

A sermon preached at Trinity Episcopal Church, Wethersfield, CT
5 Lent, March 21, 2021 by the Rt. Rev. Gordon P. Scruton

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

This morning we are living on the edge of some major transitions. We can see and feel that winter is coming to an end and Spring is beginning to emerge. Many people are getting vaccinated and Covid restrictions are beginning to open up signaling a season of new beginnings. We are coming to the end of Lent and transitioning with Christ into Holy Week, into Good Friday death and on into Christ's Resurrection and the season of Easter. What might God want to say to each of us at this time of transition through today's Scripture readings?

In the first reading, God spoke to the Hebrew prophet Jeremiah about the broken relationship that existed between God and God's people. God had chosen the people of Israel to be his people and to be a blessing to the whole world. After bringing the people out of slavery in Egypt, God gave them the 10 Commandments. Like a loving husband in a marriage covenant, God promised to love and care for the people of Israel and the people promised to fulfill their part of the covenant relationship by living in loving harmony with God and all their neighbors, as outlined in God's 10 Commandments.

Unfortunately, like Adam and Eve, the people of Israel strayed from the relationship of love with God and their neighbors. They chose instead the priorities of fitting in with the people around them, worshipping human creations instead of their Creator, being greedy to get more pleasure and power and possessions for themselves.

When we lose our focus on the purpose for which God created us and stop living in love with God and all our neighbors, then our personal lives, our communities and nations begin to fall apart and self-destruct. We slip into greed, focusing only on ourselves, trying to control others to get what we want for our own benefit, which leads to resentment, anger, loneliness and violence.

This is what happened to the people of Israel. The consequence of ignoring love for God and neighbor was that their nation declined and was conquered by the Babylonians. Their Temple, the center of their religion was destroyed. The people were deported to Babylon and had to live as exiles in a foreign society and land.

Yet, through Jeremiah, God says to the struggling Hebrew people in exile, I never stopped loving you, even though you abandoned me. So now a time of transition is coming. I will make a new covenant, a new quality of relationship with you. Instead of just leaving you with the 10 Commandments as external rules, God said, I will put my law within you and I will write it on your hearts so you can all know me and follow my way of love for God and all neighbors. God gave this same message to other prophets, like Joel, (Joel 2:28) saying, the time is coming when "I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh." You will all know me. You will be guided by my Spirit who dwells within you. You will experience a constant relationship with me,

guiding you from within, showing you how to live in love for God and all your neighbors and for yourselves.

God showed Jeremiah that this is the way of life that God expects of us, of all people. Yet living this Spirit guided life of love is not easy. We all have many self-centered and destructive voices who speak to us from within and from the society around us which can drown out the voice of God's Spirit within us, calling us to be people of love.

How do we learn to recognize and follow the voice of God's Spirit within us each moment of our lives and resist the other seductive voices that seek to lure us away from God's priorities of love for God, neighbors and ourselves? Learning to live this way with God is the one-day-at-a-time project of a lifetime. It's why we are here this morning, as a community seeking help from God and seeking to support each other in learning to live more faithfully God's way of love.

Jesus is our primary teacher and example of how to embody God's way of love. Remember how often he went aside to pray and listen for guidance from his Heavenly Father? Remember how often he said, I only do and say what my Father tells me? This was what Jesus was doing in the Gospel we heard this morning.

Jesus was in Jerusalem during the Passover Festival to which an estimated 3 million people gathered, both Jews and curious people from all over the world, sort of like Mardi Gras in New Orleans. People were talking about Jesus at this festival because he had just raised Lazarus from the dead in nearby Bethany. And Jesus had just been welcomed into Jerusalem by crowds of people waving palm branches, like they did for conquering heroes. Who is this Jesus? Could he become our new king to liberate us from the power of the Roman army that is controlling us?

