

PREPARING FOR TRANSFORMATION

3/18/18 ~ St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Encinitas, CA

Lent 5 (B): Jeremiah 31:31-34, Psalm 119:9-16, Hebrews 5:5-10 & John 12:20-33

A few weeks ago a friend and I saw a Broadway show while we were in New York. "Three Tall Women" was wonderful and amazing, but it was nothing like the musical my mom and I saw when we were there ten years ago. I was a little leery when Mom told me a friend of hers had suggested we see Avenue Q, because I'd already seen it in Seattle, and would've described it as a burlesque show with puppets!

I wasn't sure my mom would appreciate the raunchy humor. But as I sat there watching the show for the second time, I realized that I had previously overlooked part of the message. For starters, they held nothing back as all kinds of 'isms—racism, ageism, sexism—were targeted. And, more importantly, Avenue Q offered hope—hope that transformation is possible for us all.

Early on in the show, however, the characters first amplified our human tendency to focus on the negative circumstances of life. In a one-upmanship through song, each member of the cast makes the case that their life is way worse than everyone else's. As they embellish the challenging parts of their lives, they sing the refrain with gusto: "It sucks to be me!"

Looking back on Avenue Q, I started wondering about where we, as Christians, fall on the "life stinks" spectrum. On one hand, we have teachings—like those we heard in this morning's Gospel—that say: "Those who love their life will lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life." But does Jesus really mean we ought to hate our lives in a way that we might declare: "It sucks to be me!"?

Maybe if you're Job; but, for the most part, the Scripture proclaims we should be grateful for our lives—for the exquisite gift of life. On the other hand, there is a clear message that we ought to let go of the idea of our life looking like the lives of other people who are not on the path of discipleship; or, in many cases, to be willing to release the parts of ourselves no longer serving us...to let those parts die.

So this week, as we enter our final week of Lent, and wrap-up our sermon series exploring the Litany of Penitence as a model of spiritual practice, we place our attention on the fourth petition, which reads: "We confess to you, Lord, all our past unfaithfulness: the pride, hypocrisy, and impatience of our lives."

In addition to letting go of the ways of the world, the Gospel reading offers up an image of a seed to illustrate the teaching. Jesus says "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".

The point, of course, is that much of transformation happens underground—in the places we can't see. We all know a seed turns into a plant, but what we never see is the destruction of the outer seed coat as the inner seed embryo is released in the germination process.

If the seed somehow refused to let itself be shattered, it would never experience new life—it would not experience the transformation from seed to plant. So the characters in Avenue Q, along their own paths to transformation, stumble onto an important step in the process.

After complaining about their messed-up lives, they begin to admit that they have some personal responsibility for their complicated lives. A lot like our confessions in the Litany of Penitence, they admit their inadvertent wrong-doing through more song. Although the cast is racially diverse, they sing: “Everyone’s a little bit racist” as an acknowledgement of the hypocrisy of our lives.

That’s what we do during Lent; we review our lives for all the ways we have fallen short—where we have sinned—both individually and as a member of a global society. But we don’t stop there. If we did, we would be glorifying the misery. Instead we confess the pride, hypocrisy, and impatience of our lives to prepare for transformation...to release those parts of ourselves that keep us from being close to God...from imitating God.

It’s interesting that, in Hebrews, we read that Jesus “offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears”, but he doesn’t ask that the process of his trial and crucifixion be stopped. Although Jesus surely dreaded the idea of suffering in the same way any of us would, he complies out of obedience to God—out of his commitment to bring about and contribute to the salvation...the transformation...of the world.

His response conveys that the time of his own death is nearing, and only the most important matters will be dealt with going forward. And what is most important to Jesus? Our salvation—our transformation—in other words, how we are to live in order that our lives glorify God. Jesus teaches us how to live by being willing to surrender himself to death. In doing so, he becomes the ultimate sacrifice.

Likewise, the prophet Jeremiah promises us that this covenant with God will be “written on our hearts”. And we know this to be true, don’t we? We all feel the inner longing to be better people; to know God more deeply; and to help others with their success as we let go of our past unfaithfulness.

Not only are those callings within us, it is also written on our hearts how to achieve those callings. We are all given unique gifts, so living into the fullness of everlasting life, requires us to share these gifts, openly and without restraint, with the world around us—without comparing our gifts to the gifts of others.

Jesus tells us the way to experience eternal life is to know the presence of God without beginning or ending—to not be attached to life as we know it. Instead, we must always be ready to question the status quo, to go deeper, and to let parts of ourselves die.

As I mentioned, several of the Avenue Q characters experience transformation. One of them is searching for his purpose in life, and although he initially thinks he can’t be involved with anyone, or anything else, until he has that all figured-out, he comes to realize that he actually feels more purposeful by being of service to a cause larger than himself.

Another character dies to the part of herself that believes she is only capable of assisting someone else’s success. A third character has to die to the self who is concerned with what other people will think if he lives into his full essence, and he is transformed.

Most of us share similar fears, and we are all too familiar with the pain that dying to an old self entails. So the final message of Avenue Q, and the message we hear through the life of Jesus, is one of hope. The characters sing a song called “Only for now,” which is their way of confessing the impatience of our lives.

The song conceded, that while life is definitely hard at times, we have friends who help us through—who serve as God’s hands and feet in the world—and, yet, that there will be good times again, so the current challenges are “only for now.”

As we approach the day of resurrection, we are reminded that this part of our own lives is “only for now”. We are called to consider letting parts of ourselves die—the parts of ourselves that are not bringing us, or the world around us “abundant life”. We are promised that we too can experience transformation and new life.

Our Psalm for today provides us with wonderful aids for carrying out Jesus’ teaching. The psalmist writes: “With my whole heart I seek you, let me not stray from your commandments.” Another line says, “I treasure your promise in my heart, that I may not sin against you.” And finally the psalmist pledges, “I will not forget your word...I will meditate on your commandments and give attention to your ways”.

So, in this next week as you ask yourself, “What parts of me need to die?”; that is, as we ask ourselves whether the choices we are making reflect our commitment to follow Christ, I invite you to join me in praying today’s Psalm each day this week in preparation for our transformation—whether it happens this Easter, next Easter, or some Easter after that.

“We confess to you, Lord, all our past unfaithfulness: the pride, hypocrisy, and impatience of our lives.”

-AMEN

The Collect

Almighty God, you alone can bring into order the unruly wills and affections of sinners: Grant your people grace to love what you command and desire what you promise; that, among the swift and varied changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed where true joys are to be found; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

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.

Psalm 119:9-16

9 How shall a young man cleanse his way? *
By keeping to your words.

- 10 With my whole heart I seek you; *
let me not stray from your commandments.
- 11 I treasure your promise in my heart, *
that I may not sin against you.
- 12 Blessed are you, O LORD; *
instruct me in your statutes.
- 13 With my lips will I recite *
all the judgments of your mouth.
- 14 I have taken greater delight in the way of your decrees *
than in all manner of riches.
- 15 I will meditate on your commandments *
and give attention to your ways.
- 16 My delight is in your statutes; *
I will not forget your word.

Hebrews 5:5-10

Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him, “You are my Son, today I have begotten you”; as he says also in another place, “You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek.”

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

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.