

Lent 5

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St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, OH

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In today's gospel, Jesus is strongly pointing his listeners, which includes us, to the approaching actions of Good Friday, to the cross.

And the cross is both a symbol and an entryway, and as such it offers us a choice. So let's talk about that choice and what is at stake in it.

First of all, God's time is not limited or linear like our time, but eternal.

And in this time-less way of the sacred, we ourselves, here and now, are headed toward the cross. Not only in this Lenten season as Good Friday approaches, but *with* Christ, as participants, along with his 1st century witnesses. Not just to remember or commemorate events from long ago and far away, but to enter the Paschal Mystery.

There is a theological word for this kind of remembering: anamnesis.

Anamnesis can refer to the totality of our liturgy at the table, and as well to specific memorial prayers said over the Eucharist - words most of you will recognize such as, "On the night he was handed over to suffering and death, our Lord Jesus Christ took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it..." etc.

The anamnesis also includes Jesus far-ranging invitation: "Do this for the remembrance of me."

This anamnesis of the Eucharist, of the cross, is not a passive process but one we are invited to participate in:

- the journey from death into life,
- the journey from false understanding of being in a self-contained life separate from God; to full awareness of being in eternal life, the timelessness of the sacred Truth, in and with God, a part of all of life.
- the journey from fear and deep anxiety in being disjointed from the truth, from our true home; to resting in a peace that passes understanding that comes from living in awakened truth, a promise of Christ.

And again I want to underscore, we have a choice about this journey.

We are free to, like many witnesses in Jesus's time, stand at a distance from the cross; to be distracted and pre-occupied in the final days of Lent and Holy Week

or

to be all in: engaged, invested, open, prayerful, attentive, curious, trusting. To be available to the grace that Christ is offering us in the journey from death into life.

To understand what that means, and what's at stake in our choice, let's take a closer look at some of Jesus's words from today's gospel.

Jesus said: "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."

Are we willing to be broken apart like the husk of a grain of wheat, and lose our current perceived contained identity to be transformed into something we find hard to imagine or believe in?

Jesus also made two statements referring to "this world." He said
"... those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life."

And regarding the approaching cross "now is the judgment of this world, now the ruler of this world will be driven out."

The Greek word for "world" used here is *kosmos*.

Kosmos does not refer to the created, manifest world that we can see, but to what biblical commentator Charles Campbell called "the fallen realm that exists in estrangement from God and is organized in opposition to God's purposes."

Five minutes spent perusing any news feed clearly reveals that we are living in a "fallen realm" - a deeply troubled and confused world where so many believe themselves to be estranged. From God, from one another, from the wider whole of life in which we are all miraculously alive with magnificent God-given powers and freedoms to love and imagine and to care for and celebrate one another. This is an estrangement that triggers so much fear and violence.

In this way our world IS organized in opposition to God's purposes,
we might say in opposition to the true Goodness and highest Truth about us, our magnificent God-given powers and freedoms that are tragically underused - causing so much suffering.

So our choice is: Do we want to passively remain a part of this?

Or do we want to enter the radical transformation represented by the cross? To go all in.

We cannot on our own make a grain of wheat become a plant that bears fruit. We are part of something bigger than our perceived selves. We can only plant the seed and provide conditions in which it can grow, and in our case those conditions include saying Yes to engage in a highly inconvenient process that we don't truly understand or even know if we believe in.

But in that process your *very experience* tells you that you are held in love, and by grace being drawn toward a greater something that is more alive and at peace and loving than our current lives.

So. What do we want to do?

It's important to understand that our deep entrapment in this *kosmos*, this fallen realm, is powerful.

For example, one way our world is organized in opposition to God's purposes is what biblical scholar Walter Wink¹ called "the myth of redemptive violence." Ironically enough, he found some insights about this by observing children's cartoons, ones with violence like *Popeye* and *Looney Tunes*.

He noticed the same repetitive pattern happened in every show.

There's "an indestructible hero" who is opposed to a villain who can't be redeemed and who is "equally indestructible." Nothing can kill the hero, but for most of the story "the hero suffers terribly and appears hopelessly doomed, until miraculously, the hero breaks free, vanquishes the villain, and restores order - until the next episode."

The format he wrote, "never varies. Neither party ever gains any insight or learns from these encounters. They never sit down and discuss their differences."

But he also noticed something else that was deeply intriguing.

The cartoon pattern echoed an ancient creation myth, where earth and humans were created out of warring gods and violence.

It's a story that appeared in ancient Babylon around 1250 BCE, and showed up in various forms as far away as Syria, Phoenicia, Egypt, Greece, Rome, Germany, Ireland, India, and China. That's how entrenched in time and location this myth of redemptive violence is implanted: the deeply engrained belief that violence saves us, that war brings peace, that domination is our salvation and safety.

¹ Walter Wink (1935-2012) was an American biblical scholar, theologian, and peace activist who wrote extensively about the dark powers that undermine human life and the social, economic, and political systems that embody those powers.

Wink wrote: “The Babylonian myth is far from finished. It is as universally present and earnestly believed today as at any time in its long and bloody history. It is the dominant myth in contemporary America. It enshrines the ritual practice of violence . . . and even those who seek to oppose its oppressive violence do so violently.

“It is played out in the structure of children’s cartoon shows, comics, video and computer games, movies. . . media, in sports, in nationalism, in militarism, in foreign policy, in televangelism, in the religious right, and in self-styled militia groups. What appears so innocuous in cartoons is, in fact, the mythic underpinnings of our violent society.”²

We are indoctrinated into a trance that encases us, restricts us, blinds us. The violence shows up en masse, and in our individual thoughts, words, and actions. And violence is just one aspect of the trance in this world of beings who believe themselves to be separate from the loving, beautiful, divine whole. So entrenched, so trapped, that we no longer see the falsehoods as anything, but just “how it is.” Just reality.

To “hate our life in this world” as Jesus said, is to choose to break free from this trance at all costs - a life-long process requiring deep commitment.

The cross, as Jesus said, enacts the judgment of this violent world, and seeks to drive out the ruler of it – the systems, the myths, the false understandings, the fear, the belief in separation, in “my life” alone.

There is great hope, grounded in Truth. Through divine grace and with our devotion, intention, choice, and commitment, we can be delivered from this awful confusion and to know and to live in and from what is True.

As we are transformed, soul by courageous soul, the world is transformed.

May we find hope in the open arms of Christ, extended on the cross for us in love, that we might choose to die to the encasement of who the world tells us we are, to arise in knowing we are alive in an eternal, living God. The dawn of Easter.

² <https://www2.goshen.edu/~joannab/women/wink99.pdf>