

“Dying to Live”
Candidate Sermon
Lent 5B
Jeremiah 31:31-34
John 12:20-26
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According to our Gospel passage, word had spread about Jesus. Sure, he’d been traveling around the regions of Galilee, Samaria, and Judea—teaching, preaching, healing, living a life of reckless love and forgiveness. So his own movements had contributed to his growing fame—although Mark insists that Jesus was constantly asking people to keep mum about his miraculous deeds.

But people were talking. Those who had been touched by his ministry couldn’t help telling others about how they’d been affected, how their way of seeing the world was different now; and life was better, richer, more vibrant for it.

Tens of thousands of people were gathering in Jerusalem for the annual Jewish festival of the Passover. The city would have been overrun with pilgrim Jews and Gentiles alike, coming from far and wide either to partake in the religious observances at the Temple, or other cultural activities, market stalls, the open bazaar, etc., or just to be with family and friends during the holiday.

The scene from our gospel lesson opened with a note that, among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. Now, in today’s Easy Jet world, the journey from Athens to Jerusalem may not seem like a big deal—a couple hours’ flying time. But in a time when most travel happened by foot or by boat, it represented a pretty long journey. Word about Jesus and his work had spread clear across the Mediterranean, and here in our text, there were some travellers all the way from Greece who were looking forward to meeting him!

Well, let me tell you. Word about The Congregational Church of Hollis and the inspired work you’re doing here has spread to distant places. I read and heard about you clear across the Atlantic. People far and wide knew about you when I went asking questions. And, the more I learned about you, the more I felt like I just needed to meet you, to spend some time with you. I sensed that we might have some important things to learn from each other, to share with one another, about how God is and has been at work with us.

For all of us, I daresay, the journey to this moment has taken some time, and it hasn’t always felt straightforward. So it’s a thrill for Joel and me to be here this morning.

We’re all on a journey together. Fellow travellers, you and I. Together we’re walking the paces of a special discernment process as part of our journey deeper into (we hope and pray!) God’s desires and vision for our respective futures.

But we're also on a spiritual trek with Christians throughout the world in this liturgical season of Lent. It started five weeks ago, when we remembered how—just after Jesus was baptized, he found himself compelled to journey into the wilderness, all alone, plumbing the depths there of who he was, whose he was, and what his life was about.

That Sunday, we were also reminded of the story of Abraham and Sarah—those ancient grandparents of our faith—who marked the beginning of a unique people. They followed a sense of being called by God to get up and go, they knew not where, except that God would lead them; to a new place and reality which would bless them, and make them a blessing to countless generations after them. It was the start of a special relationship, a *covenantal* relationship, whereby Abraham's and Sarah's descendants would know themselves as God's chosen ones, the apple of God's eye; and reciprocally, the people would have eyes and hearts for God alone.

Except that they didn't. The people had eyes and hearts for lots of other gods; they found themselves pursuing and devoting themselves to all sorts of things—money, status, warped and abusive relationships, food, drink, drugs, internet (wait, they didn't have the internet yet; okay, let's say entertainment)—basically all the same things that still charm us most today. And, as they sought to quench their spiritual thirst with these providers of immediate, intense, but ephemeral gratification, they became like parched soil.

Across the centuries and throughout the Old Testament, God is constantly trying to find creative new ways to communicate how important the divine/human relationship is; to say once and for all how deep and wide and unshakeable God's love ultimately is for the people, and how God longs for the people to offer the same in return.

God spoke through prophets, sometimes in harsh and threatening tones; other times in plaintive, pleading, heart-rending tones reflecting the state of God's own heart. But the parched state of the people's hearts left them hardened, like stone.

The new idea proposed in the passage we read responsively this morning, was that God was going to put the divine law *within* the people; to write it straight onto on their hearts. Another prophet, Ezekiel, who was quite likely writing at about the same time as Jeremiah, recounted the words of God this way: "A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh." (Ezekiel 36:26)

Both prophets were gesturing toward the stone tablets that Moses carried back to the people containing the rules God wanted the people to live by in order to fulfil the covenant, and to know life at its best. They're rules for living that some people call "The Ten Best Ways", and that most of us know as "The Ten Commandments." The original thought was that the people would have the rules preserved in stone—but they would learn them "by heart"; they'd take them into their beings by sharing them, teaching them, helping each other to abide by them. The Ten Commandments would define their lives and their character; they would *embody* them, put flesh on them, and fulfil the

divine/human covenant of love.

But as Moses and other leaders after him discovered, writing the divine word into tablets of stone didn't work. Next, Jeremiah and Ezekiel proclaimed that God's Word would be written on the people's hearts. But even that didn't work. So, in the most extravagant gesture of love and self-sacrifice, in an unspeakable mystery and profound act of grace, God's Word put on flesh itself and came and lived among us, in order to make clear to us *as one of us* what divine love looks like, how it behaves/lives, and how it saves.

And today, the fifth Sunday of Lent, represents the beginning of Passiontide. This is the Sunday when our collective attention as the Church becomes less backward looking, no longer thinking about what's past, but completely forward focussed—gazing only on the road leading to the cross.

For most people, the road to the cross is not a path that's easily embraced. It's not in our normal human nature to seek death, or pain, sacrifice, vulnerability, potential abandonment, relinquishment of all that is familiar and feels safe.

