

“Lay It Down In Order to Rise Up”  
B, Lent Five; John 12:20-33  
March 18, 2018; 10:00 am  
Congregational UCC, Buena Vista, CO  
Rev. Rebecca K. Poos

John 12:20-33 The Message (MSG)

A Grain of Wheat Must Die

<sup>20-21</sup> There were some Greeks in town who had come up to worship at the Feast. They approached Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee: “Sir, we want to see Jesus. Can you help us?”

<sup>22-23</sup> Philip went and told Andrew. Andrew and Philip together told Jesus. Jesus answered, “Time’s up. The time has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.

<sup>24-25</sup> “Listen carefully: Unless a grain of wheat is buried in the ground, dead to the world, it is never any more than a grain of wheat. But if it is buried, it sprouts and reproduces itself many times over. In the same way, anyone who holds on to life just as it is destroys that life. But if you let it go, reckless in your love, you’ll have it forever, real and eternal.

<sup>26</sup> “If any of you wants to serve me, then follow me. Then you’ll be where I am, ready to serve at a moment’s notice. The Father will honor and reward anyone who serves me.

<sup>27-28</sup> “Right now I am storm-tossed. And what am I going to say? ‘Father, get me out of this’? No, this is why I came in the first place. I’ll say, ‘Father, put your glory on display.’”

A voice came out of the sky: “I have glorified it, and I’ll glorify it again.”

<sup>29</sup> The listening crowd said, “Thunder!”

Others said, “An angel spoke to him!”

<sup>30-33</sup> Jesus said, “The voice didn’t come for me but for you. At this moment the world is in crisis. Now Satan, the ruler of this world, will be thrown out. And I, as I am lifted up from the earth, will attract everyone to me and gather them around me.” He put it this way to show how he was going to be put to death.

Good news: a grain of wheat remains no more than a single grain unless it is dropped into the ground and dies. If it does die, then it produces many grains.

## **I. INTO THE MIDST OF THE JOURNEY**

Well, *there's* a simple little passage, with a meaning that's immediately clear! Whaddya think?! Many scholars and preachers have admitted to not *quite* being sure what this one is all about. Or, maybe it's about *many* things!

Jesus sure likes to use imagery. Metaphor. Symbolism. Make us “read between the lines.” What is he *saying* here, exactly? I'll admit it, here and now! I had to read this passage over—several times in several translations—to even *begin* to grasp even some of the meaning. It's rich. And ripe. And elusive.....

Let's try to unpack it together—this passage that finds Jesus in the *midst* of the journey. Because *we* are in the midst of the journey, too. Smack dab in the last stages of Lent, creeping ever so slowly—or perhaps too quickly if you haven't got your Easter eggs and music ready yet!—toward our final Lenten Service, Palm Sunday, then Holy Week—with Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and the Easter Vigil—until we finally arrive at that glorious Easter morning!

## **II. JESUS FACING JERUSALEM**

Where we are, in the midst of the journey now, is “facing Jerusalem.” Jesus has been “facing Jerusalem” for awhile now. Predicting what is to come, looking ahead to what he knows he must do and face—the direction he must go. He must go there, but he does have a choice. He *could* turn and traipse off into the Galilean countryside, continue his healing and teaching there and go off the radar for awhile or for forever. Maybe “hole up” in the homes of friends if the authorities keep looking for him.

But he *doesn't* run and hide. He turns *toward* Jerusalem. Toward the challenge to his message. *Toward* the opposing forces. Toward denial and betrayal of him and all that he stands for. Toward the ones who would put barriers up between the people and God—whether the purity code, sabbath laws or corrupt wheeling and dealing in the Temple—bilking the poor who just wanted to offer their gifts and sacrifices at the altar with integrity.

In our reading today, he's already *in* Jerusalem, but not *quite* in the heat of the mire and muck just *yet*. It's early in the week—in that fateful week. He's come up for the Festival, along with thousands of other pilgrims. He's been *warned* that the authorities are looking for him and his cronies.

The chief priests and Pharisees have already given orders that *anyone* who knew where Jesus was should let them know—there's a warrant out for his arrest! Friends and foes alike were holding betting pools as to

whether he'd even make the trip or take off for the hills!

### **III. FACING OUR OWN JERUSALEM**

Have you ever had to “face Jerusalem?” I don't mean, have you ever traveled to the Holy Land and included that hallowed and conflicted city as a stop on a whirlwind tour!

