

New Life

In our lectionary readings this morning, we have heard a series of passages that address, in one way or another, what we might call new life. First, in our Psalm for the morning, Psalm 51, parts of which we read together in the Call to Worship and other parts of which we read together in our communal confession. This Psalm is famous, in part for its beautiful and powerful language and in part for the superscription which is appended to it in many Bibles. In our pew Bibles, it reads like this: “A Psalm of David, when the prophet Nathan came in to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.” Do you remember the story? It’s found in II Samuel, chapters 11 and 12. David is in Jerusalem, preparing to go out to war against the Ammonites, where his general, Joab, already has an army in the field. One night, unable to sleep, he goes up to the roof of his palace and from that vantage point, high above the roofs of the neighboring houses, he sees a beautiful woman bathing herself in what she thinks is the privacy of her own rooftop. He finds out that she is Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite, one of his loyal soldiers. Nevertheless, he has the woman brought to his bed and soon it is revealed that she is pregnant. Desperate to conceal his sin, David has her husband brought home from the front, but Uriah refuses the comfort of his own bed when his comrades are in the field and sleeps outside the door of David’s house. So David has Uriah sent into the fiercest part of the battle, where he will surely be killed, and so he is. Then David takes Bathsheba as his wife and she bears him a son. But soon after, the prophet Nathan visits David and tells him a story of a rich man with many flocks who stole the only lamb of his poor neighbor in order to have a feast. David is outraged by the story and says, ““As the LORD lives, the man who has done this deserves to die... (and) Nathan said to David, ‘You are the man!’” “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.”

We hear of new life in our Old Testament reading this morning, too. The word of God comes to Jeremiah the prophet. He is in Jerusalem after the initial defeat of Judah by the Babylonians. One Judean king has been deposed and carried into exile with the elite of his people. A new king rules by Babylon’s sufferance over a diminished kingdom. But God has a promise for God’s Chosen People: “The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah... I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.” David had prayed for a new heart, one in tune with God’s will. David became known as the king after God’s own heart. He received a new life. Now God promises a new heart for all the people, one in which God’s law will be engraved. It is a powerful promise of a new life to come.

Jesus also speaks of new life. “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” From his death, Jesus predicts, new life will come for many; there will be much fruit. The same will be true for his disciples. If they are willing to give up their lives for his sake, then they will find the life of the ages, ζῶην αἰώνιον, the abundant and overflowing life connected to God that I described last week. This is an important theme in Jesus’ teaching as all four Evangelists quote Jesus on this matter, although John’s memory differs slightly from the three Synoptic Gospels. In Mark, Matthew and Luke, we find this saying: “those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.” But what does it mean, this losing of life? How are we to go about making sense of what Jesus is saying in our own lives? I believe our answer lies in the life of Jesus himself and I want to focus in particular this morning

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on the rather peculiar beginning to our Gospel story, what it reveals about Jesus and how we can apply Jesus' example to our own lives.

This story in John's Gospel is set during the week of Passover, the week before Jesus went to the cross to die and was subsequently raised by God. Indeed, it appears to be a part of John's remembrance of the events of Palm Sunday, which we will celebrate next week. "Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus." Now, we know from the story of Pentecost Sunday in Acts that Jews from all over the Mediterranean world came to Jerusalem for festivals and they spoke all different languages. And we know that the *lingua franca*, the common tongue of the time was Greek. So, one might assume that these are Greek-speaking Jews. But John uses a particular word here in Greek, Ἕλληνας, a word which specifically means a native of Greece but is also used more generally to mean Gentile, a non-Jew. One possible implication here is that Jesus has become so famous that even those who do not share his beliefs want a look at him, a moment of his time. They want to have their pictures taken with him and get him to autograph their special edition Jesus of Nazareth t-shirts. He has become a celebrity.

But that's not what Jesus wants. He's not looking for that sort of glory and he corrects his new admirers. The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified, but not in the way they think. He immediately begins to talk about his death, to talk about being "lifted up," being crucified. Whoa, bummer, Dude. The Greeks disappear from the story and it's hardly surprising.

One lesson here for us is this: we are called to be like Jesus, not like the Greeks. Just as Jesus found his glory in following the will of his Father and not in seeking the approval of those around him, so should we. Jesus says, "Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor." In his actions here, Jesus reminds me of his famous ancestor, David. Jesus is not looking for the approval of the crowd; he is looking to do what is right. If tradition is correct and David wrote Psalm 51 in the wake of the Bathsheba incident and gave it to the leader of the Levites to sing in the Temple, then he was not looking for popular acclaim, either. He was as good as confessing to the sins of adultery and murder. But he knew that he must confess and ask God's pardon and he knew that as king, he had a duty to do so publicly. David sacrificed his popular approval, "great David's greater Son," Jesus, sacrificed not only public approval but his very life.