We like to know what's ahead. From the day we're born, we're socialized to be competent, productive, self-reliant creatures who prove our worth by how busy we are, or by the title on our office door, the size of our bank account, or how well-connected we are.

We become accomplished at planning and organizing, strategizing, totting up the cost, adjusting, brainstorming some more to be sure we've covered all possible eventualities . . . all these things that help us to feel like we're competent, effective, productive people, and like we've got life under control.

Good leaders, we're taught, know how to take charge; they stand head and shoulders above the rest, elbows out if necessary; they do what has to be done to put themselves at the front of the pack, and they make no apologies for it.

Jesus' first disciples had similar thoughts about the constitution of a strong leader. Which is why it was such a shock to Peter when, after rebuking Jesus for suggesting that he must suffer and die in order to fulfil his mission, Jesus said to him, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." (Matthew 16:23) And then he got back to work showing Peter what God's style of leadership is like, as he tied a towel around his waist, kneeled down, and began the awkward and menial task of washing dirty feet. Touching the untouchable. Loving those whom the rest of the world had rejected as repulsive. He became one with *them*. As they sat there dying of shame, or scorn, or ridicule, or judgement, Jesus drew up alongside them and died right along with them. And in so doing, he healed them.

The nourishing waters of God's Spirit flowed out of him as he sat with them in their various deaths, and the hardened shell of their existence suddenly felt bathed, soothed, planted in a place that invited growth. And the green buds of life within them, previously invisible beneath that hard shell, began to push through a softened self, and

it grew and grew. And as it grew, it changed; and as it changed it shared its life, and that life gave life to others.

Such is the power of divine love. Powerful enough to conquer death, regardless of what mask death happens to be wearing.

Tom read our gospel text for today from the New Revised Standard Version. But I particularly like the way Eugene Peterson—a Presbyterian pastor, respected Biblical scholar, author, and poet—has translated it in *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language*. Hear how he renders it:

24-25 "Listen carefully: Unless a grain of wheat is buried in the ground, dead to the world, it is never any more than a grain of wheat. But if it is buried, it sprouts and reproduces itself many times over. In the same way, anyone who holds on to life just as it is destroys that life. But if you let it go, reckless in your love, you'll have it forever, real and eternal. 26 "If any of you wants to serve me, then follow me. Then you'll be where I am, ready to serve at a moment's notice. The Father will honour and reward anyone who serves me." (John 12:24-26)

It seems to me, this particular version gets the emphasis right. It doesn't make life in this world something to be hated, and an after-life in heaven the thing to put all our energies into pursuing (as some other versions, including the NRSV, seem to do). Instead it issues the challenge, the invitation, to 'let go of life just as it is'. In other words, venture beyond the familiar, the routine, the safe and predictable, to the place where the God of surprises is at work. Jesus suggests we ought to love 'recklessly', extravagantly, with abandon, not counting the cost. That's pretty big. Take a moment and just think about what that might look like for you, personally.

Me? I think it's a more than just little scary. In many ways, I find vulnerability and fear of ridicule or judgment as challenging to overcome as the next person.

But I also think it's awfully exciting; on the occasions when I've allowed my self to practise that kind of no-holds-barred love—unchecked compassion, lavish altruism, authentic warmth with no expectation that it might be reciprocated—I've felt more fully alive. I've felt a kind of power and energy unlike any other flowing through me; more life-giving, utterly liberating. And it makes me wonder why it's so hard to do it all the time!

But I also know that mine is not an unusual experience in the life of one striving to be faithful. I'm grateful for the ability to share these joys and the struggles by participating in a community of fellow sojourners. We all gain strength and clarity by journeying together—it's in community that we see and introduce others to the Risen Jesus, living and active to this very day.

Dear people of The Congregational Church of Hollis, you have an important, consequential task before you. The journey of faith, particularly in moments when we're called to make a significant decision about our future, is not always as straightforward as some might like it to be—especially when it represents a major departure from the familiar. Feeling positive that you know the mind and will of God just now may feel easy

for some, impossible for others, and like pinning the tail on the donkey to a handful of you.

But beyond deciding whether or not I am called to be your next Pastor and Teacher, as people of Christian faith each one of us is going to be challenged time and again to let go of life as we know it in order to experience the extraordinary things that happen when we trust God more fully. There will continue to be risks, unknowns, opportunities to lean more deeply into our commitment to live by faith and not by sight. We will change, and be changed, and with God working through us, act as change-agents in a world desperately needing transformation.

I recently heard someone say that, when Jesus was placed in the tomb, he wasn't buried: he was planted.

The life and journey of faith is not easy, not if we're really taking it seriously. Reckless love isn't easy; it's scary, feels risky, demands trust. It involves dying to old ways, leaving behind patterns of thinking and behaving/living that feel safe, familiar, even if they are a bit hardened and shell-like.

But here's the Gospel Truth: unless we become like grains of wheat (or apple seeds), buried in the ground, dead to the world, we will never become anything more than what we are.

But if we dare to die to the world's ways, bury the impulses that make us resemble the rest of the world—bury them in the rich soil of God's love and ways of being—then we will sprout and grow, and the love which has nurtured us will reproduce itself many times over through us. If we let go of life as it is, die to the things that stifle us, get reckless with our love and faith in God, then we'll discover that we've finally got *life*, and will have it forever—real and eternal.

So let it be! Amen.