

“Premonitions”

Sermon on Sunday, March 21, 2021

Good morning church,

We are getting closer to the seismic trembling that takes place at the center of the gospel, Jesus' death and resurrection. The vibes are already recognizable in the readings of our Lectionary for this Sunday. Premonitions are in the air - premonitions of things to come. In today's gospel lesson Jesus speaks openly about his own death. Of course we hear him through the distinct voice of Saint John. When we listen to Saint John, it's a little bit like listening to our virtual choir at St. Peter's. It sounds wonderful. In fact, it may sound even better than the sum of its parts because the disturbing sounds are edited out and the best sounds are brought together in just the right proportions. The end product is lovely.

In the same way, John takes out the more somber tones which are present in the other gospels regarding the horrible death of Christ on the cross. John turns it into something that is almost joyous to hear. And by that I don't mean that John is manipulating the story of the cross. No, he is just emphasizing the parts of the message which are more melodious. In this reading Jesus uses a metaphor from the natural world that we are familiar with, especially the gardeners among us. He says: "Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds." We sense hopeful energy in this statement! "When I die," Jesus says, I will make room for something bigger that will grow out of this. What did he mean? I have to think of the apostles and the energy of the early church that grew so fast and was so vibrant that it changed the world.

Premonitions of death on his mind, Jesus ponders ever so briefly the enormity of what's before him. For a fraction of a second we feel that he allows himself some doubt. Yet again, it is nicely cleaned up by John's synchronization and nowhere near as raw as in the other gospels. Jesus says, "Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour?'" But he answers his own question immediately: "No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour."

Like many human beings before him and like many who came after him, Jesus had to come to terms with an early death. It wasn't something his

disciples wanted; it wasn't on the agenda of his family or his mother; it wasn't something anybody wanted. When Jesus died he was only 32 or 33 years old according to the best historical guesses. He died at approximately the same age as Alexander the Great, Composer Franz Schubert, Saint Rose of Lima, Slave Leader Nat Turner, British novelist Emily Bronte, Saint Catherine of Siena and many others. In that regard his death was not novel. But unlike most mortals, Jesus felt the comfort and power of something very special about his abrupt demise. "It was for this very reason I came to this hour," he proclaims. "There is reason for this" he says. There is godly intent. There is holy purpose.

Well, what reason, Lord? What intent? What holy purpose? What good can come out of death?

The answer Jesus gives sounds so melodious in the synchronization of Saint John. "Father, glorify your name," the teacher from Nazareth exclaims. In the beginning of this passage John had already introduced that same word: "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be **glorified.**" That's a mighty joyous word for pretty nasty stuff. In other words, for the glory of God Jesus went to the cross. In John's mind Jesus' sacrifice was a triumph. It was a proclamation of God's power, glorifying the one whose love is greater than hate, who will save us from our own sins, not by giving us lectures but by holding up a mirror to human suffering.

A few chapters later when John describes the scene on the cross, Jesus will say: "it is finished." In control, he will turn it into something that brings freedom and liberation, empowering people and giving rise to the church.

Well, dear church, I don't expect that we fully understand the mystery of the cross. But I think we can embrace the principle at work in this act of salvation. God can turn something nasty into a life transformer. It happens. God takes evil intent and turns it on its head. It happens. That's what Jesus proclaims here when he asks God to be glorified. That's what at least some of us have experienced at certain points in our lives when the cards seemed stacked against us, when something that looked like the end turned out to be a beginning actually. The melody that accompanied those turning points sounded like a virtual choir, with all the dissonances and mistakes edited out and God glorified. In fact, on this 5th Sunday of Lent we have a premonition that nothing in life is able to defeat us.

The power of the cross! **Amen.**