “smart” to follow what I thought God would have me do it worked out that well. It would not, alas, be true. After sojourns in Massachusetts and back in Houston, we ended up in Louisville a second time. This time, I was managing director for Stage One, the professional theatre for young audiences and, because of the way the organization was structured at the time, a vice-president at Kentucky Center for the Arts, a state agency. Again, I was one of the Young Turks (I was not yet 35 at the time of my appointment) and my future in the field seemed assured. But after three years at Stage One, I was burned out and disillusioned. I felt as if God was calling me to something new but what? I started sending résumés to area churches looking for pastors. Unsurprisingly, I got very little interest. I decided that I would take a leap of faith and resign from the theatre anyway. This time, my colleagues were sure I’d lost my mind. But it seemed that God caught me mid-leap. I was offered the position of Director for Communication with Kentucky Baptist Homes for Children, then the largest provider of family services in the state. They had adoption and fostering programs. They had a network of family counseling services. They had rebuilt their many orphanages, founded after the Civil War, into residential facilities for youth in crisis. The job was easy – I had a terrific staff – and the pay was still the best I’ve ever had. My future seemed even more assured as I was hired as the heir apparent to the Vice-President for Development and Communication who planned to retire within five years.

The test for me this time was quite different. Part of my job was to handle press relations in any crisis, which usually involved one of our young clients running away. But about two months after I joined the agency, a highly valued counsellor at one of our residential facilities was outed as a lesbian. Under the terms of the employment agreement, which called for adherence to a lifestyle commensurate with the ideals of Kentucky Baptists, she was summarily fired. I would be the one to explain and defend this to the press, once they became interested. I felt and still feel that I could not defend such an action and, after consultation with Connie, I told the President of the agency that I must resign. The human resources director was kind enough not to contest my application for unemployment benefits but it was still six months before my next paycheck. Did I mention we’d bought our first house? Those were hard days. We had been young and dumb when we threw over what we had in Houston to move to Louisville that first time but now we were older, with three kids to feed rather than just one and that mortgage as well. There was some fear, there were some tears, there was some anger at God. There were doubts – so many doubts. Had I really been listening to God? Was I really being faithful? But we kept holding on and we kept praying and eventually there was another good job and then a better one and after some twists and turns, I finally did move into the pastorate and here we are.

If I’ve made it sound too easy, I apologize. It wasn’t. It was, at points, terrifying. Terrifying to drive off to Louisville that first time with no jobs and no place to live. Terrifying to pick up and leave Louisville after six hard but good years for New England. Terrifying to be unemployed for six months between Massachusetts and our second time in Houston and I didn’t even tell you.
that story. Terrifying to leave the comfort of the theatre world, hard as it was, for the unknown of the social service world. Terrifying to be faced with the reality of selling our first house at a loss to come to Seattle for the first time with Taproot. Not terrifying but heartbreaking to leave this area and move to Indiana twelve years ago because we thought that was our best opportunity. You know, I do blame myself for that move which turned out to be a total disaster for the whole family. Not because it was a disaster but because I really wasn’t listening for God’s voice that time. And although I can tell you that I was scared or heartbroken all those times, I can’t begin to speak for Connie, who willingly followed me on this odyssey regardless of what she actually thought. Or Kit, Colleen, and Sean, who got dragged from pillar to post willy-nilly.

You all know me after 10 years. You know a lot of my faults. You know I’m not Super Christian. I get scared and angry and I’m weak when I should be strong and I pretend to be strong when I should own up to my weaknesses. And for every story I’ve just told, each of you has one to match it. I know most of you well enough to know that you could stand up and say, “You know, there was that time when I took a huge risk because of what I believed God was doing in my life and it turned out great. God blessed me after all.” I encourage you this morning to think about those stories from your own life. You’ve been encouraged to share stories about me when we gather in Fellowship Hall in a few minutes but I’d ask you to share stories about yourselves as well, about the times when died to self to live for God. Rehearse those stories, they are holy and they give you your very best way to tell others about God’s love. You can tell stories about yourselves as a group, as well. The last time I preached from this passage was six years ago and after the service, we went outside and we said goodbye to the beloved old apple trees that had provided cider apples for so many years and which so many kids had climbed on and to the dilapidated old Pink House which held so many memories, good and bad, for this church. And the next week, the fences went up and the week after that, the trees and the Pink House were gone and that hurt. It was hard to give away $2.2 million worth of land that could have secured the financial future of this church but you did it anyway. The world would have called you all crazy but you had a vision from God to help other people. You were willing to let some things die, some things you valued, so that you could truly live – live with yourselves knowing that you had done what God called you to do.

And so I ask you again this morning, this morning of the Fifth Sunday of Lent, what is God asking you to let go? What part of yourself, of your dreams, individually or collectively, is God calling you to let die? When we came together this morning, we sang: “Well, we don’t have all the answers but we sure do have the questions.” This church has been singing this song for 40 years and I think that’s a good thing! And also the line that says, “Somewhere there’s a promise ‘bout some distant shore that those who seek will someday know.” We don’t know, you and I, what the future holds for us, individually or together. We can’t know. But if we work within the light that we have, the light from the life of Jesus, we can prepare ourselves and help prepare each other for whatever the future might bring. And as long as we are willing to stay on that path, on the Way of Jesus, no matter what the cost might seem to be in terms of what the world tells us to value, we do have those promises of abundant and everlasting life, the life of the ages.

What does it mean to be willing to die in order to bear much fruit? What does it mean to hate one’s life in this world? Only this: not to be caught up in what our society values and so lose
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sight of what God values; not to allow the teasing, shallow love of our culture to blind us to the promised, enduring love of God; not to follow the path of self-centeredness, making gods of ourselves, but seeking to serve others, just as Jesus did in revealing the truth of God.

My sisters and my brothers, it is not yet Easter on our calendar but we live in that sure and certain hope of the resurrection. Christ has died and Christ has risen. We have died in him in baptism and are raised to walk his path in new life. We can rise this morning to sing about the green blade rising, about our Jesus rising to bring us joy, joy, joy. God is with us, in the good times and especially when times are hard. Let us rejoice. Thanks be to God.