

Deep in the Earth: Called to Deep Growth
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NPMC, March 21, 2021 – Lent 5

Scripture: Jeremiah 31:31-34; John 12:20-33 (NRSV)

Jeremiah 31:31-34

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt--a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: 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. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the LORD," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

John 12:20-33

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of [Humanity] to be glorified. 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. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor. "Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say--' Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

It's that time of year again: the time for thinking about seeds – at least, if you're someone who gardens. They really are remarkable, seeds. Somehow, these tiny, dry, seemingly lifeless little things, in the right conditions, are able to grow into food that nourishes us, body, mind, and spirit. We're dependent on these tiny things for our very lives; they sustain us, year after year. I'm reminded especially of the story of the 850-year-old squash seeds.¹ Have you heard about this? It started during a dig in 2008 on the Menominee Reservation in Wisconsin, when archaeologists discovered the seeds inside a small clay container. They were carbon dated to 850 years ago – talk about heirloom seeds! This was a type of squash – now dubbed "Gete-okosomin" (Anishinaabe for "cool old squash") – that was considered extinct, and there was

¹ <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/extinct-squash-revived-370727>

uncertainty about whether the seeds were still “viable.” But Winona LaDuke, who is a First Nations seed keeper, has been sharing the seeds with gardeners in the U.S. and Canada, including a group of students at Canadian Mennonite University in Winnipeg, who were able to successfully grow squash from these seeds. Imagine – for almost a



millennium, these seeds were buried and forgotten, and yet they still held the power of life within them, and were able to grow into food for contemporary people to eat! So with nothing but a few

seeds, these students were able to bring an extinct traditional First Nations food back to life. It's the gardening version of a resurrection. No wonder seeds are such a compelling metaphor in the Bible.

Our passage from the Gospel of John for today has Jesus preaching about seeds, using them as an illustration of what he is about to undergo as he prepares to face the cross. He says to his disciples, “The hour has come for the Son of [Humanity] to be glorified. 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. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life” (John 12:23-25). So in the same way that a seed must be buried deep in the earth in order to grow and bear fruit, Jesus is saying, he must die and be buried, in order to be raised again, to bring new life to all through the resurrection. If you've ever grown anything from seed, you know this: there is that time when you place the seed under the soil, unseen in the darkness, give it water and light, and trust that something is happening; that new life is

taking root, though you can't see it. Without any evidence or guarantees, you have to have faith that the seed is sprouting, that the plant and then the fruit will eventually appear.

Jesus is speaking to his disciples right after something very public has happened. In John, this passage comes right after Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem on a donkey, right after all the palm branches have been waved and the cloaks have been spread on the road for his donkey to walk upon, right after this parody of a military victory parade. At that moment, right after doing the most overtly Messianic (and very political) thing he has done in his ministry so far, he feels the need to clarify for his disciples what's about to happen. Maybe they think this is the moment when Jesus will take over politically and be crowned king! They must have had all kinds of expectations of glory. But here Jesus speaks of seeds to remind them that what's about to happen is something very different, something that at first won't look very glorious at all, but will look like a violent death on a cross and the crushing failure of the Jesus movement. Like a buried seed, they will have no guarantees that anything life-giving is to come from these events. They just have to trust that all is not lost.

Notice, though, how confident Jesus is in this Gospel! He speaks of the cross as his moment to be "glorified." He admits that his "soul is troubled" – that he is afraid of the events that are about to occur, but does not let that fear hold him back. He says, "Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say – 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour" (v. 27). Interestingly, the prayer that he rejects here – "Father, save me from this hour" – sounds very close to what he prays in the Garden of Gethsemane in the other three Gospels! In those accounts, Jesus is

much more troubled, and grieves in fear for what is about to happen to him. In John, Jesus easily overcomes his fears and even gets verbal reassurance directly from God. Even his language for the cross – language of being “lifted up” – is tied closely to his



being raised from the dead on the third day.