We, too, must follow the path of doing the will of God without seeking acclaim for it. Sometimes, that temptation will be all too easy. In a few minutes, we will take a ceremonial step in recognizing another death that leads to new life as we recognize the trees and building that must be torn down in order for our new senior housing complex to be built. Already, among our Lynnwood neighbors and others, I'm hearing acclaim for you for being willing to make the sacrifice of part of the congregation's land and possibilities in order to help others. And it is right that your decision is being recognized. But we must be very careful, all of us, to remember that we do this thing not simply because we think it is a good thing to do but because we believe it is what God calls us to do. Any glory from this great work belongs not to us but to God, who provided this land for this congregation in the first place, who put the vision of this building into

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your hearts, and who has surely guided us through the potential pitfalls of the funding and permitting process. How else does a church which draws together less than 50 people on Sunday morning manage to put together a \$10 million construction project?

As we follow the example of Jesus, we must also be careful not to follow the example of the Greeks. We must realize that we cannot follow him without sharing in his suffering. We must be ready to stand against the currents of our society and to face ridicule for it. We must be ready to do what is right, not only when it works to our benefit, not only when we don't get anything out of it, but even when it costs us dearly. As Scott Hoezee writes on this passage, "So 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."

Does that sound too hard? Does it sound frightening? Remember, Jesus was frightened, too. John does not record in his Gospel the story of Jesus' agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, but he gives a hint of it here. "Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name." The Rev. Dr. J. Barry Vaughn writes on our passage, "For us glory is about having more: more money, more prestige, more power. For Jesus, glory was about giving more." Vaughn recalls the opening of John's Gospel, which says, "we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth." Vaughn writes, "The Word Incarnate heals the sick, feeds the multitude, raises the dead, and finally completes his task by dying on the cross..." That is how we beheld his glory.

But it was hard for Jesus and that is another possibility behind the story of the Greeks. If you read the Synoptic Gospels carefully, you will note that they record Jesus spending a good deal of time in the Gentile sections of Galilee, perhaps as much as a third of his ministry. Robert Linthicum surmises that these Greeks were actually well-known by Jesus, that they were Gentile converts from Galilee who had come to encourage him to come out of dangerous Judaea and back to Galilee where they could keep him safe. Linthicum writes, "in these Gentiles' offer lay the way out of the death that would otherwise inevitably await Jesus if he continued his attack of the Judeans – and that, quite soon! Should he accept the offer? Would he accept the offer? Could he not now "save face" while rapidly de-escalating his conflict with the Jewish clerical aristocracy, doing so by accepting the request of a people who wanted him to teach and heal in their country and were open to having their society shaped into the kingdom of God? It must have been terribly, terribly tempting – especially to a young man who really was dreading the thought of dying."

Perhaps as he would have considered such an offer, Jesus would have thought of the history of his people and of the times seen by the prophet Jeremiah, when the kings of Judah sought safety in their armies and their alliances rather than in following the will of God and so were destroyed by the Babylonians. Perhaps Jesus remembered that it was his mission to bring the Good News of the new covenant, a covenant written in the hearts of the people, and that in order to fulfill his

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mission, he had to die. “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”

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 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.

I’m glad it’s officially spring, even though the weather hasn’t looked much like it in the last few days. Spring means new life. I’m glad it’s baseball season, that’s a sign of new life too, and I’m hoping the rain holds off while I’m sitting outside for Sean’s game later today. I’m glad that the promise of the flower in the bulb has begun to be realized. I’m glad that in the ending of our old trees and the old Pink House that we find a new beginning that means life for our neighbors. I’m glad that the promise of the resurrection is offered to all of us. I’m glad that Jesus was willing to die on that spring day in Jerusalem, even though I am so often too afraid or too proud or too distracted by the world to do the things that he would have me do. Because while we were yet sinners, God was in Christ reconciling the world to Godself. Now the green blade rises. Now the buried grain springs forth with fruit, good fruit, twenty and thirty and one hundred fold. Now the life of the ages, eternal life, abundant life is available to us. All we need do is to die to our old selfish ways and accept the love of God, which cleanses our hearts, which makes God’s will a part of those new hearts, which changes everything. Thanks be to God!