

St Mary's Episcopal Church, Anchorage, Alaska
Message by Rev. Catherine Amy Kropp
Scripture: Jeremiah 31:31-34; John 12:20-33

Sunday, March 21, 2021
Fifth Sunday in Lent

Again and Again, We are Reformed



Lenten Labyrinth by Mike Moyers¹

“Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” (John 12:21)

In this little declaration, this polite inquiry, in the Gospel story today, something is happening. A subtle shift. You can feel it. On the surface, some unnamed people of unknown number, known simply as “some Greeks,” perhaps Greek-speaking Jews, seek out Philip and say, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.”²

They are curious. They’ve heard something. They know something or they feel something. Of course, this awareness of Jesus is not surprising, given that Jesus has, by this time, done a lot of miraculous things, including raising Lazarus from the dead.

But something else is happening in this little moment with the unnamed visitors. Philip takes their message to Andrew. Philip and Andrew then go together to Jesus. And Jesus, as if waiting for this very moment, as if it is the signal for his destiny, suddenly says, "The hour has now come." It is no longer "the hour is coming," as we heard him say before (John 5:25), but now "the hour has now come."³

It's a moment of pause, for the reader. Did we miss something? About this insignificant, ordinary moment when two of the disciples say, Jesus, there are these people who want to see you. These people who are curious. And Jesus declares, the hour has now come.

The time is now.

Do you remember the little moment of pause in yourself, you know, when felt something: wonder, curiosity, something. When you said to someone, or to a river or a rock or a bird, or just to yourself, "Hello, sir, or excuse me, I wish to see Jesus." I would like to know more, to check this thing out. Or, maybe the thought was, what is this thing we call church. Or what is this community called St Mary's.

However the idea formed itself, there was that little push or pull. A nudge. An instinct. Even if it's faded from your memory or it never really surfaced, *here we are*.

How did we all get here, in this moment, right now? There is always something so sacred and mysterious about gathering for worship in community. Sometimes I think the most profound and even sacramental moment of the entire service is the Welcome. Not so much the words of welcome, which are important, but the moment; the affirmation of what we are and have become: a strange, unexpected gathering in a strange, unexpected moment. Without any one of us really knowing what brought us here, even if we *think* we made a conscious choice this morning. All of our pathways have converged, so that we gather now, on this day, in mystery, in wonder, in pain, in witness.

On this day, shaking with the horror of racist violence and killing in our country.

On this day remembering the 8 victims of the mass shooting this past week in Atlanta including the 6 American women of Asian descent. Recognizing and naming the threat, fear and intimidation under which Asian Americans have been living. Naming the reality of hate incidents and hate crimes, harassment and assault.⁴

On this day, March 21, the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, marking the day of March 21, 1960 when police in Sharpeville, South Africa, opened fire and killed 69 people at a peaceful demonstration against apartheid.

This day, March 21, is now the annual day of recommitment to the elimination of all racial discrimination.

And so we gather and bear witness to this day, together in the church. In a statement issued by Churches Without Borders, our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry and other church leaders, on this day of observance, make this declaration:

“The institutional church shares in the complicity of the legacies of the Doctrine of Discovery colonization, forced removal and genocide of Indigenous people, the enslavement of African and Indigenous Peoples and injustices perpetrated against all people of color. The sin of racism is structural, institutional, interpersonal and internalized. It lives in communities inside and outside the church; it continues to inflict harm on a daily basis and generate new history.”⁵

And, the statement continues, “We must create spaces and structures that welcome and include the voices of those most directly impacted by the sins of racism.”⁶

Which brings us to the Jeremiah reading. The days are surely coming, God says, when “I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.” (Jeremiah 31:31-33) I could read this passage over and over, it is so comforting. And yet, it means that we are carrying within us a great inner heart space that is covenantal. A deep sharing within, with God and each other.

We are this covenant; we carry and embody it. We are the emergent covenant, it lies within us, inscribed on our hearts, unfolding. This means, the future doesn't lie out there waiting for us. It is in us, waiting for us to learn enough to recognize and activate this covenant that we carry together.

If we think about the status quo, institutionalism, structures that create invisible systems to control and oppress, what are they for you? Can you see them? Feel them? There are likely some you can see and feel and many more others can reveal if we listen.

Racism, patriarchy, colonialism, oppressive systems seep into our consciousness, into our hearts, our shared heart space, and lodge there, and we are largely unaware.

