

Sermon for Sunday 21 March 2021 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore

*Fifth Sunday in Lent*

Scriptures: Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalter (*Insert: Alternate Leader and people*): Psalm 51:1-12;

Hebrews 5:5-10; John 12:20-33

**“Both.”**

Talk is important; but this is the last time we only talk, in this longest serious study period of the year, called Lent. So listen closely what we say to one another, and what we hear back from God.

Jeremiah does not expect to live through the long trial of being captured and abducted to a land far away that he and his people will soon undergo.

The psalmist does not expect to pray any more without admitting his deep mistakes.

The Letter to the Hebrews says Jesus only became the Christ through pain and great sadness.

John says “some Greeks” asked the disciples Philip and Andrew to bring them to Jesus ... and when they did that, Jesus announced his hour had come. Our best interpretation of this is that Jesus felt he was now finished teaching his own people ... the Jews ... and now was called to give himself to the whole of humankind as a sign of God’s love to all creation.

What we will do next Sunday is read dramatically the way he did that; then, if we decide to gather on Holy Thursday evening as usual, we will wash one another’s feet; and the Sunday after that, we will re-enact the great signs of death and resurrection we call Easter: The announcement, the plain telling at the tomb, the repeating of baptismal vows by each of us, and the sharing of Communion with Christ risen.

What is basic today is our understanding that this is double-sided religion. It is both Jesus’ darkest hour, and his breakthrough to full aliveness. “I, when I am lifted up, will draw all humankind to myself.” In John, he says this calmly, and never cries out. He is already more than just Jesus. God comes to us through him. Pain is overcome by victory. That is our teaching, and that is what we act out in worship each time we assemble, from now on.

From our side, we promise to accept this reality. Without knowing what lies ahead, we pledge. As I read on St. Mark’s Lutheran Church’s sign @ St. Paul and 20<sup>th</sup> Streets this week, “God does not ask about our ability or disability, but about our availability.”

The simple pledge, made together, “We will be your people,” is the whole story.

I never, ever feel I make that clear, much less convincing. I never feel sure I know what I’m talking about. I only know I must do this, and receive the joy and confusion it always brings as best I can until the next time I’m called to speak, or to do something that speaks better than words. I never can separate resurrection from the present. I never feel far from the darkness

we call death. The call is always fresh: "Follow me." The promise is always new: "I can. With your help, I will."

John's Gospel was, we believe, written last of the four accounts of Jesus' life we have in our accepted scripture. That community was a long way from the early days of St. Paul, and the believers listening to Mark's bare-bones account of Jesus of Nazareth's life and death and return. John's people needed reassurance, like me and you. They needed the opportunity to believe God, in Jesus, was alive and well and working through them as the first accounts described it.

This year of scientific rescue and mass craziness; this fresh awareness we're no better secured than people around the world and throughout history against believing lies or committing awful mistakes ... all this has brought to me such fresh and powerful conviction of God's grace, and of my capacity to answer more fully than ever before, scared, brave, dead and risen again, as I never expected.

I testify, in deepest humility, it's beautiful. It's awesome. It's both sides, praise God.

Amen.