Have you ever felt compelled to turn *toward* a place and a situation that you knew would not be easy, pleasant or even come out alive on the other side? Compelled—either by external forces, or a voice from within—that nudged you to *face* it, delve-in, not run away?

Have you done it *willingly*, or with much fear and trepidation? Have you wondered if this was truly “of God?” If God was *with* you on the journey? Or maybe you were striking out on your own this time—going against what all your wise friends, family and confidantes would advise?

### **IV. EASY AS CAKE!**

Have you ever wanted to “take the easy way out”? To shortcut the hard path? But then, had this niggling feeling that the easy way wasn't the *best* way? The right path?

Here's a fun story from the annals of history about taking the easy way not going so well.

### **TOO EASY!**

Years ago, when the Betty Crocker Company first began selling their cake mixes, they offered a product which only needed water. All you had to do was add water to the mix which came in the box, and you would get a perfect, delicious cake every time.

It bombed. No one bought it and the company couldn't understand why, so they commissioned a study which brought back a surprising answer. It seemed that people weren't buying the cake mix because it was too easy. They didn't *want* to be totally excluded from the work of preparing a cake; they wanted to feel that they were contributing something to it.

So, Betty Crocker changed the formula and required the customer to add an egg in *addition* to water. Immediately, the new cake mix was a huge success.

But then, even that didn't last long. In the 1950s, sales of cake mix flattened out, companies closed up shop, and executives at those that survived racked their brains to figure out where they were going wrong.

Someone came on the scene yet again and “proclaimed that housewives needed to feel like a more integral part of the creative process.”

But this time the innovation that saved the cake mix wasn't the egg—it was the icing on the cake! And not just a layer of white frosting, but “box covers, recipes, and home-making magazines showcased

elaborate cake constructions that looked like **miniature football fields**, or European castles, or three-ring circuses.

It had to be complicated. That was it! We as human beings may not “ask for trouble,” but we definitely need to have challenge and make a contribution if we’re going to find meaning in this life! The studies found that “though you’re not actually baking a cake, with the creative touch added, you’re *making this cake yours!*”

(Source: *Sermons.com* and *Bon Appetit.com*)

## **V. JESUS: “HAVE YOUR CAKE AND EAT IT TOO!”**

Jesus “gets this.” He gets that when things are too easy for us, *we* don’t really “get it.” He gets—from his own life, experience, death and new life—that shortcuts and denial and avoidance just don’t cut it. We need to put our hearts into everything we do in order to “experience the Kingdom within.” Now, this doesn’t mean we *look* for trouble, or that Jesus pulls out a recipe for suffering for us when we want to follow him and live the abundant life he offers.

Jesus said, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies it bears much fruit.

"The one who loves their life will lose it, while the one who hates their life in this world will keep it." It's true in life isn't it? If we are going to get anything out of it we have to invest ourselves in it.

The Message:

<sup>24-25</sup> “Listen carefully: Unless a grain of wheat is buried in the ground, dead to the world, it is never any more than a grain of wheat. But if it is buried, it sprouts and reproduces itself many times over. In the same way, anyone who holds on to life just as it is destroys that life. But if you let it go, reckless in your love, you’ll have it forever, real and eternal.

## **VI. DYING TO LIVE**

Jesus uses images, metaphors, symbols to teach us. Maybe not cake and eggs and frosting as symbols, but his teachings are rich with everyday images we can grasp and make sense of –it’s a true gift to us!

What are the images that guide us as we face *our* own Jerusalems? As we *consider* our lives—seeds full of promise, that have to be buried and die in order to sprout up anew and live—facing challenges of burial, darkness and struggle before finding the sun and the light?

**Rev. Molly Baskette** says of our spiritual journey:

“Here’s the rub: even Jesus couldn’t escape the hot mess and the cold pain of betrayal, abandonment, and death. If God had to do things the hard way, why should we be exempt?”

Most of our spiritual progress, at least once we reach adulthood, is made by lurching from crisis to crisis, grief to grief, and somehow surviving all of them.

The fact of the cross says there is something spiritually important about the hard things that happen. God may or may not send them, but God will absolutely use them, when they happen, to transform us and teach us what we need to know next. There’s no resurrection without a crucifixion.

