

March 18, 2018

A Sermon for the Fifth Sunday in Lent

Pastor Carolyn Albert Donovan

Peace Lutheran Church – Austin, Texas

GOSPEL

John 12:20-33

The holy gospel according to Saint John, the twelfth chapter.

Glory to you, O Lord.

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.

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 to myself.” ³³He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

The gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, O Christ.

“I will put my law within them...I will write it upon their hearts,” says God, through the prophet Jeremiah. It is one of the beautiful, intimate images from all of Scripture of how God journeys with God’s people.

I wonder what you imagine or feel when you hear those words... “I will write my law upon their hearts...”

To me, the image is so tender...but it’s not necessarily as simple as that, is it?

What do you feel when you hear these words, “I will put my law within them...I will write it upon their hearts...”?

Are they a comfort? A challenge? An intrusion? A judgment? A calling?

What is it that God’s writes into our very being and life? God’s law.

Probably not too many of us have a day-to-day comfort of familiarity with the idea of the “law” ...either as is it for us now or was in that time...not too many of us have been to law school...though some have. Some are familiar with the law as its keepers or enforcers. And while some of us may feel like we really know the law as it is today...I expect even fewer of us are scholars of the Torah.

When *I* think of the law...especially in our lives today...two images come to my mind: first, tall shelves of books with matching bindings with those horizontal bands across the spines in different colors, usually with a shimmer of metallic gold in between.

I don’t honestly know whether law books like that are much more than commercial advertisement backdrops anymore. But they are one thing I think of when I hear the word “law.”

The other image that comes to my mind is a courtroom...which is a different way of thinking about the law. Courtrooms are so startlingly empty in many ways. Expanses of wood paneling...no shelves...just a few tables for the ones making a case before the high seat of the one who will decide what happens

next. There, the judge embodies the law. Not books, but a person, representing the ultimate place where the law resides.

“I will put my law within them...write in on their hearts...”

Does God mean the words of the law...the rules and guidelines...will be written into a person like every word of those thousands of pages that make up “the law” on those tall shelves? Like uploading something into the people’s minds...like some kind of magical knowledge?

But God doesn’t say it will be placed in their minds...

Will it be more like a judge, who internalizes and interprets the law...? With the authority granted by their election or appointment?

But God doesn’t say the people will become the law...not exactly...(though apparently they will all be so connected to God they won’t have to teach each other anymore).

The time of Jeremiah was one of confusion and struggle...a nation divided in two...mothers mourning children who have died. The time of John’s gospel was one of confusion and struggle, too...God’s people living under empire...not even at peace among and within themselves.

The more things change...the more they stay the same...

And in these moments, God reaches into human history to claim the ones God loves.

Today in John we hear an echo of what we heard when the gospel began...We hear how Jesus is drawing the people to himself. The Greeks are the newcomers today...asking to see Jesus...and they are so much like the brothers Andrew and Philip were when they first were pulled into Jesus’ magnetic orbit in the stories opening chapter.

For Israel...and for the people who walked with Jesus in his life and ministry...and for us...God's love draws us powerfully...like a magnet's pull...God's love draws us close...so close God can touch our hearts...the very hidden center of our life and our being.

And from the days of Noah and Abraham to Jeremiah and the other prophets....from Jesus' ministry to today...we are drawn into God's purposes without knowing what will happen next. It is an uncertain journey.

As one beloved prayer says, "We are called to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us..."

And Jesus says today that the hour has come, that we will begin to see what it really means to be drawn to him, to have God's law at the center of our lives, to witness God's glory.

I don't know if this is true for you...but the closest I ever feel to the power of the kingdom of God in the world...is when I have been pulled, as if by some cosmic, magnetic force beyond where I would ever know or choose to go.

Where I find myself then is often in places that are in many ways frightening...where I know both that I am not in control and yet also that my presence is connected to a purpose.

Maybe that is what feeling God's law written in our hearts is like....what being drawn to Jesus in his glory is like...what being a dying grain of wheat sprouting in cold earth...just beginning to spark with new life...is like...

The untrodden path and perils unknown loom large as we near the end of Lent...as we come closer to the cross...as we continue to live in a confusing and uncertain world.

And today we hear Jesus say that the way he is leading doesn't take us around or away from death...but that death is where the seeds of eternity will take root and grow. The last joke on death is that it will be the fertilizer of its own undoing. A grain of wheat dies in the earth...and new life takes root in the very place that defies it.

As we near the end of our Lenten pilgrimage, I pray that you sense the closeness of God's presence...and the pull of Christ's power...even in uncertainty and struggle. I pray God's law will be alive in your heart...more than a shelf of books or a stark courtroom...but a presence of humbling, persistent, unshakeable grace that you cannot outrun or outlast. For God is your God, and you are God's people. Whatever else comes, this truth will carry us through.

May it be so. Amen.