

**March 18.18**

**John 12:20-33**

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## Lifted Up

I was looking out onto the back yard this week, which has been, in turns—clear of snow/snow covered/clear of snow/then, snow covered again...and thinking about what is to come...looking forward so much now to the greening.

I suppose some of you have already seen some evidence-- maybe a few green tips of something or other on the warm side of the house or townhouse/apartment building/condo or even somewhere you travel in your everyday.

Each year, the Lenten season unfolds across this time of the waking earth when we have it in our minds that 'things' will 'come up' or burst forth in their proper time...we keep marking the rhythm of our lives this way...even though there has been much in this climate-changing time to prove otherwise. Still, every year, we anticipate a 'normal' year where everything will happen...lock-step...in it's proper order...and in it's 'right' time.

So—we go into our stories of winter giving way to Spring from all the years we can remember—recalling particular years when there was snow at Easter (we have certainly experienced that)...and, of course Easter is a bit of a moveable feast anyway. But remembering those years—and whether there was ice on the lakes and ponds or on our streets—how the excitement, related to emerging Spring was marked by definitive signs nevertheless--in time...brings back the memory of anticipation and so much else.

As we have marked the days of the Lenten season, we are mindful as well that even the language of our liturgy has to shift somewhat according to where we are with the changing earth as it is marked to coincide with the waking of creation after a long, hard winter...as Jesus ultimately emerges from the tomb to new life...just as creation is rubbing the sleep from her eyes.

But what a gift Spring is to us—whenever it comes! The gift of more light in itself lifts some of the heaviness off our chests, especially if our experience of winter-darkness is that it pulls us down.

This is the 'backward life' of a coming Lenten Spring. Life, as we know, normally ends in death—all living things will meet death. But Spring is a reminder that the opposite is also true—that life follows death...like the words of the Henry Vaughn poem from the 17<sup>th</sup> century, reminding all that Spring is a time...'when frosts are past/ the storms are gone/and backward life at last comes on.'

This backward, life-from-death in nature contradicts our normal expectations...but not in the realm of the Christian story.

So much of what Jesus says in John's gospel is symbolic and metaphorical—but his words in today's lection are so central to his mission and message—so much so that they appear in all four gospels (twice in Luke's gospel). So central are they,

that they take our attention—riveted to the image of a single grain of wheat--'very truly I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life will lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.'

Well, there are still those Christians who 'give up' or 'sacrifice' something for Lent as a hoped-for outward expression of an inward transformation, part of the Lenten journey....so to give up something is to relinquish it—to renounce it—to forfeit or lose it, or, as Jesus says...'to die to it'...and he hints at the ultimate 'loss' anyone might experience—to give up life as normally lived in the world in order to gain a newly enriched life. Conversely—then--to grasp, to clutch, to try to control every variable of life—this can feel, over time, like a death and loss.

So, in speaking with some friends and colleagues about Lenten things...to try and discern what they were thinking of as 'Lenten' in this time, I heard of practices that included 'giving up' things like certain sweets or alcohol...some spoke of trying to give up on grasping at things in life—that in the long run don't matter...I heard some shared understanding of being 'mindful' or of having a 'Lenten state of mind'...of adding faith practices like, more intentional prayer or charitable giving...or more personally, letting go those things

that drag at your life..that pull at you or keep you from your best self...a difficult memory—a past failure—anger at parents or children— expectations of others—a broken relationship. It might be that there is a need to relinquish control of some kind—or an opening of clutched hands and the release of the anxiety we hold over things like time and money.

The giving of our hearts...this Lenten season, both symbolically-with these little hearts-in the jar that we've been giving to friends and family and coworkers and neighbours for many different reasons...and with our actions, as with #Do1NiceThing are part of the Lenten practices that have focussed our attentions on what it means to exist in the heart of a loving God and to, in turn, express that love in the world...all while we continue to walk the road to Jerusalem...knowing what is to come...

We have experienced deeply Lenten days in our history as a church, so we have some knowledge of what loss is...what it means. Individually--and in our own particular way... we have at times, experienced the sort of Lent that made us wonder if Easter would ever come again...when the image of the wilderness spoke to us as at no other time...The season of Lent embodies all of this.

The Jesus of John's gospel appears to know what is coming for him—prescient of the course his life would take.

When some people from Greece approach Philip and say they wish to see Jesus—Philip first goes to Andrew and then they both go to Jesus with the request. You might imagine Jesus

looking past Philip and Andrew to those who were waiting for him...but he doesn't go to them. It has been suggested that there is a fascinating symmetry here at both ends of Jesus' life—here, as at the time of his birth, when Gentiles appear wishing to be presented to him.

In hearing distance of another group of people, Jesus speaks of what is to come—and then speaks of grain and dying—of losing one's life and keeping it—of hating and loving. And a thundering voice, John says, speaks of glory and Jesus speaks of being raised from the earth...Well, it speaks to us...

In the telling, we can almost see that group of people watching Jesus leave them—walking away from them—their faces showing confusion at all that has been said—not knowing what lies ahead—and down the days of history we are hearing John's words again, bringing us to mind that we are the Easter people...on the other side of knowing. And unlike those 1<sup>st</sup> century seekers, we know what is coming now—we know how Jesus will be lifted up—the giving over—the suffering he will endure—the sorrow of his followers—all the darkness and death...and then—Life, again--the reason we are Christians.



The season of Lent can feel like an eternity in some respects...and just a flash in others...but we are coming close to Holy week now...one more candle left on our Communion Table...that will be Palm Sunday...when we will sing our Hosannas and share in the Table, reminding each other of what we know as Easter people...that darkness comes for a night and then—the Light..the last of our Lenten journey to Easter...lifted up to Life. Amen.