

Lent 5 B 2021

John 12:20-33

A year ago,
We knew what we wanted.
We wanted to return.

We wanted to return
To the lives we had known,
To our familiar places and people
And everything we held dear.

Even those of us who said,
With a wry smile,
That we were made for quarantine,
Even those of us who said,
I have nothing to complain about,
Even those of us who said,
Maybe this will bring much-needed change,
Most of us, most of the time,
Wanted to return.

We wanted to return to church.
From the moment it began,
We wanted this time of exile to end.

But here we are,
Getting ready for another Holy Week and Easter.

For many of us,
This year has brought deeper sorrows
Than the absence from church.
And the absence from church
Has made those sorrows
Even harder to bear.

We have longed for community,
Longed for comfort.
Longed for the security of the known,
For the solace and strength and inspiration
We find in worshipping together
In the beauty of our sanctuary.
Longed, some of us,
To be sent back out into the world
To work and witness together

To the transforming power of God.
Longed, some of us,
To raise our voices
Together with those who cry out for justice.
Longed to raise our voices in song together.
Longed to wonder together
With the circle of children
Whom Jesus sets in our midst.

We are still the church,
But if we are truthful,
We long to be the church
We used to be.

And yet, it's been a year,
And though time has seemed to stand still,
Many things have changed,
Including our longings.

If you look deep within,
If you examine your heart and mind,
What is your longing now?

The church we become
When we return
Will be shaped by our longings.

If the longing is for things to be the same,
We will be disappointed.

If the longing is to see Jesus,
Then anything is possible.

There is a deep discernment
That is already stirring within us,
As within every church.
We are in the process of becoming,
Of reforming, reimagining,
Renewing.

And there is no better time for this than now.
The mystery of this season,
The mystery of the death and new life of Jesus,
Is the heart of our faith.
What happens in this time
Has the power to change our lives.

As we approach a second Holy Week and Easter,
We have a chance
To look within,
Around, and outside
And embrace the transformation as it is offered.

How will the next chapter of our story
Be shaped by our participation
In the great story
Of God's ultimate act of love?

One way to engage this question
Is by entering the gospel story
We hear today.

It's only a slender thread of a story;
It only offers a setting in which to hear the words of Jesus.
But there is just enough story to intrigue us,
If we are listening.
And we may want to listen closely;
It's a story where our patron, Andrew,
Leads the way to Jesus.
So it may show us something about ourselves.

Not much happens in this gospel moment,
But still, it offers us an invitation.
It's the moment when the story becomes our story.
Not simply as a parish dedicated to Andrew,
But as former outsiders,
the people who are only here
Because we were welcomed into the way of Jesus,
Welcomed by those who already belonged.

Jesus' mission and ministry has been among his own people,
Until this moment,
When Greeks, foreigners, Gentiles
Come looking for him.
They say to Philip,
The Greek-speaking disciple,
We wish to see Jesus.

Philip tells Andrew,
And together, they tell Jesus that foreigners,
The outsiders like us,
Have come to see him.
This is not an idle seeing,

Not eagerness for a spectacle.
For the Greeks,
Seeing is knowing.
Seeing is believing.

We wish to see Jesus.

When the people like us
Come looking for Jesus,
Then the time has come
For God's glory to be revealed.

But the revelation of God
Comes, perhaps, in a way the foreigners
Would never have expected.

Were they looking for wise teaching,
Ways of making peace with the troubles of the world?
Ways of understanding the mysteries of human life,
Or the complexity of creation?

What they found, instead,
Was a mystery so deep it defied rational explanation.
But Jesus points toward the mystery
With hints, image and invitation –
And challenge.

Jesus does not explain what he is going to do.
Instead, he offers an image.
The revealing of God's glory is like this:
Unless a seed falls to the earth and dies,
It remains just a single grain,
But if it dies, it bears much fruit.

As a seed cannot bring forth new life and growth
unless it gives itself up
and is transformed into something new,
so Jesus will give himself up to death
in order to transform life for all.

Having done this,
he invites us to join him
in self-offering and transformation.

If we can see Jesus like this,
Even catch a glimpse of him like this,

Then anything is possible.

The Greeks in today's story
Only wanted to see Jesus.
That genuine longing
Set in motion the great drama
Of self-offering,
Of falling to earth and dying,
So that new life can begin.

Is there a genuine longing like that among us?
Or are we looking elsewhere,
Looking for something or someone else
To ease the pain, satisfy the longing,
Fulfill our hopes?

If our longing is to go back,
To return to the way things used to be,
We will be disappointed.
We can't go back.

If our longing is to see Jesus,
Then the way ahead is clear.

It's not an easy road.
The seed really does relinquish all that it is
In order to bring forth something new,
Something bountiful and beautiful.

I believe this can happen for us,
As it can happen in churches and faith communities
All around us.

I believe this can happen for us,
If we can get clear about our deepest desire.

The church we become when we return
Will be shaped by our deepest longings.

If we wish to see Jesus,
To set our hopes on him and the way he offers,
If our desire is to follow him
Into new and abundant life,
He will reach out his hand
And gather us in again.

The way to that new life
Comes only when we let go the old life.

There is loss
To make way for the gift.
And because we are human,
There is regret, and sorrow.

We don't know yet what that means,
Nor can we.
We don't yet see what will need to change,
What we will need to let go.
Our task right now is only to create within and among ourselves
The openness to letting go
And to change.

And that comes when we look for,
See, and embrace the self-offering of Jesus.

The way of Jesus leads to the cross,
And if we follow him,
We go there with him in the days to come.
We see him lay down his life,
As a seed falls to the earth and dies.

And then,
By the greatest of mysteries,
There is new and abundant life.