

Hannover International Worship

21 March 2021

Jeremiah 31: 31-34

John 12: 20-26

Good morning everyone. As always, it is a privilege to worship with you this morning and share some of my reflections on scripture. But this morning, I am mindful of the restrictions for gathering together that are in place for much of our society, so it makes me truly grateful to have the freedom to gather together with you for worship – thank you for being here with me.

New experiences lead to new insights, don't they? I think for many of us here, that is a lived reality. We have traveled to different countries, experienced different cultures, speak different languages, and because of this our lives reflect a perspective on the world that is unique. I was thinking about this as I studied our scripture passages for today! After a year of living a 2 dimensional life, the only thing I could see in our passages were the 3 dimensional aspects. Allow me to explain.

Because of COVID our lives have flattened haven't they? Everything comes now through a screen – computer screen, TV screen, tablet, phone – the experiences of our lives have flattened significantly. We work, do school, share celebrations, visit home, have playdates and game nights – all through screens. Technology is a wonderful gift of this age to help us navigate this global pandemic, but it has changed my perspective on what I see in God's word. Today is a perfect example. Reading in both Jeremiah and John this is what caught my attention – the actions of God embodied! In Jeremiah, God took the hands of the Israelites and led them out of Egypt (v. 32), God puts the law in our minds and writes it on our hearts (v. 33), and in John – whoever serves me must follow me – conjures up images of feet following. Everywhere I looked this embodied aspect of faith came to the surface.

Why is this important for us? Because, I believe, we are all like the Greeks in our Gospel passage who said to Philip, "Sir, we would like to see Jesus." There are tendencies, within our Christian faith, to default to the spiritual aspects of Christianity – to the cognitive ascent of Jesus as Lord, to look for the spiritual fruit, to place an emphasis on the power and action of the Holy Spirit. But in doing so, we tend towards Gnosticism – that ancient religious movement that highlighted the dichotomy between the physical/material aspects of this world, and the spiritual – emphasizing the superiority of the spiritual. In doing so, the Gnostics argued Jesus wasn't actually human but simply used that body as a vessel for his spiritual entity. But we lose something massively important when we lose this embodied aspect of our faith.

I had the opportunity to hear Catholic theologian Emmanuel Katongole give a presentation this week in which he used the work of John Milbank. Mr. Katongole is doing important work around the central role of Christianity in reconciliation movements in Africa. In his presentation, Mr. Katongole highlighted the key understanding of John Milbank around Christian theology in society: "it is to tell again the Christian mythos, pronounce again Christian logos, and call again for Christian praxis in a manner that restores freshness and originality. It must articulate Christian difference in such a fashion as to make it strange." [John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*] As we draw ever closer to Holy Week, and in that Good Friday, we must remember the **embodiment** of our Christian faith, not only the spiritual, but the physical as well. We tell again the story of God, that Christ, although equal with God took on human form to dwell with us. We pronounce again the logos, that in following Christ we must lose our lives in order to find it. And we live out that truth in how we practice our faith,

sometimes in ways that make it strange to greater society.

The Greeks wanted to see Jesus, we want to see Jesus. What does Jesus do? He starts talking about farming! It was almost time for Jesus to enter the final stages of his ministry and he lays out the way in which the Greeks could truly see the Messiah using the metaphor of grain – the one who loves their life will lose it, while the one who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me... I invite you to come with me now as we hear a story from my acquaintance Matt Perez in order to put some flesh, as it were, on these concepts.

Matt is the brother of a good friend of mine, Liz Sluiter. Liz was a member of my youth group when she was in high school and over the years, through shared family events, I have met Matt a couple of times. Like many people around the world, Matt grew up in the church but as he reached young adulthood, stopped attending church and went his own way. Fast forward to 2017, and Matt is in the midst of significant life crises: he is in poor health, going through a divorce, and then the most excruciating thing happens – his daughter becomes ill. One Saturday afternoon he noticed his daughter’s behavior shift. Her speech started coming out tongue tied, her knees were buckling, and Matt knew in those moments something was terribly wrong. With the help of his family, he rushed Amelia to the children’s hospital in nearby Grand Rapids and soon discovered she had a tumor the size of a baseball and had wrapped itself around parts of her brain stem. The doctors said they were surprised she was even functioning. Like so many of us, when facing moments of intense pain or danger, Matt made a deal with God, bargaining for the life of his daughter. He offered his own life in exchange if God would spare the life of his daughter. I’ll allow Matt to tell the story directly now.

“Little did I know how the Lord works. The next time the doctor came out to give us an update on Amelia, he said the reason the surgery [to remove the tumor] was taking so long is that we’ve stopped operating and are waiting. They said they were waiting because her brain started pulsating and pushing the tumor off her brainstem all by itself. What was supposed to be a six-hour surgery turned into an eleven-hour operation. All of her tumor around her brainstem had fallen off by itself in those additional hours.” Four days later Amelia was discharged from the hospital because she made such a fast recovery. Today she remains cancer free. Matt continues, “God had started the beginning of something. Something started happening to me and I remembered what I prayed that day. **He didn’t take my physical life, he took my old one.** The Lord had filled me with his spirit, and it felt like every day he was just more potent and consuming. He had indeed taken my life, just not how I thought he was going to...” Those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.

Beloved of God, in this season of Lent, we remember the promises of God as embodied in Jesus Christ – that God has made a covenant with us, has promised to be our God, and we, God’s people. Where Jesus is, there his servants will also be. I can’t help but offer you some Reformed theology as I close. The Heidelberg Catechism Question and Answer 1 states: “What is our only comfort in life and in death? That I am not my own but belong *body and soul* to my faithful savior Jesus Christ.”