## JOHN PAVLOVITZ

John Pavlovitz, pastor and author, speaking of his own crisis moment in his faith journey – wondering if he could keep on with his calling, his ministry, after he’d just been fired from the church he was serving because he “just didn’t fit”:

“This terrible moment wasn’t a landing pad but a launching pad, a spectacular gift wrapped in apparent disaster. Had I known it then, I would have danced out the door.”

....later, I decided that I needed to finish the funeral for my past and start looking for the life again. I decided that I could either wallow in the rejection and hopelessness which really wanted to have their way with me, or I could do what I’d been doing since this faith journey began: trusting that God *is*, that God is good, and that loving people will lead me to where I need to be without knowing it. “

Gravity began to loosen its grip on my spirit. I started to feel lighter. I began to feel less like I was falling and more like I was flying. I was learning to trust God again. I was walking *through* apparent disasters looking for hope. (Build a Bigger Table, pgs. 50ff)

**Mark Nepo**, in *The Book of Awakening* (p. 87), says that in the tough times – the times that feel like we’re drowning:

“We often move *away* from pain, which is helpful only before being hurt. Once in pain, it seems the only way out is through. Like someone falling off a boat, struggling to stay above the water only makes things worse. We must accept we are there and settle enough so we can be carried by the deep. The willingness to do this is the genesis of faith, the giving over to currents larger than us. *Even fallen leaves float in lakes, demonstrating how surrender can hold us up.*”

“We can learn from the leaves that ducks swim around. In life as in water, when we curl up or flail

we sink. When we spread and go still, we are carried by the largest sea of all: the sea of grace that flows steadily beneath the turmoil of events. And just as fish can't see the ocean they live in, we can't quite see the spirit that sustains us.

### **GRACIE and The CLOCK**

A preacher named King Duncan in *Collected Sermons*, shares this insight:

“Remember Gracie Allen, who played the scatterbrained wife in a comedy team with her husband George Burns? Once, Gracie called in a repairman to fix her electric clock. The repairman fiddled with it for a while and then said, "There's nothing wrong with the clock; you didn't have it plugged in." Gracie replied, "I don't want to waste electricity, so I only plug it in when I want to know what time it is.”

“That's an apt description of many of us. We save our religion for a rainy day. We go about unplugged and wonder why our lives are so devoid of power. How sad. Christian faith is not something to be plugged in when it is convenient or when it is necessary. The Christian life is lived daily. There is a cost involved.”

(King Duncan, *Collected Sermons*)

**Christine Caine:** “When you're in a dark place, you sometimes tend to think you've been buried. Perhaps you've been planted.”

**Maya Angelou:** “Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better.”

### **VII. LAY IT DOWN IN ORDER TO RISE UP**

And so, we face Jerusalem. Together. Knowing the road ahead will have trials and tribulations, but also knowing that retreating to the hills is not an option. That the easy way is not the life-giving way. That challenges must be faced, and that the only way through is through.

We are not alone, and we are not without a rich source of wisdom and images from creation and one another's experiences to help us frame our journey and face our challenges head-on.

For we are, and can choose to consider *all* these things:

A grain of wheat, falling to the ground, joining with others and springing to new life together. Clinging to life or laying it down? Leaves curling up in a desperate clutch, or floating in surrender on the water, held safe by the Spirit? Darkness winning the day or light that shines and brings insight. An apparent disaster or a spectacular gift? Falling or flying? A landing pad or a launching pad? Curling up in a desperate clutch, or floating in surrender on the water, held safe by the Spirit? Creative cake-baking, plugging in the electricity just when you need it or staying connected?

Life is to be found when we lay down our lives. When the seed falls to the ground and is not left alone to die, but is planted and brought to life again by its Creator.

And a final inspiration: looking up to the stars.

