

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Psalm 51:1-13

Hebrews 5:5-10

John 12:20-33

March 21, 2021  
Fifth Sunday in Lent

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I have started to really dislike the cold weather...and the rain...and the mud. I even put away my winter coats and sweaters the other day just to prove that I am officially over any temperatures below 65 degrees. It's like a switch that turns on every single year. One morning I wake up and decide that my winter is over.

Because of my stubborn resolve to will higher temperatures into being, I end up perpetually chilled and uncomfortable with a grumpy attitude and a growing impatience for sunshine and short sleeves. It's illogical, I know. But year after year, I go through the exact same emotions with the exact same results.

Yet, logically I know my yearly ritual of winter defiance would be much more manageable if I allowed myself a little extra time with my coats and sweaters. The hard truth of the matter is that there is simply no shortcut to summer. So, what does it mean to have patience through lingering days of cold weather? Do they have a purpose? I think they do.

Consider verse 24 from our Gospel reading: *<sup>24</sup>Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit."*

Jesus teaches that the time in darkness, in the depths of the earth, in the cold, these times are essential for life. It is only within the darkness that new life can be nurtured into being. A grain of wheat must fall to the earth, under the dirt, into the darkness. It must give up the life it once knew in the light. Because if it stayed there it would only stagnate and dry out, with nothing to nourish it and cultivate it, it becomes useless to anyone. But, if that grain of wheat makes the journey into the depths of darkness it has the opportunity to transform into something life giving...for itself and for others. If it dies, it bears fruit.

This was the first year I took this lesson to heart. Maybe quarantine made this lesson a little more profound. Back in January, Dee (our music director), encouraged me to notice the buds of the dogwood tree that have been holding on all winter. For some reason, I had always thought that the buds appeared in the spring. I had never looked that closely before. I just assumed nothing was going on during those cold, winter months except some form of forced hibernation.

But, instead, I saw that the buds actually appear during the shortest and darkest days of the year. It's in that darkness, that they cultivate life. What might have seemed like a stalled form of living, was actually the tree growing and becoming. As the days now are growing longer you can almost see the buds swelling in preparation for the beauty that they are quietly holding

inside. It's a hidden blessing. A promise growing in the darkness, determined to come back to life in a truly miraculous way. And it is there that God is working.

Jan Richardson, whose writing I have spent a lot of time with this Lenten season wrote about these hidden places where God's blessing is at work. She writes,

*"There is work that God needs to do in us in secret; out of sight, away from the glare of day, removed from public view. Yet God has a penchant for revelation, for bringing into the open what is within us. God's inward work is for the purpose of opening us outward. God draws us deep inside, then draws us back into the world to bear the fruit that comes when our inner lives are congruent with our outer ones."*

I think so many of us feel defeated when we find ourselves in darkness. When our winters linger and the challenges in our lives feel insurmountable. We grow impatient for resolution. We doubt if things will get better. We may get angry with God or with ourselves. We grow weary of the work.

But Jesus encourages us to hang on, to have hope, to allow ourselves to linger with confidence in the darkness knowing that the days will gradually grow lighter and warmer. God has a penchant for revelation and that revelation is at work in each of us to cultivate those parts of ourselves that need love and compassion and mercy. Those parts that have been broken or abandoned, those parts that have been sick or hopeless, those parts that have been washed with grief and fear.

What might God be trying to cultivate within you? Aren't we all so hungry for new life? I think the most beautiful thing about Jesus' teaching in our Gospel this morning is that it reminds us that we all have so much fruit to bear...your life has purpose and meaning and God is working within you to bless you into being.

I want to leave you with a poem from Jan Richardson's reflection on our Gospel.

### **Blessing the Seed**

by Jan Richardson

I should tell you  
at the outset:  
this blessing will require you  
to do some work.  
First you must simply  
let this blessing fall  
from your hand,  
as if it were a small thing  
you could easily let slip  
through your fingers,

as if it were not  
most precious to you,  
as if your life did not  
depend on it.

Next you must trust  
that this blessing knows  
where it is going,  
that it understands  
the ways of the dark,  
that it is wise  
to seasons  
and to times.

Then—  
and I know this blessing  
has already asked much  
of you—  
it is to be hoped that  
you will rest  
and learn  
that something is at work  
when all seems still,  
seems dormant,  
seems dead.

I promise you  
this blessing has not  
abandoned you.  
I promise you  
this blessing  
is on its way back  
to you.  
I promise you—  
when you are least  
expecting it,  
when you have given up  
your last hope—  
this blessing will rise  
green  
and whole  
and new.

Amen.