

Descending into Easter – Georgann Kurtz-Shaw

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

“Ladies and gentlemen, as we start our descent into St. Louis (or Seattle, or Tel Aviv, or you fill in the blank...), please make sure that your seat backs and tray tables are in their full upright position. Please check to be sure your seat belt is securely fastened and that all carry-on luggage is safely stowed underneath the seat in front of you or in the overhead bins. Please turn off all electronic devices until we are safely parked at the gate. Thank you.” This is my favorite announcement on every flight I take. It means we’ve passed the turning point in the flight path, and we are beginning our descent into our destination, the flight’s resolution. It doesn’t mean we’ve arrived at the gate, but it does mean that we probably will in less than an hour. It means that soon we will be set free from the confining walls of a long, narrow jetliner. It means our destination is within reach.

Today we find ourselves at the turning point in this year’s Lenten Season, just beginning our descent into our final destination. We are beginning our last full week of Lent before Palm Sunday and Holy Week take us to Easter. We can still look back into the clouds to see the weight of sin we’ve been trudging through, and we know we’ll need to pass through some significant turbulence as we finish our descent, but we are beginning to sense and perhaps even glimpse the hope of a landing that lies ahead of us. Our destination is within reach.

Our lectionary readings confirm that we are beginning our final descent out of Lent and into Easter. In our gospel lesson for today, we find Jesus and the disciples at a similar turning point. At least three times prior to this in John’s gospel, Jesus said that his *hour* [or his *time*] *has not yet come*. In this passage, however, the story changes direction; it begins its descent to the tomb. When Andrew and Philip tell Jesus that there are Greeks who want to see him, Jesus responds in verse 23 that *the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified*. This clear change of direction in Jesus’s language signals a turning point in Jesus’s life and in the gospel story. We might say that with this passage, Jesus begins his descent and final approach in the gospel of John to his ultimate destination.

To explain his approaching descent and death, Jesus employs language both appropriate for us in Lent and typical of his earlier parabolic teaching. Like a *grain of wheat* that must fall *into the earth* and die in order to break forth into new life and produce fruit, Jesus says that he, as well as those who want to serve and follow him, must also die in order to gain eternal life. To understand Jesus’s lesson here, we just need to look outside. We have remnants of death all around us—twigs and leaves that fell during the winter or gathered around our shrubs to escape the wrath of the city’s leaf-vacuuming machine last fall. Just as we know that Lent descends into Easter, so we also know that winter’s dark death will soon descend into the first gold of spring buds on our trees and bushes. Some spring bulbs have already pushed their new leaves up through the soil and soon will begin to bloom, and yesterday we saw a few that had even done that already. It’s a beautiful cycle—nature requires death in order for life to continue.

Lent reminds us that we too must die. We too must follow Jesus’s example of humility. We too must be the *grain of wheat [that] falls into the earth and dies*—dies to our own vanity and pretensions, dies to our own bent toward consumerism, domination, and violence—dies so that the buried seeds of our lives, like Jesus’s life, may multiply and produce fruit. Death to our own self-interests is essential for us, like Christ, in order to descend into the life God calls us to live. Lent reminds us of that.

Our gospel lesson also reminds us that Easter is for everyone. We’re not on the only flight headed toward the tomb. Significantly in our gospel lesson, it is when *Greeks* seek out Jesus that he finally says, *the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified*. These Greeks approach Philip who then goes to consult

Andrew. Coincidentally both of their names are Greek, and both of them are from Bethsaida, a mixed Greek-Jewish town in Galilee. These Greeks want to be part of Jesus's story. Through these references to Greeks, who would have been viewed by many Jews then as despised outsiders or interlopers to the Jewish faith, we are reminded of the universal implications of Lent and of Easter. Jesus didn't descend into suffering and death for the Jews alone, or for us alone; instead, Jesus suffered and died in order to *draw all people*—Jews, Gentiles, Palestinians, Israelis, Iraqis, Afghanis, Mexicans, Nicaraguans, Peruvians, Paraguayans, Libyans, Tunisians, Namibians, Chinese, Japanese, and even Canadians and Americans—all of humanity to himself.

Like the gospel lesson for today, our epistle reading from Hebrews reminds us that we have begun our descent toward Easter and that we have reason to hope. Like John, this passage also affirms that through Jesus's humanity as well as his suffering and death, he ultimately *became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him*.

The writer of Hebrews utilizes the metaphor of Jesus as high priest to characterize Jesus's role in our salvation. This passage opens and closes with God's *appointing* and then *designating* Jesus as high priest. While the role of high priest isn't one we see in our Wesleyan tradition, the Hebrews to whom this letter was written would have understood the tradition of the Levitical priesthood and the metaphor presented in this passage. Priests served as mediators, bridging the gap between "holy deity and sinful humanity" (New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible 613). In the New Testament in particular, priests served as reconcilers of the people to God and of the people of God to one another. The writer of Hebrews explicitly applies priestly language and characteristics to Jesus. In Hebrews Jesus serves as the *eternal high priest*, standing between God and humanity with his feet firmly planted on each side. Just as on the Day of Atonement the high priest would have offered an animal sacrifice for his own sins and for those of his family before offering a sacrifice for the sins of all the people, in this Hebrews passage Jesus *offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, . . . and he was heard* [by God his father and by those around him] *because of his reverent submission*. As the Levitical priest would have entered the "Holy of Holies" to offer up sacrifices, in a similar way Jesus entered into the heavenly "Holy of Holies" by offering up himself in order to bridge the gap between God and humanity.

Our Old Testament passage comes from the middle of the book of Jeremiah, in a section of two chapters scholars sometimes call the "Little Book of Comfort." After many chapters of Jeremiah's prophesying destruction for the people of Judah and Israel in response to their cycle of sin and repentance, in these verses Jeremiah brings the people hope even though they are now in exile. Here he tells them that God will bring new life out of their destruction. They, like us, are not capable of healing themselves. So according to Jeremiah, God is going to make a *new covenant* with them—a *new testament*. This new covenant will not be like any that God has made with them or their ancestors in the past. The law will no longer be engraved on stone, but instead it will be *written* on their hearts. They will not need to be taught about God, because according to Jeremiah, through this *new covenant*, they will *know* God. God will bring new life out of the destruction around them; therefore, they have reason to hope even in the midst of their exile and hopelessness.

Most days, especially these days of Lent every year, I feel much more like the people of Israel and Judah trapped in a cycle of sin and repentance than like someone who has the law *written* clearly on her heart. Like the people of God throughout the Old Testament mixing their worship of the one true God with worship of false gods, I continue to find myself vacillating between the cross and the idols that I allow to creep back into my life. Like the people of God in Jeremiah, I do not have the capacity to heal myself. But, unlike them, I do know the reality of Jesus the high priest, Jesus the *new covenant*. And I do *know* God because I know that the new covenant that Jesus the high priest delivered includes me as well.

As we continue our descent toward Easter, let's remember the call of the church to hear and join in Jesus's cry. Let's join with Jesus in crying for ourselves, in crying for one another, and in crying for our world. But as we cry, let's also remember the glimpse of Easter we've gotten today. Like Jesus who knew his destination, we know ours as well, and thus we have great cause for hope. We know our landing is surely not very far away. And we know that when we arrive at Easter in two Sundays, we will celebrate the gift of the new covenant that Jesus our high priest has given to the world. We haven't yet arrived, but the time has come to begin our descent. So, make sure your seat belt is securely fastened and that all carry-on luggage is safely stowed underneath the seat in front of you or in the overhead bins. And please, please turn off all those electronic devices. We need to be ready to land.