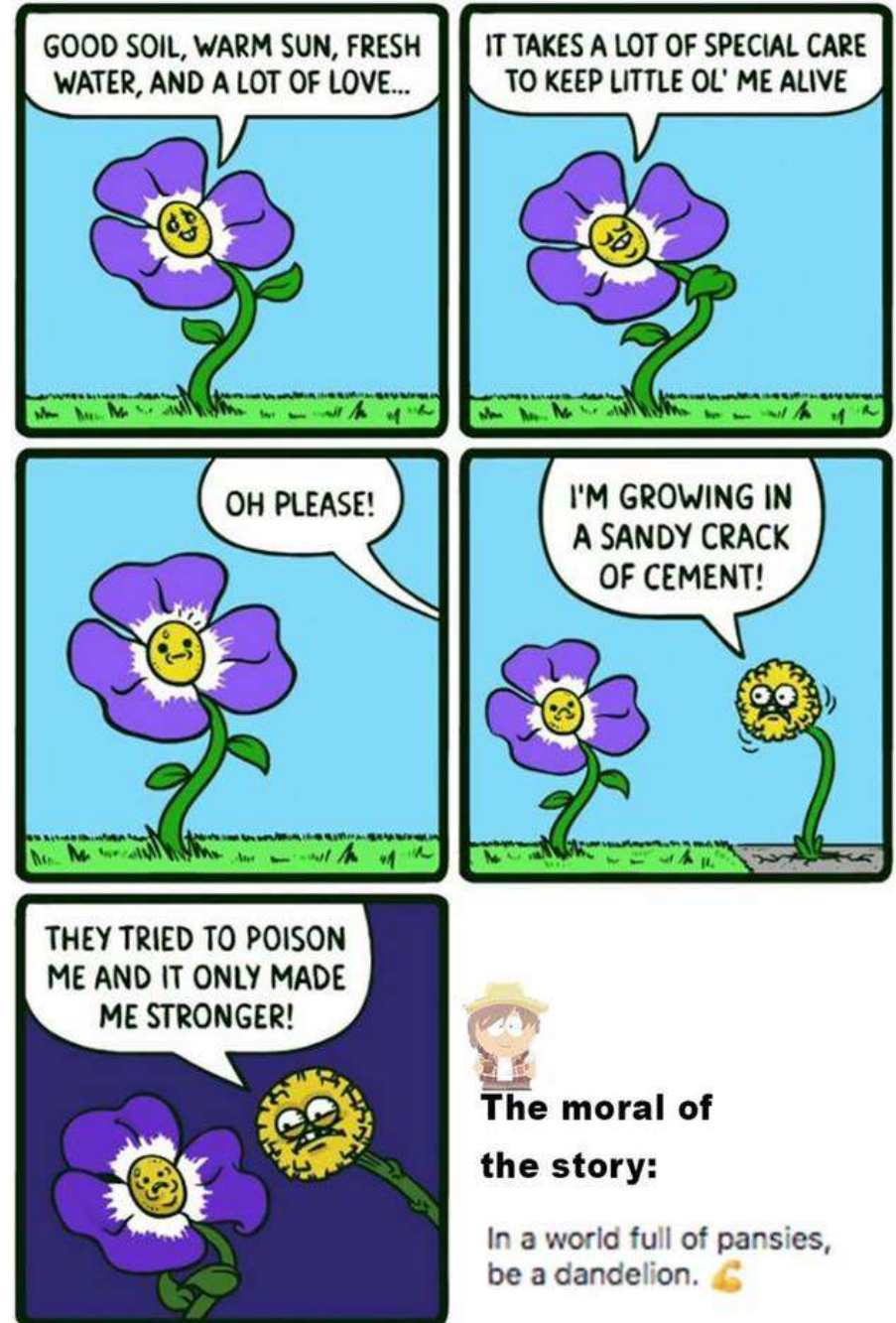
Stephen Hawking, one of the great minds of our times and intricately connected to the natural world, passed away this week while we were contemplating this question of facing challenges with courage; of relating to seeds and death and looking for new life:

“Remember to look up at the stars and not down at your feet. Try to make sense of what you see and wonder about what makes the universe exist. Be curious. And however difficult life may seem, there is always something you can do and succeed at. It matters that you don't just give up.” Amen.

**In the bulb there is a flower; in the seed, an apple tree;  
In cocoons, a hidden promise: butterflies will soon be free!  
In the cold and snow of winter there's a spring that waits to be,  
Unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.**

**There's a song in every silence, seeking word and melody;  
There's a dawn in every darkness, bringing hope to you and me.  
From the past will come the future; what it holds, a mystery,  
Unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.**

**In our end is our beginning; in our time, infinity;  
In our doubt there is believing; in our life, eternity,  
In our death, a resurrection; at the last, a victory,  
Unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.**



**The moral of the story:**

In a world full of pansies, be a dandelion. 🌻