

We have all had the sensation of something oppressive being driven away. In the past couple of weeks, as the days grow longer and the wind kicks up, I experience the sensation of winter being driven out by spring. I have watched as clouds are cast aside by a warm breeze and the sun is revealed once more. We've all experienced the sensation of the dark of night being cast out at daybreak or the feeling of a bad dream dissipating upon waking. Or that feeling of relief that we feel when a fever breaks for the first time—we feel finally free from the fever that has been oppressing us.

All throughout the gospels, Jesus goes from place to place and restores health and peace wherever he goes. Jesus restores things to wholeness. This is what I think Jesus means when he says the Kingdom of God is at hand—he means that the way things were meant to be has come at last in the presence of Christ. Where there is sickness, Jesus drives out sickness. Where there is evil, Jesus drives out evil by restoring those tormented by unclean spirits. Jesus drives out the money changers from the holy temple. In John's 11th chapter Jesus drives out death itself as he raises Lazarus and restores him to new life and wholeness.

Here in the 12th Chapter of John, Jesus declares, “now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.”

Charles Campbell, professor at Columbia Theological seminary writes,

“[In the Gospel of John] the crucifixion is interpreted as an exorcism in which the System [of this world] is judged and its driving force (“ruler”) is “cast out” by means of the cross.”

Here in John's 12th chapter, Jesus foretells that his cross will overcome the forces of Evil and that in Evil's very act of attempting to bring him down, Jesus being lifted up on the cross, and that Jesus will not only drive evil from the world that God loves, but in so doing he will draw or “drag” all people to himself.

Martin Luther liked to say that John 3:16 was the gospel in miniature, this is one reason why it has become such a famous verse. If there was one verse of the bible that I could have everyone memorize, it would be John 12:32.

We serve a God who seeks to draw all people to himself. In spite of human weakness, in spite of human sinfulness, in spite of our brokenness and unworthiness, we serve a God who yearns for us just as we yearn for Him.

We serve a God who joined us as a pilgrim on this earthly plane, who took on human flesh, human life, and human suffering, and gave up his very life so that suffering would be no more. He leads us through the great tunnels and passageways of life, and acts as our guide through suffering and death, through the waters of baptism into a new life where we recognize our oneness with God, the creator, redeemer, and sustainer of the universe.

Christ our shepherd, Christ our guide, Christ our friend, offers wisdom to us in the parable of the grain this morning. In this time of Lent, we are faced with our mortality, this pilgrimage of Lent reminds us that earthly things are passing away.

We began this Lenten journey on Ash Wednesday in a very unusual way. We were overwhelmed by ice and snow as we sought to observe a Holy Lent and remember that we are dust. We may not have

received our ashes that day but we were certainly reminded of our powerlessness.

Over the course of the last year, we have been confronted with human frailty and mortality in the mist of this time of pandemic, during what some of my colleagues and I have called a year-long Lent. Jesus in our Gospel this morning calls out to us and says,

“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.” Even as this earthly life passes away for all of us, even as we share in Christ’s death, we share even more fully in his resurrection life. We who are single grains of wheat are destined for the incredible flowering of a fruitful harvest full of joy and life abundant. We who are tiny seeds, tiny grains, tiny acorns are loved immeasurably by the God of the universe and through whose love, we are destined to grow into something greater than we can imagine. Even as we feel the pain of loss and imperfection in this present life, God in his quiet wisdom is perfecting us and seeking to make all things new: Seeking to draw all creation to himself and reap a fruitful harvest.

Just as Jesus' death bore immeasurable fruit, so will we, as we follow Christ through death, experience this great flowering and fruition.

Next Sunday, our pilgrimage leads us to the very cross of Christ. Next Sunday, on Palm Sunday, we will come face to face with human inconstancy, human short-sightedness and human violence as we walk the path of Holy Week.

As we agonize over the sacrifice that Jesus made for us, we also know that we serve a God who can turn tragedy into redemption and the ashes of mourning into the oil of gladness.

As we prepare for Palm Sunday and Holy week, allow yourself the opportunity to draw near to the God who yearns to draw you and all people to himself. Amen.