Fifth Sunday of Lent March 18, 2018

All Saints’ Church Year A

Jeremiah 31:31-34 Hebrews 5:5-10

Psalm 51:1-12 John 12:20-33

*Create in us clean hearts O God, and renew a right spirit within us.*

Today we are deep into Lent, all the way in. There’s no turning back. Mothering Sunday is behind us, and we are marching our way to Calvary, to learn through Jesus’ saving act, that unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain. Yet, if it dies, it will bear much fruit.

Imagine, Jesus is in the lead, walking ahead of us, ready to be that grain of wheat that will bear fruit for all. And then, he turns around to face us, all of his followers, who are doing our Lenten best, struggling to keep up, to understand, to trust, and to not be afraid, limping, staggering, hitching a ride, whatever we can do. We might be a motly group, ragged around the edges, but in it all, we are facing Jerusalem with Jesus. That’s the way of Lent.

And Jesus turns, and with no uncertain words, delivers his death-blow. “If you love your life, if you cling to it, if you refuse to surrender to God’s ways, then you will lose your life. Dying is Living. Follow me.”

“The hour has come,” says Jesus. The words are mysterious, yet we know what they mean. Maybe not then, but we do now. The storm is surging, the wind is already wild, the snow is swirling, the earth is breaking open, and Jesus is being raised up, both by the cross and the resurrection. For our Gospel writer, John, they are one in the same. The way to true living, to being fully alive, is through the cross. We may tremble, make up excuses, try to look sharp, or find a hideout. Anything to avoid the horror that is coming. Yet that attempt will make no difference. The event is about to occur; it will occur.

Such was Jesus’ “hour.”

We have these hours as well, maybe not as final or bloody as Jesus’ but all of our living always involves dying (small deaths along the way)… whether it is in a relationship that breaks apart, or a glaring truth we do not want to face, or a cherished dream we must let go of, or our health we can no longer rely on, or a tragic death of a loved one. We pray for the best outcome, we fight to make a difference, to work toward changes, to hope for a cure, maybe for a miracle, but then it comes, something just around the corner:

We lose- to death, disappointment, despair, dismissal, rejection, or humiliation. All adding up to Loss, definitive, with no getting around it. We have to walk right into it. We will meet pain. This is what it means to be human. These are our “hours.”

This week, Parnian, my adopted Afghan daughter who is living in Germany called me. She was strapped in her seat, her flight about to take off for her layover in Istanbul, and then onto Kabul. Her mother was fighting for her life; 40% of her body had been badly burned, mostly 3rd degree burns, from a gas stove explosion. Infection was setting in; she was in a coma.

There was a silence as I was trying to take it all in. My beautiful daughter in so much pain, and there was nothing I could do about it. I pictured her in the plane, focused, calm, determined, afraid, overwhelmed; she hadn’t seen her mother for four years.

“Oh, dear one, I am praying for you and your family.”

“Yes, please pray for me, and the members of your church, can they pray for us?”

“Most certainly.”

But then I got practical. “What passport are you traveling on?”

A pause, “Afghan. The appointment for the final signature for my German passport is tomorrow… I had to cancel it; I can’t wait.”

“O Lord, do you have all your Visas in place?” She knew I knew how risky this flight was going to be, as she had become an outlaw in her own country by the force of her education, her western perspective, and her global travel. Once she got in, would the authorities let her leave the country of her birth, yet again- it has always been a risk. I also knew that she had to go. There would be no holding her back…. To be present, to tell her mother how much she loved her, to say goodbye, (if things got worse), to make a difference, to talk with the doctors, to protect, to be with her siblings, to cook, to shop, to be a good daughter. Love has no boundaries. Love like this always involves the cross. You can’t risk loving without always inviting the cross. Ask any new parent, or one who is keeping a vigil at death. Anyone loving deeply always involves the cross.

“Be safe, honey, be safe.”

In our reading from the prophet Jeremiah, Jerusalem is in the process of being destroyed by the Babylonians. Blood is pouring into the streets, the fires are lit, the Temple is being torn down, and chaos reigns. The Law, the source of life and liberty was written in stone, kept in the Ark of the Covenant and housed in the Temple in Jerusalem. All religious practices evolved around the power of the Temple. And now everything is being destroyed. Every stone overturned. Annihilation is the Babylonians’ blueprint, and there’s not a thing anyone can do about it.

Imagine if an advancing army came into this sanctuary, began to desecrate our beautiful altar linens and vestments, to throw rocks through our stained-glass windows, to take an ax to our wood carvings, and to pull out these granite stones, and to set fire to the roof; meanwhile we are being chained to each other for our exodus away from everything we know to be true and safe and good.

The hour has come.

As bad as this is, with no hope, Jeremiah consoles…. During this hour of eventuality, where loss is real and there is no way out, he says, a new covenant will be written on our hearts. Yes, the Temple is being destroyed, but the Law will no longer reside there, but rather, on your heart. Each and every one of you will become the Ark, carrying God’s Law within you. That’s like saying, each and every one of you will become All Saints’ Church, carrying the altar, these people, this light, this beauty within you.

In other words, our faith is written from the heart to the heart, a way of being that does not prescribe, but invites, that does not condemn, but guides, that does not force, but points to love, that does not hold on, but let’s go. This is why it is so tender when a young Muslim woman takes solace in knowing that we are all lifting her up in prayer. When our faith resides in our hearts, there is no geography that defies it, we carry our sanctuary within and we find the way to walk together with friends and strangers through our deepest hours of grief.

And the way this faith finds its way to our hearts, Jesus keeps reminding us, is to let go of our controlling, even when we are in our gardens of Gethsemane.

Henri Nouwen, when he was making his vows to become a monk, talked about “hating” his life by loving his “not knowing.” It is here in our not knowing, where “God can touch us with God’s loving presence… making it possible for us not so much to find God as to be found by God, not so much to know God, as to be known by God, not so much to direct our life towards God, as to be directed by God, not so much to love God as to be loved by God. This might sound quite passive. But the contrary is true. It requires active spiritual work to keep space for God.”

Space of beautiful buildings, accomplishments, the good life, safety, shopping carts, good grades, excellent reputation, healthy bodies, joyful celebrations, victories, blessings are all wonderful, but if we cling to them, loving them too much, then we can easily lose the space for God. If we fill ourselves up with other things, there is no room for God.

Jesus is pointing us to an ancient truth: our space for God gets wider the more we can surrender into God’s reach. And the more we surrender to God, the more our hearts can hear an inner voice of God’s truth, God’s presence and the integrity, authenticity and power that leads us to freedom and love.

We are all saints, we are God’s Ark, carrying God’s Word within our hearts that are broken wide open. AMEN