

B Lent #5

A sermon by Tim Wray

Grace to you and peace from God our Father through our Lord and savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

With the march towards Golgatha's shadow and the encroachment of the grave's gaping mouth Jesus holds up a seed and we brace to ponder the humanity of Jesus right alongside our own. The writer of the book of Hebrews recounts, "Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard."

Yet we know before Jesus is saved from death he dies. Like every other testing moment in our lives, the only way through it is through it. No intellectualization of the facts can set at ease the goosebumps we feel on Ash Wednesday or Good Friday. We can only make sense of the Paschal Mystery, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, through mimicry. We get through it by going through it.

Teaching on his own death Jesus asserts, "Whoever serves me **MUST** follow me."

And we will and we do.

The spiritual disciplines of Lent, the services of Holy Week, the daily act of confessing our sins and remembering our baptism, the *re-membering* at the communion rail of all that is good, the closing of our eyes to the day with words of the age old mantra, "into your hands I commit my spirit", the release of control over our finances, time and loved ones, the opening of our hearts to what will be...all of these things embody an act of trust in a divine promise that actually allows us to follow Jesus through Holy Week to Easter. Moving through these moments we realize with in our own bodies that our spiritual work of

living is at the same time a work of dying – and vice versa. We lose our life and find it heeding the whisper that I imagine cajoling Jesus' obedience amid the cacophony of the crowd calling crucify. The whisper persists today, "You will not disappear."

We tend to speak of Christ's saving work as something that he alone has done for us. We say this to honor Christ and to recognize the gift we have been given. But if Jesus does only what Jesus can do we ourselves cannot follow our savior as he has instructed. We can't save ourselves, let alone anybody else. Yet Jesus beckons, "Follow me."

How are we to do what Jesus does?

The reading from Hebrews answers this question by describing salvation as something that happens to Jesus. In Jesus' passivity to God's will he is changed into a source of life for us. The NRSV reads "having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation." Dusting off my Greek grammar I think that the translation is sound. Hebrews describes the perfection of Christ as something enacted upon Jesus as he gave himself over to the process in "reverent submission".

The argument that Hebrews is building here is that if God's saving work can take hold of Jesus it can take hold of you too. *As we offer up prayers with loud cries and tears to the one who is able to save us from death, we too are heard* as Jesus was. And it is at the command of the living God that the resurrected Christ will come and save us who are eagerly awaiting him. (Hebrews 9:23) **The passive one before God becomes the activator of life!**

It is worth mentioning the popular idea that Jesus needed to be roughed up to satisfy God's wrath. Hebrews makes no mention of the brutality of Christ's public trial, humiliation, abuse and crucifixion as

being central to his saving work. I raise this point because the degenerative suffering that we encounter in its various forms does NOT appear to be part of God's perfecting plan in Jesus' life nor in yours or mine. The "suffering" that we share with Jesus as described by Hebrews is the dissonance experienced by people who pray with tears in their eyes even while we are being heard (Heb 5:7). To obey Jesus is to trust that we will not disappear no matter what threats and insults the crowd and the courts project on us. Led by the Spirit the Christ follower can at once be *passive* to God's will and simultaneously *active* in reshaping this world from the ground up.

The passive one before God becomes the activator of life.

To explore what this might look like we can consider the seed of grain that Jesus uses to make sense of his own death. In the 12th chapter of John the Greeks have approached the disciples saying, "We wish to see Jesus." Jesus introduces himself with a parable. "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain of; but if it dies, it bears much fruit."

The seed is falling. Pulled by gravity down into the earth the seed does not plant itself, but it somehow is planted. The metaphor alludes that the son of man is glorified by letting the forces of the earth enfold his body and shape his fate.

As a farmer and a theologian I have been humbled these last few years as I have glimpsed into the workings of the underworld, the top twelve inches or so below our very feet. It has taken a growing number of scientific studies to crack through our mechanistic view on what is happening out in our fields. We now know that the earth yearns to fulfill what it is commissioned to do in Genesis Chapter 1; the land receives breath and brings forth life out of itself. The Australian writer, philosopher and farmer, Charles Massey went back to University in his

60's to build his PhD research on this very insight. As he learned to listen to the land that his family farmed he came to see that nature has it's own agenda and ability to self organize. The life of this planet oozes into every crack and crevice so that minerals become tied up in long chain molecules through metabolic pathways that lead to more complicated and life generating forms. The earth brings forth. Which means that Charles Massey's farm, though it had become degraded from decades of human effort, was now regenerating itself as Massy submitted to the gravity of this greater principal of life.

Memorize this, **the passive one before God becomes the activator of life.**

The seed falls into the earth and dies so it bears much fruit.

The relatives of the Greeks who came wanting to see Jesus coined a term for us that still hangs around churches today, showing up in sermons in and throughout Holy Week. The word is Kenosis, and it refers to the self-emptying of Jesus, the complete and total handing over of his life to God's will.

But here is the twist. Handing over his life to God's will doesn't put Jesus in the hands of God, but rather into the hands of humanity and then into the hold of tomb. Kenosis results in Jesus being laid into the earth entrusted to the life giving power commissioned in the garden of Eden to bring forth of itself, life forms of every kind.

For John the glorification of the seed of Christ comes as he trusts in this age old process that he himself designed as the *Word that was with God, and was God through which all things came into being*. What peace Jesus must have felt when the noise of the crowd finally faded and the rock was set in place so he could be ministered to by the earth.

Some of us, for moments, experience hints of this peace.

The Poem, *The Peace of the Wild Things*, is for me an art work in line with Jesus' self-emptying posture. Wendell Berry pens,

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives might be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.

I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.

And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.ⁱ

Rest. Yet, the path that Jesus leads us down is not one of eternal rest but one of eternal salvation. There is more for us than mere freedom in passivity. We, like Christ, are remade into glorified animators of life.

As farmers we are now realizing that the first thing a seed does as it "dies" is it begins to refashion the darkness around it. How is that for a Christian theory of atonement. The new plant begins to stimulate and call to life the creatures of the underworld with a whisper – "You have not disappeared". The new plant literally breathes into the earth. Activated by a reciprocating embrace the shoot starts to make immediate connections. Like lovers trading letters through a fiber optic

network the seed that has died commits to a communion of the saints that rolls the stone away. Giving and taking of the earth the new plant pushes through the darkness towards the light. And the second that photons dance upon the chloroplasts the first fruits of photosynthesis are marked for sharing so that the communion with the soil continues, strengthens and expands its reach.

This seed that dies brings life down into the underworld that yields 30, 60 and 100 fold.

The passive one before God becomes the activator of life.

From Galilee to Gethsemane, then Golgatha and the garden we give ourselves over to the gravity of Jesus' way and find ourselves falling into the earth. Empty of will, we do not disappear. May the peace of the wild things imbue your pilgrimage to Holy Week.

Breathe as the soil breathes.
Plant as the sower seeds
Share like the plant that feeds
That which is below and sight unseen.
Teaming with still - activity
Trusting,
life generates a blessing.
In the name of Holy Trinity.

ⁱ From The Selected Poems of Wendell Berry (Counterpoint, 1999)

[The preacher may chose to show a video of Wendell Berry's reading of this poem, with visual art. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ewBOWL3bNw>]