

Lent 5B 2021

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Jeremiah 31:31–34, Psalm 51, Hebrews 4:14–5:10, John 12:20-36

When was the last time, you found yourself at a fork in the road? There was a decision to be made. You knew that whatever choice you made, your life would never be the same. It could have been making a decision about college, or a job, or getting married, or quitting a job and stepping out on your own. There are all sorts of feelings and emotions that can surface during these times...

When I was a Freshman in Highschool, one of my best friends Josh had an older brother named Adam. As in a lot of cases with older siblings, the younger ones get involved in things that they probably have no business being involved in. This was definitely the case with Adam. Adam and his friends who were Seniors in high school at the time were off the chain crazy! They all had wild cars that were all boats from the 60's and early 70s that had massive engines in them. One of those guys, Thayer, even had a giant pair of bull horns bolted into the front of his car and he would drive around with a motorcycle helmet on at all times. As a dad of 4 adolescent daughters, even thinking about this now will give me nightmares tonight.

One Late spring Friday afternoon stands out vividly in my mind when I was spending the night with Josh and we were invited to come along with Adam and his friends for an afternoon adventure. Of course we were ecstatic to be included. We jumped in the back seat of Shamu—this was the name of Adam's 1970 banana yellow convertible and burned rubber to our unknown destination. When we arrived, the older guys yelled at us to follow them and RUN! The caravan of cars was parked in a neighborhood and before Josh and I knew it we were in the back of the pack racing through these strangers yards. I must have been in the very back when I was grabbed by a middle aged man who was yelling at us to stop! And get out of my yard. In a reflexive move, I shoved the man with all my might and spun out of his grasp and raced on towards the group now a few hundred yards ahead of me. When I finally hit the tree lined woods at the edge of his property, I caught up with Josh and I could hear the blood pounding in my ears.

Little did I know this would not be the end of this adrenaline infused day. As I looked up to see where the rest of the guys were going I could see we were at the edge of a cliff with the lake in the distance. As they older guys were shedding their clothes to make the leap Josh and I stared at each other and eventually fell in line. We followed to the edge of the 90-foot cliff and watched as all the guys took their turns leaping into the water below. Each time, the next daredevil would stand for what seemed like an eternity being egged on by the small distant voices below calling them all sorts of names until they finally jumped. It finally came my time and I scooted to the edge of the precipice. Everything around me turned silent. The tiny specks treading water in the lake below telling me to go but I could hardly hear them. I was totally petrified and knew there was no other option than to lunge to my death. As I bent down and began to push up and outward away from the cliff, I knew I had reached the point of no return.

This morning we continue to follow Jesus on his path to Jerusalem, and to the precipice of his ultimate act of love and sacrifice on the cross. I would love for us this morning to tag along with John and the other disciples and listen to Jesus' conversation with his closest friends.

Our scene opens in John's Gospel with Philip being approached by Greeks who were in Jerusalem to worship during the time of the Passover Feast. They approach Phillip, maybe because he has a Greek name and they thought he would be their best bet to see Jesus. Perhaps Philip does know exactly what to do so he goes and tells Andrew and then both of them go and tell Jesus. It is interesting to note here that although the passage starts with these individuals wanting to see Jesus, we don't really return to the Greeks specifically, but they do serve a purpose here which leads to a declaration from Jesus that "the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified,. This brings up the times in my mind, starting at the first miracle at the wedding where Jesus tells those around him not to tell anyone, that his time had not yet come.

I wonder if this announcement, that the time had come, is what his followers had been waiting to hear. So many had been longing for their warrior king! It was time for God's Kingdom to come in a mighty way and finally, Jesus was giving the battle cry to follow Him, to retake their place at the top instead of being an occupied people.

The possible excitement I imagine is quickly extinguished with what comes next in Jesus' words, "Truly truly I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit". This is not quite the battle cry they might have been waiting for. In Verse 25 He goes on to say whoever loves his life loses it and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Dale Bruner in his commentary on the Gospel of John, tells of his Sunday School class helping him decipher what this might mean. He rephrases it like this, "The person who is in love with one's own self ruins it, but the person who hates one's this worldly self preserves one's true self thereby into deep, lasting life."

