

The Hour Has Come

John 12: 20-33

Fifth Sunday in Lent

Pastor Deb Birkeland – March 22, 2015

The images that stay with us are often those we cherish from childhood. One image that I have is walking beside my father into a newly planted field of corn to check the progress of the plant life. My dad's hands were huge, and I remember the feel of my little hand engulfed into his. His legs were long, so I had to take two or three quick steps to keep up with him. His eyes would survey the field and choose a spot where we would stop and kneel. His hands moved the soil, pushing the dirt back and forth over a row of planted seed until something magical was exposed. Dad would point to a little sprout of a fragile plant that had broken through the deadened skin of the seed, and say, "Look," *this is how God gives us everything we need.*" Gently, he dislodged the seed to show me the root system that anchored the seed into the ground, and turned the seed to show me how the hard shell had rotted away so that new life could be set free. Together, we would replant the little sprout, trusting that in just a few more days, that field of corn would be a field of green seedlings bursting forth.

In our Gospel reading today we hear these words:

"The hour has come for the Son of Man 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." John 12: 23-24

Many times as I have gathered with a family prior to a funeral service for their loved one, I've shared these profound words from Jesus. This metaphor of life breaking forth out of apparent death is comforting, especially as we must let go of a loved one to death. This image of a grain of wheat falling unto the ground to die, yet destined to bear fruit beyond it's self, helps us see purpose and a future with hope even in the face of death. We need stories and images of faith that help us experience our God of life and hope, or despair would appear to win.

Recently, Actress Julianne Moore won an academy award for her portrayal of a brilliant university professor who faces early onset Alzheimer's disease with her family. If you haven't seen the movie, "Still Alice," or read the book, I highly recommend it. For it is not only revealing about the impact of this disease on her and her family, but it gives us a glimpse of new life sprouting from a seed of death. Given some of the horrific, dooms day movies that are out there, this is one where resurrection and hope are stronger than darkness.

We might think that resurrection is only something we can experience in an eternal life to come, but John's gospel is clear that the glorified promise of life that was unleashed in the passion of Christ is something we can experience now. What might that look like, feel like, taste or sound like now...in this human context we all share?

Life giving images can be found in the story of "Still Alice." As the movie begins, Alice and her husband have successful careers of their own. Their marriage has a comfortable rhythm as they mutually support one another, and launch their adult children. Alice is highly respected for her expertise in linguistics and a sought after speaker. She has high expectations, and pushes her children to follow her example. This expectation, however, irritates her youngest daughter who wants to follow her own path, which doesn't include academia. As they are in conflict, the observer is drawn into this human family as if it were our own.

But then, everything changes. Alice is out running after work and suddenly realizes that she has no idea how to find her way home. She's not just lost...she is clueless. Panicked, she runs with growing fear recognizing that something is very wrong. Step by step, we watch as her capacity to engage with the details of daily life slip away. Alice pursues testing to name her terror, and learns that she has a genetic condition that will not only rob her of brain capacity, but will also be passed to her children. The news impacts their family with no less punch than an actual death.

Now some might say, I don't want to watch something so sad and tragic, but this story, while poignant, is far from tragic. For if we observe Alice's journey through eyes of faith, we can see all the cycles of life that Jesus showed to us in his own journey among us...incarnation, death, resurrection and even ascension. Let me explain.

Julianne Moore takes us into the process of losing her ability to remember and function. We witness the break down of her life's work and identity. Yet, as her world diminishes into the safety of home and family, we discover with Alice that there is a new life growing out of the one that is breaking down. Alice's humanity slowly, but graciously takes on a new incarnation. The Alice she was, is diminishing, but she is STILL Alice...a person of courage and conviction; a wife and mother, and a child of God. We watch as this new fragile person takes root and struggles against darkness and fear. Resurrection comes as Alice discovers a new kind of life, a moment-by-moment life in the "NOW" where she is content in ways her academic professional life couldn't match.

In a very poignant scene, Alice stumbles upon an earlier video she had recorded on her computer to inform herself how to take her own life when she got to the point of not being able to answer three basic questions. Alice obediently tries to follow through with the instruction. However, Alice can no longer multi-task, so she returns again and again to re-watch the video. The viewer holds her breath, wondering whether the PAST Alice...the one who was so efficient and capable, will succeed in ending the journey of this NEW Alice, who in many ways is actually quite content and alive. Suddenly the doorbell rings and Alice is interrupted. She turns from the complexity to end her life, to embrace the simple joy of a friend coming in the door and gives her a warm hug. Life and love win.

Theologically, as we watch Alice reclaim her core identity as a person of worth; we are reminded of the incarnation: how God became flesh, and embraced the human condition as a vulnerable baby. We watch Alice face a cross of death as her career is wrenched away and we remember a dying Jesus, humiliated, yet filled with compassion. We witness a resurrection into a new way of being Alice, and remember

how our Risen Lord walked the earth breathing peace and sending the Holy Spirit. And, as the movie ends, we watch Alice walking the beach by the sea, opening her life to a new depth of living with those she loves, and with the creator that loves her still...she is after all, still Alice.

You see, the story doesn't stop with resurrection. And neither does the story of Jesus. Alice is Still Alice, but she is also God's child. In her vulnerability and brokenness, she is drawn into an intimacy with God that is more fulfilling than life itself.

Jesus said that without death, there could be no fruit. The cross is what MUST happen when God becomes human. It is the ultimate outcome of the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us. Yet, its fruit promises more than resurrection, it promises glory! "Glorify me Father!" asks Jesus. Make the promise come! Jesus returns to reveal his glory to his disciples...and then, 40 days later, he ascends to the Father...he goes home! Why? Why not stay on earth in his newly resurrected body that can no longer die? Isn't resurrection enough? No... not for our God who wants to give us EVERYTHING that Jesus had...His VERY SELF! His very Heart!

The hour has come. Phillip said, "*Lord, show us the Father!*" Some Greeks (representing the world God so loves that he sends his only begotten son) clamor..."*We want to see Jesus!*" We want MORE than life, we want the REAL Living God, our Father! John's good news is not focused so much on the Cross, but upon "*being lifted up*" with Christ into a relationship of intimate knowing and discipleship. John declares that God's salvation for the world he loves so much is accomplished, and open to all who believe.

Because we are lifted up with Jesus into the very bosom of God's endless love, we can trust that the ruler of this world is cast out and the love of God glorified in Jesus is unleashed as fruit that draws all people to God. Jesus' final words to Peter were "*Feed my sheep, tend my lambs.*" We can love one another by sharing our very lives in service, as our three new Stephen Ministers are preparing to do as they are commissioned today to share fruit of care among us.

Jesus was lifted to a cross, rose from the dead, and ascended to the Father's open arms. His love draws all people out of darkness into light and life so we can know intimacy with the living God beyond what we can imagine NOW. He has sent the Holy Spirit to bring forth new life, we can answer a call to discipleship that is more fruitful than we could ever fathom. For truly, God so loved the world...that he gave Jesus, who lived, died, rose and ascended to show us the way into the heart of God. Praise be to God! Amen.