

**A sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Jason Cashing at
Clarence Presbyterian Church on March 17, 2024.**

REBORN

<Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 51:1-12; John 12:20-33>

Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Holy One, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.

I am, at best, a brown thumb gardener, but I'll be the first to tell you even that is likely a generous observation. I take great joy, however, in watching the virtual planting and gardening of friends, notable among them Derrick Weston who has published a book on faith-based, justice-oriented recipes and reconnecting the church to the soil of creation. One of his greatest joys each year is to receive the annual seed catalog, and his joy is infectious; it becomes a vicarious joy to see his garden grow. Despite all his ministrations in the garden, he will be the first to tell you that his direct work is more about facilitating the best conditions possible; the actual work of growth in his garden has little to nothing to do with him. He embodies the philosophy of Paul that one may plant, another may tend, but it is God who gives the growth. I am, admittedly, somewhat envious of Derrick's abilities to tend the soil and engage in the work of life and growth which God brings about.

Nevertheless, despite how many plants I have inadvertently turned to compost over the years, there came a time when two peace lilies at the church were dying and nearly dead, and it was more than I could bear to simply toss them away. Both had been given in memory of long-standing church members at their funerals, which had both been within a few weeks of each other in the spring. I was feeling somewhat adventurous, so I determined to make an effort not to simply let them pass into memory, but to attempt to keep the peace lilies alive, flourishing, and flowering in memory of these church members, and as a sign of God's continued presence. Even though I had only the barest understandings of practical gardening, I determined that - at the least - I could attempt to replant them each in new, bigger pots with fresh soil. Beyond that, I was at a loss of anything else to try.

While agrarian pursuits are not my strong suit, Jesus knew that such an understanding of life was commonplace in the lives of those to whom he preached. On several occasions he framed the work of the Kingdom of God and the ministry he was about in terms and parables related to seeds and their growth. And so, in response to the desire of some Greeks to be introduced, he offers a vegetative analogy, and one that is not unfamiliar to us, today. Or even to the disciples of the time, as they likely would have already heard a similar parable. Seemingly unconnected to the casual observer, we can see that this illustration is a concise summation of what Jesus is about, and as these new individuals come to him, he is able to share with them an overview of what it will mean to commit to and follow the Kingdom of God being realized, more and more fully each day. Furthermore, it is an overview of what is to come, in the very future.

In order to follow, in order to participate in the active realization of the Kingdom of God, one must die and be reborn.

Even when mystified by this reality, we as Christians today tend not to be too phased by this proclamation; we have lived our entire Christian lives with such a teaching. But for those who were hearing it directly from Jesus' lips, it would be less familiar. The parable of the seed would be known; applying to one's own life would less so.

The concept of resurrection was still a largely unknown concept. There were stories of it in the Hebrew Scriptures, and perhaps in other religious texts of other cultures, but it was still an abstract idea, and removed from the everyday practice of faith. Especially so in regards to the understandings of the Messiah. We'll speak more of this next week, but remember that the mental image of the Messiah held by the Jewish people in Jesus' time was that of a conquering hero who would come in and vanquish all opposition, without casualty. The idea that the Messiah must die, and be resurrected, was foreign to the conversation.

And yet, it was an idea that must, like a seed, take root and grow to fruition in order for the Kingdom of God to be fully realized. The faith of the people of God must be reborn.

Such a concept might seem overwhelming, but glimmers of this were already in place from the prophets of old and the teachings of Jesus up to this point. Jeremiah was notable in his prophecies regarding the renewed life of faith. Known as the Weeping Prophet, given his circumstances, Jeremiah speaks most directly to both the lament that the people of God felt in the exile and the hope of restoration that was to come.

Speaking to a populace caught up in exile, removed from Jerusalem and their home territories, removed - in their mind - from the presence and nearness of God, Jeremiah offers a new word. No longer, he proclaims, will the words of God be written on paper or parchment to be read on occasion. No longer will people need to learn of God in instructive lessons. No longer will the people be distanced from God, whether in reality or perception. For now, in the new reality, the presence of God will be with all the people and the words of God will be writ within each and every person.

Pete Seeger is perhaps one of the most well-recognized musicians of modern day. Even if you don't know that he is the musician of a song, you likely recognize the song itself. For instance, if I were to start singing "If I had a hammer, I'd hammer in the morning..." most of you would be able to complete the lyrics.

As Pete would tour and give concerts, he would sing the songs in their entirety. But as time went on, and Pete grew older, he fell more and more into the habit of merely beginning a song, offering up the first few lyrics, and then playing along while the crowd itself sang. The people in the crowd became the musicians themselves, for the words of his music was internalized in them.

This is what it would be like for the People of God. This is what it will be like for us. As our faith is reborn within us, as we are reborn in the fullness of the life that is to come, the music of creation, the words of God proclaiming value and worth, whispering love and acceptance, embodying life and vitality will be writ on the very fibers of our being. For everyone. For all the world. This is what was to come in the fullness of life realized on the other side of the resurrection. And this is not a one-time realization, but an ongoing, developing reality.

But first, in order for this new reality, the grain must die in the soil. Jesus was about to show that the fullness of life was going to be found on the other side of death, and that through his death and resurrection, the way would be opened and prepared for all others to pass through. This is not of our own doing, but is enabled in the One who brings us to life through his own life, death, and resurrection.

Miraculously, in my opinion, those peace lilies at church thrived once more. The flowers blossomed bigger and more vibrant than ever, and they lasted for many years to come, with some ongoing care and attention. But the rebirth, and the ongoing growth, was the work of God within them. As we approach the final movements of Lent, as we approach the fullness of Holy Week and Easter, we are about to realize all that God is continuing to do within us, within the church, and within the world. Life as we know it is about to be reborn. Amen.