There *is* a heart consciousness even if we can't see it. And this breakthrough of consciousness is us: through us, inside of us. And we don't do this alone but together. We reform ourselves again and again.⁷

As john. a. powell writes, "...we have systems and structures that make it almost impossible for us to see each other as human beings.... unless we also tell a narrative about the system and how the system is tearing us apart..."⁸

Jesus exposes the world as the system in which we are not seeing who we truly are. Jesus, as Charles Campbell writes, proclaims "... a new, alternative way of life in the midst of a violent world."⁹ If we follow Christ, this community, this gathering, even if we just glimpse something, like the ones who said, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus," we are looking within ourselves and glimpsing the future in the present, together. (John 12:21)

And Jesus, after saying, "the hour has now come," is troubled. His soul is troubled. Yet, he accepts this moment, this hour, asking God to glorify God's name. And then a voice comes from heaven (or thunder or an angel) to confirm the moment. No one is sure what they are hearing, but Jesus hears it and confirms the voice that speaks, he says, for us as it says, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." (John 12:27-31)

Again and again, we face the institutionalism in our day, in the church, in our societal and governmental structures, as we confront the structures of oppression, we discover our own inner reformation and collective witness. May we become the grain of wheat which doesn't really die, as Jesus knows, but the grain of wheat that dies into life and abundance.

On this day of the vernal equinox, suspended and balanced as we are in the moment, when the energy of light is equal with the night. Poised on the edge of it. Let us fall into spring, into Holy Week, into this year, this next moment, in Jesus' name. Amen.



Cross with Wheat Chaff, Benton Chapel, Vanderbilt University¹⁰

READINGS

Jeremiah 31:31-34

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

John 12:20-33

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. 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. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

“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. Father, glorify your name.” Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, “An angel has spoken to him.” Jesus answered, “This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgment of this world; 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.

¹ Moyers, Mike. Lenten Labyrinth, from Art in the Christian Tradition, a project of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library, Nashville, TN. <http://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=57142> [retrieved March 19, 2021]. Original source: Mike Moyers, <https://www.mikemoyersfineart.com/>. “This painting is a visual labyrinth containing many Lenten concepts. The labyrinth begins and ends with the dark path at the bottom —representing Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. Some other themes depicted are: covenant relationship, scripture, The Law, discipleship, betrayal, servant hood, readiness, patience, Christ’s passion, deliverance, abundance, provision, sacrifice, new life, and love.” [from: <https://www.mikemoyersfineart.com/about>]

² Michael D. Coogan et al., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with Apocrypha: New Revised Standard Version* (Oxford University Press, 2010); p. 1903.

³ “Crowds have previously flocked to Jesus (John 4:1; 6:2; 6:24) or heard and interacted with him (7:20). What makes the visit of this delegation of Greeks remarkable? Their step-by-step approach highlights the unusualness and importance of their coming: they approach Philip (John 12:21); Philip speaks with Andrew (12:22a); then Andrew and Philip approach Jesus together (12:22b). In response, Jesus concisely sums up his message and states that the critical moment has arrived. Then a voice from heaven utters confirmation.” James D. Ernest, writing in *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide* (Locations 4802-4806). Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition.

⁴ “‘Enough Is Enough’: Atlanta-Area Spa Shootings Spur Debate Over Hate Crime Label,” NPR.org, accessed March 21, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/03/18/978680316/atlanta-spa-shootings-expose-frustration-and-debate-over-hate-crime-label>.

⁵ National Bishop Susan C. Johnson (Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada), Archbishop and Primate Linda Nicholls (Anglican Church of Canada), Presiding Bishop Michael B. Curry (The Episcopal Church), Presiding Bishop Elizabeth A. Eaton (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America), “Churches Beyond Borders Issue Statement for the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination,” *The Episcopal Church* (blog), March 17, 2021, <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/publicaffairs/churches-beyond-borders-issue-statement-for-the-international-day-for-the-elimination-of-racial-discrimination/>.

⁶ National Bishop Susan C. Johnson (Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada), Archbishop and Primate Linda Nicholls (Anglican Church of Canada), Presiding Bishop Michael B. Curry (The Episcopal Church), Presiding Bishop Elizabeth A. Eaton (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America), “Churches Beyond Borders Issue Statement for the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination,” *The Episcopal Church* (blog), March 17, 2021, <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/publicaffairs/churches-beyond-borders-issue-statement-for-the-international-day-for-the-elimination-of-racial-discrimination/>.

⁷ “Change, even when welcomed, means death... We could die to some things so that we could live to others, or we could hold onto what is and die with it. Only one of these is a faithful way forward. Again and again, we are being reformed. The process is uncomfortable, but the status quo is untenable. When change happens with us, what could possibly take root and flourish?” Rev. T. Denise Anderson, *A Sanctified Art*, Sermon Planning Guide Lent 2021, p. 13, sanctifiedart.org, used with permission. Rev.

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⁸ “Why Equity Is Good for Everyone: Changing the Story, Changing the World with john a. powell and Heather McGhee,” *Bioneers* (blog), February 16, 2021, <https://bioneers.org/equity-good-everyone-changing-story-world/>.

⁹ Charles L. Campbell, writing in *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide* (Locations 4886-4892). Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition.

¹⁰ Cross with Wheat Chaff, from *Art in the Christian Tradition*, a project of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library, Nashville, TN. <http://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=46035> [retrieved March 19, 2021]. Creative Commons Attribution ShareAlike - CC-BY-SA-3.0