

Jeremiah 31: 31-34

A New Covenant

³¹The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ³²It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband,^[a] says the LORD. ³³But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the LORD,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

Some Greeks Wish to See Jesus

²⁰Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. ²¹They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." ²²Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. ²³Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴Very 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. ²⁵Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

Jesus Speaks about His Death

²⁷"Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. ²⁸Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." ²⁹The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." ³⁰Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. ³¹Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. ³²And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people^[a] to myself." ³³He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

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Jeremiah 31:31-34; John 12:20-33

“This Lonesome Valley”

Kerra Becker English

Jesus talks about death, his own death, with grave foreshadowing. With a soul full of trouble, Jesus talks about how he has been preparing his whole life for this particular hour. Even through John’s veiled language, we know that he’s talking about being crucified. John tells us that when Jesus said he would be *lifted up from this earth*, “He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.” This is different than him talking about having a terminal illness or having lived to such an old age that his body was giving out. Jesus is talking about a violent death that would follow a sham trial. And he knew it was going to happen. And he was asking God to make sense of this death, to bring glory out of the gruesomeness about to come as his whole reason for being on earth. It’s a bold thing to talk about.

In our culture, we are reluctant to talk about death under the most natural of circumstances, or for the most practical of reasons. We are encouraged to think that we will live forever. There’s got to be a cure for every illness – until we come to the ultimate place of reckoning when the costs finally outweigh the benefits. And if you have a will or living directive in place to describe your wishes for those last

days or moments, you are most likely in the minority, until you are significantly into your 70's. Those few times when my husband and I have talked to our parents about their final wishes, the conversations took on a tone of something that shouldn't be talked about all that often, and probably far out of the range of grandchildren's ears.

However, over time, I've learned that my profession is one that requires me to have conversations with people about death, sometimes conversations that they haven't had with closer kin. Along with funeral directors, some physicians, and financial management professionals who take long term family financial planning seriously – I'm in a job where I can't afford to embrace our cultural squeamishness about the subject. Though it is a topic I also take very seriously, those of us who deal with it on a more regular basis can develop a sense of humor about it. It can be helpful to be the more detached one in the room who can observe a lighter moment. By the time of the memorial service, sometimes the family needs to tell a story or two that will make them laugh as well as cry. That said, I am very pleased with myself for the one time, the ONE TIME I got a funeral director to blush through laughter. You'd be surprised how funny a lot of those folks happen to be. In every clergy role I've been in, I've gotten to know the local funeral home personnel – and they will have you in stitches behind the scenes – almost guaranteed.

But no matter whether you've talked about death with your spiritual advisor, your financial consultant, or your funeral planner, and even if you have spoken directly and intimately with the ones who will miss you most when you are not in this existence any longer, to really deal with your own mortality in all its aspects is a lonely, lonely road. It is the Lonesome Valley that nobody else can walk for you. I found it interesting to compare our version of this hymn "Jesus Walked This Lonesome Valley" with other added verses that show up elsewhere. In other hymnals Jesus will walk your last steps with you, but in our rendition, we must walk the Lonesome Valley by ourselves. Now, of course, there's room for interpretation in about any song we sing, especially the religious ones, but I find I like it better when we aren't offered a little too much comfort for the particularly trying moments of our lives. Music, particularly some of these African American spirituals, take us to haunting places, and rightfully they should. We need the deeply human experience of grief. We need a touch of anxiety about how we choose to live and how we hope to die one day. We need to know that it's OK to have things not be OK.

The gospel writer John accurately, I think, describes Jesus' most difficult moments with the feelings intact. His soul was troubled to tell his friends what was going to happen next, and rightfully so. John's gospel is the one that walks us step by step through the events of Holy Week that starts with Jesus turning his face to

Jerusalem, recounts his words in the prayer in the garden, and takes us through every aspect of his trial, including the details of how he was ridiculed and beaten before they began his execution. The sheer and utter loneliness he must have felt as one disciple betrayed him and the others ran scared is unimaginable. And then the words that John includes from the cross are Jesus telling the women to care for each other and with his final breath, “It is finished.”

