

Lent V Year B: 17/18 March 2018  
St. James Episcopal Church, Clinton NY  
The Rev. Gary Cyr, Rector

**The Word of God has been spoken in our midst:  
may we choose faithfully**

Jeremiah 31:31-34  
Hebrews 5:5-10  
John 12:20-33  
Psalm 51:1-13

One of the fond memories I have of early spring, is that of my maternal Grandmother, who lived with us, preparing to plant the garden. That may sound silly with so much snow on the ground, but she always started seedlings in February and March so that certain plants had a “head start” on the growing season, which, in Northern Maine, consisted of a limited number of days (about ninety to one hundred twenty if I recall correctly).

As a child of the depression era, she would, over several months, save empty soup cans, milk cartons, anything really that could serve as a vessel for potting soil and seeds. These would then be arranged in rows upon a table in her large bedroom with its southward facing windows and tended by her for weeks on end. In short order, her room would begin to smell like a greenhouse, a scent that even till this day I still love. Though she was far from a master gardener, she nevertheless took great care of her “indoor” garden in anticipation of transplanting the young plants in the “outdoor” garden. This is the image that came to me when I read Jesus as saying “Whenever a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”

That’s a rather ambiguous statement that seems to make little if no sense at all. However, as a gardener will tell you, not every seed that is planted germinates. Part of Jesus’ mission was to plant lots and lots of seeds in the hope that what is planted will take hold and be fruitful. Jesus knew that some seeds will rot in the soil rather than shed its shell and allow for tender tendrils to take root in the soil. The metaphor is a common one that Jesus returns to often, and with good reason. If a seedling remains entombed in its protective shell, it dies and produces nothing. But if it dies to itself, breaks free of its outer wrapping, it becomes something much more than a dried seed. For within every seed, there is potential life, abundant life even, and that’s a key understanding that Jesus continually imparts to his followers.

If you are to follow me, says Jesus, you must forfeit your life. Making a commitment to Jesus is a transforming experience, and it's a commitment each Christian makes in their baptism, though not all who are baptized are transformed. That process takes time, commitment, and faith. Jesus' message is the fulfillment of the covenant established between our forbearers and God. One that we are reminded of in the words from the prophet Jeremiah.

Jeremiah is addressing a community where their fidelity to God's covenant is tested in the midst of disorder and desolation. The people haven't been faithful in their conviction to God's holy word as conveyed through Abraham, Jacob, and Moses. However, God is always steadfast and faithful; as such, God will now write the words of the covenant upon the heart of the people rather than etch them in stone. You see, etching the covenant in stone so one can display them in front of government buildings and courthouses, or on school grounds and other public spaces is meaningless. Far too often, those who subscribe to such ideology, are like seed that will not surrender, but dies in the soil. For these individuals, their heart is as hardened as the stone the words of the covenant are written on. For these individuals, it's about following rules rather than following Christ. In Jesus we witness the fulfilling of what is promised in Jeremiah – that God will write the covenant upon the hearts of the people such that God is found within rather than in some structure or externally. This is an imminent God who desires an intimate relationship with humanity and all creation.

Far too often, many of us get lost in the idea of a transcendent, omnipotent God; a God who exists beyond mortal comprehension or experience. Yet, the incarnation changes all of that, such that our God is one who dwells among us and with us, and for whom Jesus is the consummate embodiment of that reality. As such, Jesus is the fulcrum upon which salvation history rests, and whose mission and ministry in word and deed points.

All of Lent has been a journey pointing towards the fulfillment of this salvific history, of God's mighty acts in redeeming and restoring the covenant relationship that we broke in the first place. It is no longer an external reality but an internal truth. God's redeeming grace abides within us rather than existing as some external force that bears down upon us. We, who have put on Christ in baptism, abide in that abundant grace, and it is amazing indeed.

Today's readings are a summation of our Lenten pilgrimage, one that reiterates much of what we have heard over the past several weeks: follow me, take up your cross, rely on one another, be in community with each other, serve the marginalized, seek and protect the disenfranchised, be prepared to put the needs of the other before your own. This Sunday is that turn in the road that points us towards Holy Week and our final journey with Jesus that leads to the

cross, an instrument of death which God will transform into new life. We are at the fulcrum and must decide to participate in mending the relationship with God by repenting of our sin, which is the embodied manifestation of our fractured relationship with God. Are we going to walk with Jesus or are we going to turn our back on him? Are we going to receive the Good News and carry it out into the world, or are we simply going to pay lip service to Jesus' message? Will we have hearts of stone or hearts filled with compassion and charity? Now is the moment of decision.

The Word of God has been spoken in our midst. It is the seed that is planted within our soul. We are the soil in which the seed has been planted. God is the master gardener who tends the planting and nurtures the soil. But we must respond to the efforts of our Creator. Redeemer, and Sustainer. We must either allow the seed that is planted within us to rot and die, producing nothing; or we can break free from the husk, from being entombed in darkness, and allow our souls to be deeply rooted in God's holy word so that we can produce new and abundant life. Will we be faithful in our conviction to God's Holy Word? Or will we remain disobedient and continue to walk apart from God? It is the same question Jeremiah asked of his community. It is the same question Jesus asked of his disciples. And now it is the question placed before us on the cusp of Holy Week. The choice is ours. May we choose faithfully.