This gets a little wordy there at the end, but if I could put it in my own words it would be something like this, "If all you care about is yourself, you will be deeply disappointed in life, but, if you resist (and even detest) what our culture tells us life is about (mainly being happy at any and all costs), and seek what your life's real purpose is (loving God and loving others), you will have REAL life forever. Eugene Peterson says it like this, "Anyone who holds onto 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.

I wonder where I am missing the mark this morning in my own desire to hold onto my perception of what my life is supposed to look like? There are many ways where I feel like I know God's heart and plan for this world. How is my confusion about life and what Jesus us up to in and around me being brought to light this morning as I look at the confusion around Jesus to those who are longing for something different?

Next John lets us into something that encouraged my soul at a time when I didn't know I needed it so badly. Jesus does us a huge favor here and peels back the layers of his human

soul to his friends and to us today. The other three Gospels tell of Jesus's tears and turmoil in the Garden as everything is culminating. Interestingly though, John does not record the same events in the garden of Jesus's internal battle with the weight of what he is getting ready to enter. Instead, John's memory of Jesus' struggle comes in our passage this morning in Verses 27-33 where Jesus says, "Now my soul is troubled". I want to camp out here for a minute. "My soul is troubled—which is a Greek way of saying "I am afraid" some commentators I read furthered the importance here of John not reporting a superhuman Jesus and hears something more like this coming from Jesus, "Right now my life is so deeply depressed". Peterson translates Jesus's words here to, "Right now, I am shaken".

I wonder where your soul is this morning? I'm curious about where it has been over the past year of isolation, loneliness, loss, sickness, disappointments, financial struggle, anxiety, uncertainty... The list goes on and on am I sure. This makes me think of our passage in Hebrews this morning and the reminder that we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, and I would add here, the whole gambit of our human experiences and feelings. What a gift to know that God understands and can even empathize with us in our lives right where we are this morning. Sometimes, it's easier for me to comprehend a God who can identify with where I am in my emotions, but as I meditated on this passage, I felt myself being invited into the mind and heart of Jesus as He is struggling here with what lies before him. Often we tell the story so quickly in simplistic phrases that Jesus died on the cross and was raised from the dead and don't take the time to think about the fact that he was shaken and deeply depressed over what he actually was getting ready to go through.

After allowing his disciples and you and me to see this glimpse into his soul, he goes on to demonstrate to us what it means to live the life he talked about a few lines prior when he tells those around him to follow him. You see, in spite of all the human feelings that are swirling inside him and his dread of what lies ahead, Jesus yields, He releases his grip on his own life, He says "no" to what his friends, his culture and the world are saying and believing around him and says out loud for all of us to hear, "Father, glorify your name". Later in the garden, those words and this ongoing conversation between the Father and the son are echoed, Father, if you are willing take this cup from me, nevertheless, not my will, but yours be done. Jesus demonstrates for us the perfect example of what it means to let go of your own life for the sake of the Father. The passage in Phil. 2 rings in my ears now as it will for the remainder of lent,

(Jesus), Though he was God,
did not think of equality with God
as something to cling to.

7 Instead, he gave up his divine privileges;
he took the humble position of a slave
and was born as a human being.

When he appeared in human form,

8 he humbled himself in obedience to God

and died a criminal's death on a cross.

In response to Jesus' submission the voice of the Father is heard those around as thunder or an angel and afterwards Jesus proclaims, "Now is the judgement of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself. I love Peterson's paraphrase of Jesus' words here which resonates deeply with me in our world today: At this moment the world is in crisis. Now Satan, the ruler of this world, will be thrown out. And I, as I am lifted up from the earth, will attract everyone to me and gather them around me." The time has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Jesus has initiated the leap, the point of no return...

Finally, a reminder for us this morning on our journey with Jesus these last couple of weeks of his passion, death, burial and resurrection, of his great love and pursuit of us his creation. The echos from Jeremiah to Israel in the middle of their occupation this morning reminds us of the work that was being done prior to Jesus life on Earth, the hope to those in bondage both as a people and spiritually under the law--the hope of a new covenant, written on the hearts so that ALL will know him from the least to the greatest...The Greeks to the Jews to the Gentiles.

As we transition this morning in our liturgy into our declaration of what we believe and into our prayers and our confession along with David's heartcry for mercy in Psalm 51, we come finally to the communion table to celebrate our mini Easter and receive a taste of what is coming over holy week. A foretaste of the promise by Jesus in our passage this morning of His overcoming the ruler of this world and the drawing of all people to himself.