Jesus was not trying to win the approval of the crowds. His only focus was to listen for and obey his Heavenly Father's guidance, in every situation he faced. On this particular day, some Greeks wanted to see Jesus. We don't know anything about them except that they came up to Philip, a disciple of Jesus, and asked him to help them meet Jesus. Philip then talked with Andrew, and they went to Jesus and told him that some Greeks wanted to talk with him.

At first, it seems like Jesus is ignoring the Greeks, because he says, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified." Remember, as Jesus is listening to his disciples tell him about the Greeks, Jesus is also listening, at the same time, to the Spirit of God within him. In that moment, Jesus instantly knew that God was giving him a signal through those Greek visitors.

He might have thought of Isaiah 56, where the prophet says that a time of transition would come when many non-Jews, foreigners from around the world who were once thought of as outcasts, would be drawn to worship God in Jerusalem where God's house would become a house of prayer for all people. At this moment, the Spirit in Jesus let him know that these

Greeks were a sign to Jesus, that his time had come to be crucified, and raised from the dead for the love and salvation of all people, including those who were once rejected as unacceptable before God.

After this inner awareness, Jesus spoke to the Greeks, to his disciples and to all of us saying, let me tell you the deep wisdom about my life and your life, about all life in this cosmos. As he so often does, Jesus uses an agricultural image. He talks about seeds, about a grain of wheat. He says, "Unless a single seed of wheat is buried in the dark ground, dead to the world, it is never any more that a single grain of wheat. But if it is buried and dies, it will sprout and reproduce itself many times over."

Let's think about seeds for a moment. All the trees, and flowers and grasses, all the vegetables we eat come from seeds that have to die in the soil, so that new fruit can spring from them to sustain life. Animals and human beings come from seeds, from sperm and eggs being changed and growing in a dark womb before giving birth to new life. Every day, thousands of cells in our bodies, our skin, our blood and our hair keep dying and new cells are birthed to sustain our lives.

Do you see what a profound image Jesus is using here? If we try to hold on to life as it used to be, we end up destroying life. But if, following the guidance of God's Spirit, we let the limiting past go, let it die and come to an end, then we let God birth something new, produce some good fruit out of the process of letting go and dying.

Jesus used this image to let the Greeks and his disciples know that very soon he was going to be crucified. His death and their loss of him was not going to be a dead end. Out of his death and burial, God would birth a new resurrection life in and through Jesus which would continue to bear more fruit down through the centuries and throughout the cosmos.

Then Jesus said, whoever serves me must follow me. He is reminding his followers and us that during Holy Week, we are not to just admire and stand in awe of Jesus as he is crucified and raised up. Jesus calls us to follow him in this way of continually listening to the voice of God's Spirit within us, helping us recognize when it is time for us to let something die, come to an end in our lives, so God can birth a new dimension of life in us...not just for ourselves, but to help us grow in love and service to our neighbors in need, as Jesus did.

God created us, as Jeremiah said, and as Jesus lived, to be people who have to keep listening to God's Spirit within us to show us what God wants us to be and do in each moment. In this season of many transitions, what might the Spirit of God who lives within us be inviting you and me to let go of, to die to what has been, so that God can birth something new and more loving in and through us?

Let's close our eyes and be still for a few moments to listen for what God might be saying to each of us...

Let me suggest three questions to carry with you during this week...and we'll take a moment to begin reflecting on each question right now.

1. When and how do you listen for God's Spirit whispering guidance within you throughout each day?...
2. What might God be calling you to stop doing, to let go of, to die to...so you can listen more attentively, throughout each day, to what God's Spirit is saying to you?...
3. In this season of transition, what might God be calling you to stop doing, to let go of, or die to...so God can birth something new through you, to help you grow in love and service to God and your neighbors in need?...

O Gracious God, thank you for planting your Spirit within each of us. Teach us this week how to listen more attentively to the guidance your Spirit gives us moment by moment. Show us how to let go of and die to things that are blocking our continuing growth in love for you and our neighbors; and show us how to let the fruits of your Spirit of love flow through us in new ways, so you can continue to bring healing and new life to this needy world through us, through the power of Christ at work within us. Amen