

Lent 5B, March 21, 2021
 Christ Church Valdosta, GA
 The Rev. Dr. James C. Pace

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“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.”

That pretty much sums up what life is all about, right? It reflects patterns of loss and renewal that run throughout our lives, sometimes by choice, other times by chance.

If you have ever fallen in love with someone and became engaged, you had to let parts of your former single life go to create a new married one. Sadly, the reverse can also happen. Divorce finds a set of dreams unfulfilled and pieces that are picked up to begin again. If you are a parent, you know of the sacrifices made so that the life of your child can emerge and grow. If you have had to care for another, perhaps an older parent, you also know the parts of your life that died so that another might live with dignity, compassion, and love.

This same pattern is reflected in nature. You can see it in the changing of the seasons, falling leaves and new blooms as well as the setting and the rising of the sun. One of my favorite books is a children’s picture book titled “The Giving Tree” by Shel Silverstein. When you read it, grab a box of Kleenex. It’s all about how a tree gives everything that it can to a boy that the tree loves.

Think about the many stories in scripture that talk of loss and renewal. Innocence in Adam and Eve died so that consciousness might be born. Abram left his country and kindred so that he might be made a great nation, renamed Abraham, and be a blessing to all the families of the earth. Jacob lost his old identity and was wounded so that he could become a new man, Israel, with a new life. James and John left their father, boats, and nets to become disciples of Jesus and fishers of people. Jesus taught his disciples, “The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.”

And so, there you have it; the secret to life is out. It’s a pattern of loss and renewal, dying and rising, letting go and getting back, leaving and return. It is at the core of our baptism and it is what we declare each Sunday in the liturgy of Rite II when we proclaim together:

Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.

I don’t think it is a coincidence that today’s Gospel is set in the context of the Passover feast and celebration. The Passover celebrates the liberation of the Israelites from their bondage in Egypt. It is about their freedom and new life. There is great hope and excitement there. It is about letting go, leaving behind, and moving into what is new ahead. Perhaps the question: What do we need to let go of in our lives so that we can begin, again? What needs to die so that something new may live?

The pattern of life and death, repeated over and over, year after year, allows us glimpses of Jesus ... to see Jesus a bit more clearly. In today’s Gospel, some Greeks come to Philip and say: “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” They want to see the man who changed water into fine wine; this man who cleansed the temple, fed the 5000, walked on water, gave sight to the blind, and raised someone from the dead. “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.”

Philip tells Andrew about this request and Philip and Andrew tell Jesus. And Jesus says to them: “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.” That is his response to the Greeks. To you. To me.

That kind of dying is about more than physical death. We die a thousand deaths or more throughout our lifetime. We lose many who we love. We lose relationships. Sometimes our health. Opportunities. We change our beliefs and values so that we can be more authentic. And sometimes there are things *that need to die* so that we have a fuller life: fears, anger, resentment, jealousy, disappointment, guilt, the constant need to be right or the need for self-approval.

We have had times in our lives where we have said: “You know what, that was the hardest thing I have ever experienced. I hope that never happens to me again, ever. But then we usually follow that up with something like: *But I wouldn't change it for the world*. Sound familiar? One of my favorite songs that reflects this whole frame of being and mindset is a song by Bob Seger and the Silver Bullet Band titled “Against the Wind”. I play the piano. I play it badly. But in that song, I hear the constant, beautiful background rhythm of a piano being played by an ace keyboardist that drives the song and its powerful lyrics to completion. It's all about how we live life and make choices along the way. Living constantly *against the wind*.

True. What is often difficult or painful *can* bear much fruit. Change often brings life renewed. Moving from a place of loss and darkness to a bright future takes a lot of trust. But when you do manage to make your way forward, it means that you encounter a promise of new life. Letting go makes room for something new to rise up and gives God something to work with. Why then would we want to cling to a self-enclosed, single grain of wheat?

This pattern of loss and renewal will be unveiled everyday throughout Holy Week; maybe that is why we hear this today, a week before Palm Sunday and the start of Holy Week. It's our preparation. Holy Week ends after a death, the discovery of an empty tomb, and the entrance into the dawn of a new and blazing day. That single grain of wheat becomes our Bread of Life. Amen.