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Thursday, March 18, 2021
Year B Lent 5

Jeremiah 31:31-34
Hebrews 5:5-10
John 12:20-33

“Life from Death”

- Not too long ago a little article on the internet caught my eye
 - I cannot remember if it was facebook, or if it popped up on my news feed, but I saw proposed a new way to be buried
 - Of course I clicked on it, because you know, burying people is a part of what I do
 - But more so because of the way in which a person would be buried if you went with this product
 - It was called Poetree¹
 - It was a concept for an urn for your ashes that includes a seed for a tree
 - So when you bury a person, over time a tree grows from their remains, serving as a natural monument
 - You can literally become a tree after you die.
 - It's a very ecofriendly way of being buried, with no chemicals for embalming, and no casket and vault
 - And I'll tell you, you don't have to be a tree-hugger, or whatever, to find that this idea resonates in some deep place
 - It just seems more natural than some parts of the death and burial industry we have today
 - Which in my opinion sometimes hinders the grief process rather than facilitates it
 - Now the downside is that Poetree is only a design concept and not for order
 - But I did find one called Spiritree and another called Eternitree, both of which are similar and actually for sale
 - There are even more out there, and I bet we will see more of these in the years to come

¹ <http://www.idsa.org/awards/idea/graduate-student-designs/poetree>

- To become a tree when we die... to have some life come from the ashes of our death, it's kind of beautiful.
- For Christians, it is a tangible symbol of the truth we already proclaim
- "Very truly," Jesus says, "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."
- I could not help but think of these biodegradable urns as I read this saying from Jesus in our Gospel for today
 - And at this point in John's gospel, we are just a little over half way through the book
 - But Jesus has already arrived in Jerusalem during his final Passover
 - Which we won't celebrate until next week, but for today Jesus already knows this is the beginning of the end
 - The triumphant entry with palm branches having already happened in John's gospel just a few verses before
 - For the next six chapters of this gospel, Jesus basically delivers a lengthy sermon to his disciples
 - Very little action, a whole lot of talking
 - You get the sense he is telling them everything he can while he still has the opportunity
 - Jesus knows the time is coming; the authorities are reaching a point when they will no longer tolerate him
 - Even the Greeks have begun to seek after Jesus in order to follow him, as we are told in this reading²
 - And you realize Jesus' impact is growing by leaps and bounds attracting attention from Jews and Greeks alike
 - This is not something the religious or secular authorities want; everyone knows they are going to try to stop it; everyone is bracing for impact
 - And as Jesus realizes the time is close, he begins to talk about his death to his disciples
 - Of course they don't see it- they see Jesus' future as limitless- he is just getting started!
 - They see is their deepest longing that Jesus could really be the Messiah, the one from God who will put the world back right again
 - Who will restore their nation and their culture and their faith
 - Jesus' death, the death of this type of Messiah, would be defeat

² *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B Lent/Easter, Marion Soards, ed., 64*

- It would mean that their hopes were misplaced, and that they are still indefinitely waiting for God to make things right
- But as Jesus looks ahead, he knows that while he is the Messiah, it will be very different than what they expect
- Jesus tells them a parable:
- “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.”
- Now you and I know that a seed never actually dies, that it is really alive the whole time and can even stay alive for years in a dormant state
- But all anyone knew at this point in time was what they saw with their eyes: and a seed looks dead
- You bury it in the ground and cover it up, just like you do with anything else that has died
- Yet instead of decaying and returning to the soil, the seed sprouts, it comes back to life, and starts the cycle over again
- For Jesus, his sacrifice and death are as much a part of his purpose on earth as teaching and resurrection
- He too will die, and buried like everyone else, but like the seed there is more to come
- God was going to work in Jesus something miraculous, yet still completely in line with what God has been doing all along
- Because if we back up and take a look at our reading from Jeremiah this morning, we see that God has been working in this way for a long time
 - Working through death and loss, and making a way when there was no way
 - Bring life out of death
 - We see it in our Old Testament reading today, from the prophet Jeremiah
 - He is writing after the exile when God’s people are at a low point in their nation’s history
 - The covenant seems broken: they have disobeyed, and God has punished
 - A cycle we talked about last week that seems to repeat throughout the Old Testaments

- Today, however is a little different: the covenant which exchanges the people's obedience for God's care has come to an end³
- And even Jeremiah begins to refer to a "new covenant" for the only time in the Hebrew Scriptures⁴
- God is up to something new here in Jeremiah, something different.
- Jeremiah is preaching a new covenant written not in stone tablets, but deep within our very being, the very hearts of the people⁵
- Not in physical place like a mountain, or an ark, or even a temple, but in a place that cannot be removed or taken from them
- God is rewriting who they are, recreating God's people with the very Word of God from the inside out
- Not because God has given up, but on the contrary, because God has decided to take it to the next level
- God reaches out to humanity through the nation of Israel in a very personal and intimate way, by speaking directly to our hearts
- Breathing life and peace into a people who everyone else would see as defeated and dead
- And you have Jesus saying the same thing: what may seem like defeat to us can still be used by God.
- God works salvation not by avoiding the hurtful things in our world: the exile, pain, and death
- But by moving us through them, using them, just like God did with Jesus on that cross
- Turning death and defeat into something more powerful than even the Messianic victory the disciples were hoping for
- Using death to reveal the greatest victory of all: resurrection
- But for resurrection to come, death must first prevail
- With seeds, with Jesus, and with us, with the church
- It's the story we are on the cusp of reliving through our Holy Week services next week
- Good Friday always comes before Easter Sunday
- Being reminded of such things here in this last Sunday before Holy Week made me consider life a little differently this week

³ *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, Year B Lent/Easter, Marion Soards, ed., 60

⁴ *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, Year B Lent/Easter, Marion Soards, ed., 58

⁵ Kathryn Matthew Huey, http://www.ucc.org/worship_samuel_march_22_2015

- After all, we began this journey of Lent with being reminded that we too will one day die, and return to the dust
- And today we are once again reminded that one day we will die and be planted
- So while Jesus is speaking of himself in today's Gospel, comparing himself to the seed
- I realized we can consider ourselves in the same light
- That our lives as we live them are essentially us in the process of becoming seeds, waiting for the day we will be planted
- Maybe not literally as with the Poetree or Spiritree, but none-the-less, the day will come when we will cease to exist
- And we will leave behind a legacy: the impact we have made in the people and world around us
- Through the people we chose to become, we will have a lasting impact on this world
- The question before us is what type of seed will we chose to become?
- Will we live our lives looking out only for ourselves, and leave behind a seed of consumption and selfishness
- Or can we live our lives in ways that positively impact others, that improves lives for the better?
- One that leaves a legacy of grace, and caring, that keeps on giving long after we are gone on to life eternal.
- This applies to so many things- this truth is what God in Jesus Christ wants us to learn and know and believe with all our being
- We look at our country, and we see this week yet another mass shooting coming out of our collective racism
- Can our people's sin of racism finally be buried in the ground and become a seed from which to grow equality and justice
- And what about our church, St. Michael's: instead of seeing just a shutdown
 - Can we see the last year as a time when St. Michael's was planted in the ground, and now God is getting ready to grow a new thing in us?
 - Can we see death as a step with God toward resurrection?
- Starting next week, we will retell the story of Jesus of Nazareth who gave everything he had to reconnect all of humanity to our loving creator
- Who paid the price with his life, yet whom God used him to change the world

- Can we hear and believe and internalize this good news that what we so often see as the end, like death and sin
 - God can use to make resurrection?
- God, never let us be satisfied with simply a burial
- Keep us always looking to what you can do next.

Amen