

Sermon Lent 5 Year B - Planting as seasons change

March 17, 2024

Mary Beth Mills-Curran

One of the classic images of the church calendar shows the whole year presented in a circle. Each Sunday of the year as a block in the wheel - 52 Sundays, each with its own color. Advent begins the year with four blocks, four purple or blue sundays - or maybe three, with one pink. Christmas is white, and so is Easter. Pentecost is red, but the many weeks that follow after are green.

Lent is five purple sundays, with one red - Palm Sunday.

The pattern of the year gives us a sense of predictability. We know how Advent goes. We know what to expect from the beginning of Lent, and from its end, Palm Sunday.

Today we find ourselves on the Fifth Sunday of Lent. Which is to say we've been at this whole "Penitance and fasting" thing for a while - but we've yet to turn the corner into holy week.

If we were running a marathon we'd be at the 17 mile mark. Well past midway, but still almost ten miles from finishing. And I don't think I've EVER run ten miles all together.

Which for me raises the question - what IS the fifth sunday of Lent? What are we doing here? Where are we going? What is God's message to us here today?

This morning's Gospel is at once heavy and confusing. Let's just summarize what's going on:

- Before our scene opens, two major things have happened: 1. Jesus has arrived late to Bethany, but raised Lazarus from the dead. And 2. Jesus has traveled to Jerusalem for Passover, being greeted by the crowds. This is all before our story begins, however.

This morning's gospel begins like this:

- Some Greeks (which is to say Gentiles, outsiders) are in Jerusalem in the days before the festival of passover. And they want to meet Jesus.
- They approach one of his inner circle, a friend from home even. Philip isn't sure how to answer, so he asks Andrew. Andrew isn't sure either. So they together ask Jesus.
- Jesus's answer is ANYTHING but straightforward. He tells them a story about a grain of wheat... a thinly veiled metaphor for himself. The wheat must die to bear fruit. He must die to bring the world to him.
 - But he doesn't answer their question about meeting the greeks.
- He goes on... asking a rhetorical question about denying his responsibility. (Perhaps a reference to the other Gospels, where Jesus seems to express a reluctance to die.)
- And then God's voice breaks in.... Just as God's voice broke in at the beginning of Jesus's public ministry, his baptism.
- The crowds hear God's voice. They may not all understand the words, but it seems most know something incredible has happened.

Jesus is turning into his final days.

This morning we are shown how his public ministry ends dramatically, just as it began.... With the voice of the Father from above.

Sermon Lent 5 Year B - Planting as seasons change

March 17, 2024

Mary Beth Mills-Curran

We know what's coming.

God knows what's coming.

It seems Jesus knows what's coming.

But the people around him don't know what's coming.

And so the Gospel stands in this moment between what IS, and what IS to COME.

The specifics of Jesus's story are pretty remote for us. But that feeling maybe isn't so relatable.

The sense of one chapter ending, and the next about to begin is one we can probably all relate to.

- Sometimes it's predictable changes. Like the end of a period in school or training. The completion of a major project or deal. A job that has reached its end.
- Sometimes we can track the progress of a season of our lives by counting down the weeks. Just as we count down the days of Lent.

Other times, however, we are caught by surprise. A sudden illness that reorients our priorities. A death that reshapes all our plans. A change in employment that comes suddenly

- We can all find ourselves like a grain of wheat, suddenly stripped off the head. A seed lying on the ground. Bare and vulnerable.

Jesus was in that place as he entered Jerusalem for the final time. He will face his final days soon enough. But in the meantime, crowds are still being drawn to him. Even Strangers from far away are reaching out, wanting to meet him.

- No one but Jesus seems to know what is to come.
- From the outside, it must look like his star is only rising. His fame is only growing.
- But Jesus knows things are about to change.

He's at that 17-mile mark. The marathon isn't quite in its final stretch, but the runners are nonetheless looking towards the end.

- But for Jesus, the finish line won't be the end of the story....
- Rather it will be the beginning of a new story.

Jesus will be the seed planted, which dies in order to bear much fruit. And we can follow Jesus by being willing to die ourselves in order to build something bigger.

- Most of the time these deaths are small... not so much the end of a life, as the end of a season of our lives. "Dying to self" as some theologians put it.
- In order to follow Jesus, we must be willing to let go of parts of ourselves which do not serve us.
- We must be willing to allow our vision of how things "Should" go to die - in order that things may unfold

The promise that Jesus makes is that those who follow him and his way will be honored by God. If we are willing to lose our lives - the lives we know, the plans we have - If we are willing to give ourselves over to God's plan, we may find out that we too are seeds capable of bearing much fruit.