

The Fifth Sunday in Lent
March 21, 2021 Year B
The Episcopal Church of the Atonement
The Rev. Nancy Webb Stroud

Jeremiah 31:31-34, Psalm 51:1-13, Hebrews 5:1-10, John 12:20-33

We are now a full year into this pandemic experience. Last year, on the first Sunday in the season of spring, we were beginning to understand what quarantine meant. We were learning how to order our groceries on-line and discovering whether or not insurance covered pharmacy delivery. We had our first Zoom Morning Prayer service on March 22, 2020. We have learned how to do a lot of things that we never really wanted to know.

The season of Lent in 2020 began a journey into change. Some people who have been infected by the coronavirus are experiencing long-term physical consequences. More than half a million people in this country have died—parents, children, spouses, and friends who are no longer with us. Life has changed—for all of them and for all of us. This list goes on: a whole year of loss—schools and businesses and life-events fractured.

Of course, not all of it has been bad. Zoom has brought us face to face with friends and loved ones we haven't seen in years. Technology has allowed us to do things together that we thought were impossible. We have used less fossil fuel, and our hands have never been so clean!

All of this is to say that the lessons appointed for today are particularly appropriate. The season of Lent is often described as a journey. That description has made a lot of sense as we have journeyed through the pandemic from last Lent through this Lent. And our prayer for today begs God to help us like what we are going to get: *Grant your people grace to love what you command and desire what you promise*, we prayed just a few moments ago.

Do you know what we were really praying for? We were praying for the grace to accept change. We say that same prayer every year, just two weeks before Easter. We pray for God's grace to welcome the change that is coming. And we forget sometimes, how very hard change can be. In reading today's lessons, we cannot escape that Jesus is on a journey.

Jesus is on his way to the Cross. Jesus' journey of faithfulness and suffering is going to lead to change. How Jesus—how God—loves God's people is going to be forever changed by the events that we commemorate in the next few weeks. Our Holy Week and Easter celebrations will remind us of the transformation of Jesus—the baby born in the stable—the faithful son—the prophetic voice and present healer: Jesus will be transformed from God become human into resurrected God.

For our Psalm today, we recited the first half of Psalm 51—a song of penitence that we sang all the way through on Ash Wednesday. Our portion today ended on a hopeful note: *Give me the joy of your saving help again * and sustain me with your bountiful Spirit*. But the Psalm goes on, and the Psalmist recognizes that sin and sorrow has changed their world forever: *The sacrifice of God is a troubled spirit; * a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise*

(Psalm 51:18). It is a good bit of scripture to know, because if we have had any time to live at all, we have known heartbreak. This pandemic year, we all have known heartbreak, for sure.

The tradition is that the Psalms were written by the shepherd boy David, who became the mighty king of Israel. And we know that well-trained Jewish people—ones like Jesus—sang the Psalms by heart. To them, the heart was even more important than it is to us. For in addition to being that beating thing in the body that is linked to breath and life, the ancients believed to be the place of intelligence. To believe something with all of your heart was to know it—to know it with all the strength of life. *A broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.*

In today's first lesson the prophet Jeremiah tells the people that God wants to make a new covenant with them. This will replace the covenant of the Exodus—the covenant that was marked by the giving of the Law. The old covenant was that the people would follow the Law, and God would love them and give them life. The people have broken that covenant, says God, even though God has been faithful. So this time, God tells them that the covenant will be written on their hearts. There will not be a distance between the people and the law. "I will put my law within them. And I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. . . .they shall all know me." Because the word of God is on their hearts, the people will know God.

The writer Anne Lamott tells this little story about broken hearts:

There's a . . . story of a rabbi who always told his people that if they studied the Torah, it would put Scripture on their hearts. One of them asked, "Why *on* our hearts, and not *in* them?" The rabbi answered, "Only God can put Scripture inside. But reading sacred text can put it on your hearts, and then when your hearts break, the holy words will fall inside."

Anne Lamott, *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*, p. 73

The story that we hear in today's Gospel is about knowing God—about who knows God and how to know God. Jesus teaches about knowing God by talking about God's glory, and talking about death. It is, for me, the hardest part of the Gospel to understand, and it comes around every year at this time: how can death show God's glory?

Death is about loss and heartbreak. The Psalmist says it, *A broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.* That sounds like toleration, not glory. Glory is full of light and power. The image of God in glory is one of power and radiance, of weight and import, of angels and trumpets. "Glory to God in the highest," sing the angels in the pre-dawn of Christmas morning. God has come down from heaven to live as one of us, and the skies are bright with God's glory, even if the sun has not yet arisen.

But the Baby born in that stable, bathed in God's glory, is Jesus, and the grown-up Jesus in our Gospel reading today is resolute. Jesus explains how God's glory will be revealed in his suffering and death. God's glory is the most important thing. The little analogy of the grain of wheat is a good one: when the grain is buried and breaks open, it gives up being a single grain, and it allows a whole new plant to grow: a stalk that carries a head of new, young kernels. The

old grain is gone, and abundance replaces it. So it is with us, Jesus tells us. If we want this thing called “eternal life” we must be prepared to lose the life that we know.

But this is not easy. “Now my soul is troubled,” he says. I would guess that every one of us could share a story about early heartbreak. But the older we get, the more relationships we make, the more people we love and care for, the more connected we are to the world we live in, the easier it is for our hearts to break.

This pandemic year has broken our hearts. But how can we love with broken hearts? This week, we have seen again that we have a choice. The appalling murders in Atlanta are additions to the long list of horrors caused by those who claim broken hearts. We don’t know the whole story, but early reports indicate that this week’s atrocities were committed by someone who was broken-hearted by his personal sins and by the losses of the pandemic—and so he chose targets who signified his sorrow—women who seemed to be stand-ins for his lack of loving relationships—Asians who seemed to him to be symbols of the coronavirus. We know for sure that the murderer is just one of many who are choosing to target Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. Is it all a pandemic-related targeting? It doesn’t take too long to find the evidence of a long history of Anti-Asian racism in the history of our nation. And racism is the way of death.

The Atlanta murderer chose the way of death. We can make that choice. This is not the first time that our Sunday prayers include a list of those targeted and killed. But Jeremiah tells us that God is going to make a new covenant with the people: “I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts.” Maybe the only way for us to know God’s law—God’s love—is for our hearts to be broken. We can choose to love better, and more fully, with our broken hearts.

“Now my soul is troubled,” says Jesus. When Jesus reveals his own sorrow over his coming suffering and death, I don’t know if I can stand it. Jesus has done nothing but take care of people. He changes water into wine and turns a wedding party into a great feast. He takes a few loaves and a couple of fish and feeds a whole crowd. He dines with the outcast; he heals the sick; he even raises the dead. He does all that, and only, he tells us, to show God’s glory.

Jesus does not shrink from what he has come to do. The entire reason that Jesus comes is to glorify God, and he will do whatever he has to do for that to happen, even though it troubles his soul. “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” Jesus says this to the whole crowd—to the Jews who have come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, to the Greeks who have come to enjoy the holiday time, to his disciples, and now, today, to all of us who hear the Gospel.

Jesus has come down to earth from God, to show God’s glory—and now he will be lifted up to God again—but the only way that will happen is if he is lifted on the Cross. And it will break the heart of every one of us who watches it. When Jesus is lifted on the Cross, he draws all of us to himself. And we, the ones with the broken hearts, are drawn to new life, eternal life in God.

Amen.