

## Unless the Grain Dies

Late winter and early spring are an unpredictable time for weather in Utah. We have had mild winter in the valleys, with only a few big snowstorms, yet the mountains have received a good amount of snow this year, above average. We have had unseasonable warm days, and cold, windy days. Will we receive more snow, or is winter over? Who knows? But we are beginning to see some hopeful signs of spring. Little purple flowers have appeared in my yard. And I know other colorful flowers will soon arrive.

I don't know much about plants and flowers. But I love to witness the miracle of the flowers that spring up this time of year, especially the daffodils and tulips. If you didn't know the mystery how bulbs work, you would never guess it. In the autumn, to look at a tray of bulbs on a shelf in your garage, or in the store, you would hardly imagine the possibility of what they will become. The bulbs themselves look so ordinary, so lifeless, like strange little onions, or rocks.

As all of you know, you take these bulbs and put them in the most unlikely environment. You don't keep them indoors, protected from the elements, safe and warm. No, for the bulbs to produce, you bury them, outside, several inches deep, into the cold earth. And there they sit, over the course of the long winter, through the frosts, and the thaws, and the rain and snow. They stay buried, in the ground, where it is damp and cold and dark. And finally, after months of lying dormant in the bleakest of conditions, something happens -- those plain, ugly bulbs send out green, fragile shoots, and in season, this new growth leads to flowers in all sorts of brilliant colors. It is a miracle, and we are blessed to see it all around us every year. But it never could happen without the long season of buried deep in darkness and cold. It is one of the interesting paradoxes that new life, sometimes the most brilliant new life, only takes place on the other side of some kind of death. It occurs after going through the most unlikely circumstances. Our favorite spring flowers arrive on the other side of what looks to be a dark and dormant season of winter.

This pattern in nature is also the way things work in our lives. This is how it was for the people of Israel in the time of the prophet Jeremiah. Israel, as they were prone to do, once more had turned away from God, and over time, they had been conquered by foreign nations and taken away into captivity. At the time of this writing, they

were in exile, far away from home. But these dark times of exile, harsh as they were, also produced the prophets such as Jeremiah. Jeremiah is known for his fiery condemnations and judgments against Israel. Yet, as today's scripture shows, like all the prophets, he is also a person of powerful and persistent hope. In the middle darkness, the prophets are courageous enough to speak how God desires to make all things new.

While Israel is in exile, buried deep and dark in a foreign and hostile land, Jeremiah declares, "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors, a covenant they that they broke. This is the covenant I will make with them: I will put my law within them, I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God and they shall be my people. No longer shall they need to teach one another to know the Lord, for they shall all know me, from the least to the greatest. The days are coming, when my law will be written not just on tablets of stone, but on their very hearts." What a bright and glorious message to hear in those dark days. This is another reminder of how life works: Israel's time in darkness was also the time of the boldest, most hopeful messages from the Lord. In the wintertime of their despair, God promises that glory will shine forth like spring.

Jesus knew this truth of new life coming from dark and difficult places. Living closer to the land than most of us do, Jesus and his followers knew the miracle of seeds and seasons, of planting and harvest. That is what he was talking about in this scripture passage we heard today. In the gospel of John, a major theme is the glory of God and the glory of Jesus the Christ. Jesus teaches that he shall be glorified and then he immediately he teaches his followers how it happens. "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified," Jesus says. And in the very next sentence, "Very truly I tell you, 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." It is only when the grain dies to what it was that it produces a harvest. It's like our spring flowers all around us, it is only when the bulb is buried in the earth, cold and dark and dead, it is only when it dies to what it was before, only then will it eventually, and inevitably, give way to new life. That is how we will find God's glory. Death yielding to life.

Jesus knew that this was the path he had to travel. He knew that he must go the way of the cross. He knew his path would lead to rejection, and suffering, and even death. And Jesus also trusted God that this is the way that would lead to new life.

Jesus said that if we try to hold onto our life, our life as it is, then we will lose it. We would then be like a grain of wheat that is never buried in the earth. And without going through that death, only the single grain will remain. To hold onto to our life, with clenched fists, never giving it over to God, will result in our life remaining simply what it is, and not much more. Now I believe that God calls me, "Just as I am," as the song says, but God doesn't call me to just stay that way. God desires each of us to live in a way that is more full of life, and love, and hope. God wants our lives to yield a plentiful harvest, and that means some of the grain, some parts of us are going to have to die, in order to yield to something else.

Giving ourselves to this is not easy. We get a glimpse into Jesus' own heart as he faces this. He tells his disciples, "And now, my soul is troubled." The path unfolding before him was like it was for the grain of wheat, it meant dying in order to find new life. Jesus knew this, and he would trust it. "What should I say, O God, save me from this hour?" No, that would be like the grain of wheat never falling to the earth and yielding a harvest. It would be like the flower bulbs never being placed outside in the dark, cold soil where they could give us flowers each spring. No, Jesus said, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. I will go this way, giving myself to God. And the voice of God confirms this. "Yes, this is how God's glory is revealed, and this is how God's glory will be revealed again." Death leading to life.

Deep down, we all long to be closer to God. We desire God's life to be more present in our own life. Like the people of Israel, we want God to guide us to our true home, and to our true selves. We want God's word written on our hearts. Like Jesus, we hope that God might be glorified in us. This is incredibly bold for us to say, but that is what Jesus and the prophets tell us. This is what our lives are made for, that God might be glorified in us, that our lives might show God's glory in the world.

And for this to happen, we are going to have to let go of the seed, plant it, and let it die so that it may become something else, something more. It means we will need to experience death – all the little deaths that come in all sorts of ways: times of exile and darkness, little deaths that come from tragedy and loss. We will be asked to die to some of our old ways, some of things we have held onto. It means dying to self, over and over again.

On this spring morning, lessons about death and life are all around us: the bulbs in our gardens, the powerful words of Jeremiah to a people in exile, in the example of

the grain falling to the earth in order to produce abundantly. It is the ancient lesson that in the midst of death, new life is unfolding. In the church we call this the Paschal Mystery: Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again. Death, and life, and this same pattern again and again. It is letting go of our old life and encountering the truer, deeper life that comes from God.

Perhaps in these long days of Lent, you have been going through a time when signs of new life don't seem to be coming. Perhaps in your life you are facing some dark days, or some kind of small death. I know that in our world today, we are experiencing anxiety, and despair, and uncertainty. Our faith tells us that we are not to lose hope. This is the very place where God's power and glory can be found. What shall we say, "God, save us from this hour, God, make it so that we never have to go through any kind of death?" No, it was for this reason that we have come to this hour. It is for this reason that God has brought us here. That we may have life, and that God may be glorified. Amen.

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Lectionary B – 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent

Jeremiah 31:31-34 • Psalm 51:1-13 • Hebrews 5:5-10 • John 12:20-33

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