



Woodcut reproduction by Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld (1794–1872).

Lent 5

Take the opportunity to welcome the participants once again. We are now deep into Lent, and from this point on, the journey to the cross gains both momentum and intensity.

Prayer

God of the covenant, in the glory of the cross your Son embraced death and broke its hold over your people. In this time of prayer and reflection, draw all people to yourself, that we who confess Jesus as Lord may put aside the deeds of death and accept the life of your kingdom. Amen.

Teaching Moment

Some context for the reading from Jeremiah would be helpful before actually looking at the text.

The Babylonians have destroyed the temple in Jerusalem, and the people of Israel, God's chosen people, are in exile in Babylon. The people are facing a major crisis. They have lost their freedom, their way of life, their homes and their temple, which was the symbol of who and whose they were. They have lost their connection with their past, their present was oppressive and they hold little hope for their future.

The big three prophets, Jeremiah, Isaiah and Ezekiel, have a consistent theme with respect to all

their problems. They state unequivocally that the collapse of their way of life grew out of their failure to live out the covenantal relationship with God. They failed at keeping the Torah relationship, which was about loving God and loving neighbour. Instead, they got caught up in unbridled acquisitiveness; they turned Jerusalem into a gated community where the elite lived in comfort off the hard labours of the rest; and they employed militarism to feed their greed. Rather than caring for the widows, the orphans and the aliens, they exploited them.

After all his words of warning and rebuke, Jeremiah now offers words of hope that their suffering, exploitation and despair would soon come to an end and God would take them home to start again. New life and new freedom would come from a renewed Torah relationship between God and God's people.

With this context in mind, ask a participant to read the following passage. Let the group sit with it in quiet reflection, and then have it read again.

Jeremiah 31:31–34

A New Covenant

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.

In buzz groups of two to three people, talk about the following questions (10 minutes).

- 1) What is going on in this reading?
The reference to the covenant given to the people through Moses on Sinai is very clear. Jeremiah promises a new or renewed covenant with the People of Israel.
- 2) What is the difference between a covenant written on stone tablets and one that is written on the hearts of the people?

Walter Wangerin, Jr., an American author and educator, wrote a wonderful story called “Matthew, Seven, Eight, and Nine” about how he tried to stop his son Matthew from stealing comic books. He tried various uses of the law over several years and continued to fail. Finally, he resorted to something he rarely used: a spanking. He did it deliberately, almost ritualistically, and he was so upset when he finished that he left the room and wept. After pulling himself back together, he went in to Matthew and hugged him. A number of years later, Matthew and his mother were doing some general reminiscing, and Matthew happened to bring up the time when he kept stealing comic books. “And you know why I finally stopped?” he asked. “Sure,” she said, “because Dad finally spanked you.” “No!” replied Matthew, “No, because Dad cried.”

Wangerin concludes with these words: “Hereafter, let every accuser of my son reckon with the mercy of God, and fall into a heap, and fail. For love accomplished what the law could not, through tears more powerful than Sinai” (*The Manger Is Empty*, Walter Wangerin, Jr., pp. 116–132).

- 3) What difference does the “heart” make in the relationship between God and God's people?

As has become the pattern, record any thoughts or insights that arise from these brief conversations.

Then ask a participant to read the following passage. Again, allow time for quiet reflection and then have the passage read again, if possible in a different translation.

John 12:20–33

Some Greeks Wish to See Jesus

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 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. 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 honour.

Jesus Speaks about His Death

“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.

In small groups, ask the participants to engage with the following questions (10–15 minutes):

- 4) What might be the significance of “Greeks” wanting to see Jesus? Why does Jesus respond the way he did to news of their request?
- 5) What do you think Jesus was getting at with his image of a grain of wheat dying to bring new life?
- 6) How do you make sense of the statement, “Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life”?

Record any thoughts or discoveries that emerge from the conversations.

An Alternative Exercise

In small groups, have the participants talk about this gospel scene (some questions like those above might help them focus). Then have participants draw group pictures to illustrate what they believe is going on. Note that the drawings are a group effort. While some may be reluctant to draw, all have the opportunity to offer opinions and thoughts about what might be depicted.

This approach opens up the scriptures for group members in surprising ways as they enter into the story from a totally different direction.