In order to tell our story in it’s completion, we cannot rush too quickly to the resurrection, though we may want to. We can’t skip over the hard parts in life. We can’t ignore our own mortality or expect our loved ones to live forever. We must come face to face with the violence of our world, and the prospect that human life is grossly undervalued.

What was Jesus talking about when he said, “Unless a grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains a single grain of wheat; but if it dies it bears much fruit?” Again, he’s talking about death, his own death, but this one I think he means for all of us. Those who love their life, who think of no one else but themselves will lose it. But those who risk their lives for others, who believe there are values and actions more important than self-preservation will have the gift of eternal life. There’s a saying that has been attributed as a Mexican proverb, and though it has been used extensively throughout Mexico, was actually penned in the 1970’s by a Greek poet, Dinos Christianopoulos, which says, “They tried to bury

us; they didn't know we were seeds." Much like the grain of wheat example, our trials, our conflicts, the death of parts of us that comes before our physical deaths, are often times of significant growth within ourselves. But I still don't wish them upon anyone. It hurts. It's lonely. It's scary. They are the valley experiences – not the mountaintops that most people are looking for in religious understanding – but we don't really have one without the other.

On Friday evening, I met some old Oak Ridge friends who were doing a revival for the Christian fellowship of the Unitarian Universalist church here in Richmond. Steve Martin, now with the National Council of Churches, showed a film he made about Elisabeth Schmitz of Berlin. She was a resister during the Holocaust, but not one that was famously remembered. Instead she was a voice, behind the scenes, pushing her church, and other Confessing Churches, to be the resistance, to stand up for the moral value of human life, and to denounce publicly the persecution of the Jews. Her pastor's sermon is one of three, one of THREE, that is known to be proclaimed against the events of Kristallnacht, the night of broken glass when violence raged against the Jews and Jewish businesses, where some were killed and many, many more were rounded up and sent to concentration camps. Though she managed to escape arrest a couple times, her actions against the state were of the type that could have gotten her interred or killed. That kind of boldness requires a long dark walk of loneliness. Most people didn't believe her, or

hated her, or at least would not have condoned what she was doing as rational or safe.

Jesus valued love over loneliness, and the sanctity of the whole of human life over his own safety. Time and again, and throughout history, Christians have aligned themselves out of popularity and power rather than emulating the life that Jesus lived, or walking toward the type of death that Jesus died. Even well trained Christian theologians and long serving Christian churches stood behind Hitler. It's important to remember that. The resistance movement that stood against evil was hated and reviled – until the whole world could stand in horror against what happened in Nazi Germany.

It's an historical example of the hunger for power. Jesus lived through his own time of that as Rome occupied his homeland. It's best for us to pay attention when the church gets too cozied up with political might or allows evil to be called good. Our world is violent – within our nation where we have tended to experience relative safety – even as minority populations, and young people, and immigrant groups here remind us that not all human life has been valued the same. And it's violent across the globe where wars continue to rage seemingly without end. Jesus' death stands as a symbol against senseless death. God made sense of the senseless, glorified the gruesome, and allowed the persecution of Jesus to be a seed planted, a burial that produced uncommon growth for all to see. Remember that's

the Christianity we follow. And to follow that kind of Christianity can be a lonely walk through a dark valley where our enemies threaten us daily. Be prepared for that. Jesus was warning us that following him wouldn't lead to popularity and power and the ability to make the rules. He let the rules break him, body and soul, to expose the darkness for what it is.

Will Jesus walk this path with us? I believe he led the way. Nevertheless, the fear of following is tremendous. It's easier not to say anything when we notice lives cut down too soon, or groups whose lives aren't really valued at all. It's easier to make Christianity a feel-good religion of resurrection and Easter egg hunts. That will happen again this year, as it does every year. That's not to say that resurrection isn't our every Sunday celebration. It is. It is radical good news that death itself has been overcome – but to leave out the hows and whys renders it far less significant. They tried to bury him, to silence his voice in the ground. They didn't know. They really didn't know – Jesus was a seed. Amen.