

## **"Some Questions Before Holy Week"**

The Fifth Sunday in Lent

17 March 2024

Trinity+Saint Peter's Episcopal Church  
San Francisco, California

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Jeremiah 31:31-34

Psalm 51:1-13

Hebrews 5:5-10

St. John 12:20-33

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### **I. How do we examine ourselves to see the faith and the Covenant that is within us?**

The Covenant had been in Israel's mind for an eternity – first to Abraham, and then to his children, to Moses and the chosen people – this covenantal tradition was remembered through the ages. Now it is Jeremiah who remembers it and who sees it in a new light. He sees it as an agreement that will be an internal understanding on the part of the people, and evidenced in the laws of the fixed order of the universe. We can see that in the verses that follow our reading for this morning.

*"Thus says the LORD, Who gives the sun to light the day, moon and stars to light the night, Who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar, whose name is LORD of hosts: If ever this fixed order gives way before me - oracle of the LORD - Then would the offspring of Israel cease as a people before me forever."*

Jeremiah sees beyond the traditions of the covenant, cut in the animals in Abraham's sacrifice, written in the Law of Moses, celebrated in the blessings given to David. Jeremiah sees an internalized covenant known by all. The evidence will be seen in creation – in the moon and stars. The fixed order of the universe will speak to the covenant that is eternally made between God and God's people. We need to see that covenant within ourselves, written on our hearts, known in our hearts and seen in our actions. It should be evidence to those who live around us of God's presence with us, and God's gift to us known in this Holy Week.

What promises and gifts has God given you? What mercies and what forgiveness have been seen in your lives? How have others given evidence of this covenant and promise to you in the realities of their own lives. It is time for silence and an internal examination of the covenant in our lives.

## II. How do we examine ourselves to know confession and then forgiveness?

Every Sunday we take the time of confess our sins and to hear the words of absolution. The Psalm for this morning sets this theme for us.

*Have mercy on me, O God, according to your loving-kindness.  
in your great compassion blot out my offenses.  
Wash me through and through from my wickedness.  
and cleanse me from my sin.  
For I know my transgressions,  
and my sin is ever before me.*

It is helpful to know the ascription of this psalm, "For the lead player, a David psalm, upon Nathan the prophet's coming to him when he had come to bed with Bathsheba." The situation will make certain passages and the general tenor of the psalm more understandable.

Should you want to understand the situation with David and Nathan the prophet better we need to remember the story (actually a parable) of David and Bathsheba. The psalm itself is confessional in nature, with David asking God for forgiveness for his adultery with Bathsheba. This is, however, a frame into which the author places his text on the lips of David. It was most likely composed a great deal of time after David. There is almost a chronology of sin and forgiveness in the psalm: "a sinner from my mother's womb," "you look deep within me," "make me understand your Wisdom," "purge me...wash me," "that the body you have broken may rejoice." There are seven penitential psalms used in the Liturgy of the Church, and this is a primary example. For Jews, the 13<sup>th</sup> verse is used to introduce the penitential prayer during Yom Kippur. This psalm underscores the importance of forgiveness in both the Jewish and Christian traditions. The creation of a "new heart" is well stated after hearing of the internalized covenant that Jeremiah proposes. So when I invite you to the Confession of Sins, followed by a bit of silence, use the time to examine yourself, and know what you need to confess and of what you need to be forgiven.

## III. How do we examine ourselves to see priestly actions that we can give to others?

The author of Hebrews looks at Jesus through two lenses. The first lens is where he quotes Psalm 2:7, "You are my Son, today I have begotten you," and Psalm 110:4, "You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek." The second lens is that of suffering as the author depicts Jesus at prayer in the midst of his suffering. The Melchizedek reference is understandable in so many ways. First, he was the "King of Righteousness." Such a reference not only connects Jesus to the Davidic tradition, and the hopes for a righteous and just king, but also to Jesus' offering of himself in death on the cross. As the hymn says, "both victim and priest". Secondly there is the remembrance in the Abram story that Melchizedek greets Abram with both bread and wine. The author of Hebrews sees in that scene a Eucharistic connection. The priest, Jesus, offering both body and blood in the bread and wine of the Eucharistic table. In this Hebrews sees Jesus as the "source of eternal salvation."

What we need to think about is how we offer ourselves to other, how we might share gifts of food, clothing, healing, and comfort. How have you done these things in your Lenten almsgiving? We need to be like Melchizedek, offering to the stranger the gifts of bread and wine, of welcome.

#### IV. How do we examine ourselves to know that we are journeying with Jesus?

It is quite telling that this Gospel reading which signals Jesus' approach to final things, is witnessed by Gentiles, believers who are seeking Jesus. So we see here Jesus' ministry to both Israel and to Gentiles who seek him. We hear more of this in John when Jesus talks about the "one flock" into which all peoples will be invited. There is also the sense of the time, and the plan that has been made evident, "*The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.*" So we are at the cusp here, and next Sunday in the Liturgy of the Passion we will follow Jesus in his journey to the cross. This first section has a verse to which I am very much attracted, "*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.*" Some years ago while serving as Interim Rector at Saint Mark's Church in Berkeley, California, I decided to draw some Stations of the Cross. I remembered this verse and used it as an illustration for the Ninth Station – Jesus falls the third time. The grain, the gospel, the Christ, the soil – all seemed to speak to me at this station.

The next paragraph in this reading is a fine meditation on life and death. Not only must Jesus deal with the reality of his dying, so must we all. It was made even more clear to us during the times of Pandemic and trying to survive. Remember how many things and situations that we took for granted that were wrested from us, and how many people and connections became dearer to us. We have been detached from a great deal, and now we can in our Lent and the coming Holy Week meditate not on what we have given up, but what has been detached from us. Our service now is following Jesus on his journey of suffering and his departing from only knowing his own grief.

Even here there is temptation, "*Father, save me from this hour?*" No, Jesus embraces the cross and is destiny. And in the midst of this temptation and conundrum, Jesus hears the Voice again, "*I have glorified it, and will glorify it again.*" It is good to see Jesus in the grain, to see him in his humanity, in his weakness – for in all of that we can begin to see our redeemed selves. Jesus will be lifted up, and in being lifted up will be seen by all, and all will be drawn to him. There will be not only the lifting up on the cross, but also the being lifted up in the resurrection. That is our hope – the grain bearing fruit. So let us in the days ahead, follow him in the Liturgies of Holy Week.

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