

“Saving Time”

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler

Presbyterian Church in Leonia

March 17, 2024

Jeremiah 31:31-34

John 12:20-33

Our gospel reading today leads us into the historical time of the Passover. Jesus had just arrived into Jerusalem on a donkey in a little parade of palms. We will time-travel next week, to remember that moment. But in today’s moment, there are some Greeks at the Passover festival. I’m not sure why they were there—whether they were seeking to convert to Judaism, or if they had heard about Jesus and were curious, the gospel writer doesn’t mention. Maybe they had heard about Jesus raising his friend Lazarus from the dead, a miracle which had been both remarkable, and disturbing. For if the dead can’t stay dead, what can we even count on?

For whatever reason these Greeks were curious, they ask Philip, “Sir, we want to see Jesus.” Philip then asks Andrew, and then Andrew and Philip together approach Jesus.

I feel a bit sorry for the Greeks, because it’s not clear whether or not they got their audience with Jesus. Instead, the gospel reports that Jesus gives a speech about time, and grain, and losing your life, and service, glory, light and darkness. To someone who is new to the Jewish faith and also to Jesus’ teachings, it must have sounded to them like what Greek sounds like to *us*; except since they *were* Greek, maybe it sounded like a different language entirely.

Honestly, I feel a little bit like Philip and Andrew. You have shown up today, hoping to get a glimpse of Jesus. I can try to bring you there, but what I have to show you is his speech filled with symbolism and metaphor, and I cannot know if these words will land directly on you and take root in you. But I will try.

Remember the science fair project that my daughter did? I wrote a very long sermon over many hours yesterday. After it was completed, I looked back on it and thought, I do not want to fill you with my thoughts and words as fertilizer that does nothing but clutter your spiritual landscape. My hope for you is that you can have an honest and direct communication with the holy, so that God's love can take root in you, and grow. So, this morning I cut out most of what I was going to say. All that coffee yesterday, for nothing!

As nice as it would feel to me for you to leave the sanctuary saying, "Wow, that Leah preached a great sermon!" I would rather you leave this sanctuary saying that you were able to bring something before God, and cast it aside, to its death, so you can take root in the soil of God's love... and grow.

Jesus tells us in John's gospel, "Unless a grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain. But if it dies, then it will bear much fruit..." Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.

What do these words have to tell *you* today? What do *you* have to lose?

In Lent we can take the chance in Lent to explore what shells we bring with us. Are they entombing us? Are they keeping us safe? What would it take for those shells to fall away? What would it take to expose our hearts to God so that God can write God's covenant of love on them?

What would you die to? To greed? To consumerism? To a relationship that you are barely surviving? What would you die to?

What does it mean to die to self? I think of the courageous women who come through Oelhaf House, who often have lived with a partner who was abusive, but still a partner, and someone they once loved and maybe even still love. A common pattern with people who stay with abusers is that there is still some benefit they get from their partners: their financial lives are tied up with this person, often including their home. They may fear that they won't be able to sustain themselves financially without this abusive partner. If they share children

together, it is one thing as an adult to remove yourself from a relationship. But with shared parenting, it is a much harder thing to completely extract yourself from an abuser. And the most frightening reason why a person may stay with their abuser is that leaving is not a safe option. Some fear that in leaving, their lives may be threatened. There are many valid reasons that someone who is abused stays with their partner.

But some do leave, and when they do, there is a sort of death to the life they once lived. And it is not easy. One thing Oelhaf House does, with the help of Center for Hope and Safety, is to provide a safe and nourishing grounding where these survivors can die to the lives they had. They can find safety enough to shed the skin of who they were, and to become someone else. It is not easy—ask Susheela, whose work as an attorney has helped many survivors of domestic violence. But in this work, these clients are given the chance to not just survive, but also to thrive.

Seeds, grains... aren't technically dead. They are dormant, and they neither give off energy, nor consume energy. But when they descend to the earth, where they are surrounded by the nutrients of the soil and the water's moisture, the embryo inside the seed becomes animated; it begins to shed its skin and the life within emerges.

Jesus, we believe, was technically and officially dead after he was crucified. But the vitality within him was something neither the cross nor tomb could not consume forever. It was in his death that he was able to shed the shell of domination and violence that sought to kill him, and emerge with something full of vitality, that could transcend or rise above even the dealings of death.

How do you get to that vitality that God has set within us? Do we really have to die in order for that life to emerge or bloom?

We do not have to worry that we will be nothing without our shells. For we are already known within by a God who has written God's covenant on our hearts. We are God's people, and God is our God. I believe something good can grow from that. In fact, I stake my faith on it. Amen.