Though they seem to be opposites, the cross and the resurrection are as linked as the planting and sprouting of a seed, and its bearing of good fruit.

This is the cross as the Tree of Life, and it brought to mind that Mexican proverb: “they tried to bury us; they didn’t know we were seeds.”

But Jesus’ comparisons here also bring up an important aspect of growth that we maybe forget. We tend to think about growth as a good thing, but that doesn’t mean it’s easy. Growing pains are a reality, especially when we’re forced to grow by circumstances beyond our control. Change can feel like death; in other words, we might not know we’re seeds; we might think we’re buried, when really we’re growing. This was certainly at play in the circumstances of the prophet Jeremiah’s time: the time of the exile in Babylon. The Israelites taken into exile were devastated at what had happened: at the conquering of their nation, especially the destruction of their glorious Temple in Jerusalem. By the waters of Babylon, they sat down and wept for Zion, for their memories of a Zion that no longer existed.

But Jeremiah steps in to tell the exiles that all is not lost. Two chapters earlier he has told them to “seek the peace” of the city where they are exiles, to grow gardens and raise families there (Jeremiah 29:4-7). Here, Jeremiah speaks more words of

encouragement. Yes, the old covenant is broken and their former way of worshipping God in the Temple is no more. But God is making a new covenant with them. This covenant – this relationship with God – does not depend on the Temple sacrificial system and these outward rituals alone, but is within them. God says, “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. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the LORD,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD” (v. 33-34). Jeremiah here articulates a dream of the covenant internalized, enlivening the people, nourishing their hearts and minds. In living out the covenant that has taken root in them, the people live out God’s ways, and flourish in doing so. This reminded me of Jesus’ other references to his good news as seeds, and his talk of his message taking root and growing in us.



I want to end with two more stories of growth and seeds. One is from a local artist named Monique Martin, who makes very realistic dandelions out of paper (you may have seen her work on display at Market Mall or currently downtown). She reflects on dandelions – often considered a weed – as a symbol of resilience and survival. They’re able to grow, for instance, right up through the cracks in concrete. Her art installation places dandelions growing in these harsh places, managing to bring bright spots of sunny yellow to bleak spaces. Since the pandemic began, this has taken on new meaning for her. Martin says, “We’re all having to be dandelions right now: strong and

resilient, and persevere Dandelions don't give up ... they grow wherever they want."²

The last story is from the 14th-century mystic Julian of Norwich, who lived through the time of the plague in Europe and offered many words of encouragement from her isolated room in a church during bleak times. She's the one who wrote, "All shall be well, and all shall be well, all manner of things shall be well."³ In one of her visions, she sees a tiny hazelnut – a type of seed! – that represents creation. This is what she says,

And in this he showed me a little thing, the quantity of a hazel nut, lying in the palm of my hand, as it seemed. And it was as round as any ball. I looked upon it with the eye of my understanding, and thought, 'What may this be?' And it was answered generally thus, 'It is all that is made.' I marveled how it might last, for I thought it might suddenly have fallen to nothing for littleness. And I was answered in my understanding: It lasts and ever shall, for God loves it. And so have all things their beginning by the love of God.

In this little thing I saw three properties. The first is that God made it. The second that God loves it. And the third, that God keeps it.⁴

To God, we are all, together with all of creation, as small as a tiny hazelnut. We could easily get lost or slip through the cosmic fingers that hold us. But God made us, God loves us, and God sustains us. Though small, we are held in God's love, in which we live and move and have our being. Though tiny, seemingly dormant seeds, we hold the power of life within us. Nourished by God's constant love, we take root and grow into images of that loving and life-giving God. AMEN

² See <https://thestarphoenix.com/news/local-news/a-symbol-of-resilience-monique-martins-paper-dandelions-fill-downtown-saskatoon>

³ See Carol Penner, "All Shall Be Well," *Anabaptist World* (Jan. 17, 2021), <https://anabaptistworld.org/all-shall-be-well/>

⁴ From Julian of Norwich (1342-1416), *Revelations of Divine Love*.