Following the exercise of creating their illustrations, one member of each group then explains to the rest of the participants what they have drawn and why.

The emphasis is on getting into the story, not creating works of art worthy of hanging in a gallery. Make it fun. Obviously there needs to be newsprint and markers (multi-coloured) available for this exercise (20 minutes at least).

Teaching Moment

It is important to say once again that the crucifixion and resurrection are treated by John as two parts of one event. More to the point, the crucifixion/resurrection event is the purpose, the reason, for Jesus' being. The incarnation was the first action in God's purpose in reconciling humanity to himself—writing a new covenant on their hearts if you will. For John, though, the cross is the moment that matters most in the Christ event. The sense of glorification on the cross, that Jesus was most fully revealed as Messiah on the cross, is certainly a key to any reading of, or discussion about, John and/or John's Jesus.

The question arises, however: just why is this happening? Why was all of Jesus' life and ministry directed to this hour—to this violent conclusion? The answer, at least in part, lies in the fact that John's gospel account is written through the lens of the resurrection. His focus was theological more than historical. It is less a historical recounting of events than a drawing of the "big picture." For John, right from the prologue, Jesus is the cosmic Christ whose mission was to reconcile the whole world to God: "For God so loved the world that He sent his Son...."

Walter Wink, an influential theological thinker over the last 40 years, concludes that the world that God sent his Son into was held hostage by political, military and economic forces that dominated and oppressed humanity through violence and death. Wink suggests that the "world" has evolved into a "System" that dehumanizes and leads humanity to death, not life. Jesus' death by crucifixion was a judgment, not on every human being, but on the System that oppressed human beings and isolated them from their God. The judgment of the System was not enough. The ones who drove the System—those who used violence, collaboration and death to dominate God's creation—were to be "driven out." The allusion to an exorcism is unmistakable. A cosmic battle for humanity is at play here.

Simply put, on the cross the System is laid bare for all to see. In the light of day, the domination culture and the violence and oppression that accompany it are exposed for all people, for all time to see. In that exposing of evil, there is judgment and the possibility of redemption and reconciliation. From a cosmic position, John echoes the sentiment of the Synoptic Gospel writers: "This is God's world not Caesar's!"

(Walter Wink, *Engaging Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*, Fortress Press, 1992, and Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium*, Doubleday, 1999.)

With this "big picture" material set before them, have the participants discuss the following questions (15 minutes):

- 7) Both the reading from Jeremiah and the passage from John are directed toward those who are suffering the consequences of domination, exploitation and violence. How then would Jesus' violent death help to write a new covenant on the hearts of God's people?
- 8) Where is the hope for something better?
- 9) How did his death draw all people to him?

Take the time to record the highlights and any insights that emerge. These are difficult questions to wrestle with. If it seems appropriate, a few minutes probing and pushing in plenary might be useful

Taking It Home

Clearly God's kingdom, while initiated by Jesus, is still very much a work in progress. The System, to borrow Wink's expression, is still very much in evidence. Domination through violence and economic oppression are still operative in every corner of the world. Unbridled acquisitiveness and militarism are still factors in the dehumanizing of God's people. The notion of Jerusalem as a "gated

community” is a painful metaphor for the world we live in today. As we read the words of our scripture passages today, we can hear the voice of Jesus speaking to us in our time and in our unique place and context: “Those who love their life will lose it, and those who hate their life in this world [System] will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am there will my servant be also.”

In small groups, take the time to deal with the following questions (20-30 minutes):

- 10) In our own context, what are the things that hold us captive and lead us in the way of death rather than life?
- 11) How might Jesus’ crucifixion write a new covenant on our hearts? What difference might that make to you personally? What difference could it make to God’s people today?
- 12) If Jesus, from the cross, did indeed challenge, expose and delegitimize the dehumanizing

structures and actions that tore down and destroyed the life of God’s people, then what does it mean for those who claim to be followers to really follow? What action might Jesus be calling us to today?

Record any insights or discoveries that may have emerged from these questions.

Wrap-up

Take the opportunity to affirm the efforts of the group. These were very challenging readings to work with. The fact that they are well known does not change the difficulty in making some sense of them.

Close with prayer for one another, the church and those we are called to serve.

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