

In the Bulb there is a Flower

Sermon for November 17, 2019

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*'There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars,
and on the earth distress among nations
Luke 21:25*

Grace to you and peace from the one who is and the one who was and the one who is to come!

We are now five weeks into the stewardship drive, and next Sunday we will wrap it up. Our theme this year is YOU ARE THE SEED, and for a number of Sundays now we have offered reflections on the theme of the seed: the seeds we plant; the seeds entrusted to us; seeds of hope; seeds of courage; seeds of faith; seeds of new life.

And now, today, we have arrived at the moment, the breathtaking and awesome moment, where the seed is placed into the ground. And then it dies. This is a moment of great mystery. The seed is placed into the ground and falls utterly apart. And then out of this falling apart emerges new life. This moment is beautifully captured in the hymn "In the Bulb There Is a Flower".

*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.*

I have always loved this hymn and I love it even more now because we recently sang it at the funeral of my good friend Nancy. Nancy was a very special person, full of life and adventure, she was unstoppable, always burned the candle at both ends, very athletic and fun loving, and also incredibly smart and very compassionate. And then she unexpectedly died in her sleep. We had just celebrated her 61st birthday when her son found her dead one morning.

A huge crowd gathered for her memorial service and we sang this song, "In the Bulb There Is a Flower". It was Nancy's favorite song, and it was the perfect song to sing at her memorial service. It is a song full of images of new life. Flowers emerge from bulbs apple trees from seed... butterflies from cocoons and winter turns to spring.

But all this beautiful new life comes with a price tag: the new life comes out of struggle, and

often it comes out of the destruction of the old life. Even child-birth has this aspect of destruction: First of all there is the birth-process itself, which is not for the faint of heart; but what's more, by giving birth or by adopting a child, a new life begins and the old life - life as the parents knew - ends. Before parenthood, they were free to come and go as they pleased, to stay up late or sleep in late, to travel and enjoy outings. But with a new child in the home, all of this changes. With the tiny new bundle a new life has arrived and the old life is gone.

In the case of child-birth this change is sweetened by the joy which the new life brings. Many young mothers are deliriously happy as they hold their new baby in their arms. Even sleep-deprived parents are giddy and over-joyed. (The giddiness sometimes wears off in the teenage years).

Another example of new life emerging from struggle is transgender surgery or rather gender confirmation surgery. This process requires a great deal of struggle, courage, and perseverance, but those who have undergone it, usually say that the outcome is worth the suffering.

Or think about the struggle for human rights: none of the human rights we enjoy today--which we sometimes take for granted--none of them have tumbled down from heaven and found their way into our law books all by themselves. All of them have been won at great and sometimes terrible cost by those who have struggled to make them real.

All new life comes out of struggle, but the struggle is not always sweetened by a good outcome. Think about how the forest renews itself through wild-fires. Wild-fires are a natural feature of our Western landscape. Many trees and plants depend on fires to regenerate themselves. But now people have made their home in the wilderness, they have replaced the forest with homes and ranches, but the fires still occur. The fires come as they always have and destroy everything in their path. In fact, the fires come now more often and burn more severely, because of human activity. And often they burn out of control.

To those affected by the fires, all the life-giving aspects of the fire have been totally eclipsed by the loss of human life, the trauma suffered by the victims, the heroic efforts required of the firefighters and the immense costs, both financial and emotional – of the fires. And in this way, the fires which have been a life-giving friend to the forest have become a death-dealing enemy for us.

All new life comes out of struggle, but not all struggle leads to new life. There are certain kinds of destruction that are only death-dealing and never life-giving: the holocaust; the untold wars and genocides; the brutal terror attacks; the deadly mass shootings; but also natural disasters such as hurricanes and earthquakes.

Our 24-hour news cycle takes hold of these terrifying events and brings them into our living-

rooms multiplied by a 1000 times. We get so overwhelmed by images and stories of destruction that we live in a constant state of anxiety and dread. In the end we lose all perspective and we experience destruction only as bad and terrifying, and we forget the other side of destruction, which is renewing and life-giving.

And then we come to church and what do we hear? More destruction! The destruction of our entire world as we know it. In today's gospel reading we heard: *Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven.* Luke 21:10-11

And we don't like it. I know I don't like it. We want happy-pappy songs and positive messages. And we don't realize that this gospel with its terrifying images IS actually a positive message, it is good news, although it requires a second look before we realize that it is good news.

We have been reading a portion of chapter 21 from the gospel of Luke, and as this chapter unfolds, the images become even more scary; a few verses later we read:

*'There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars,
and on the earth distress among nations
confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves.
People will faint from fear and foreboding
of what is coming upon the world,
for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.
Then they will see "the Son of Man coming in a cloud"
with power and great glory.
Now when these things begin to take place,
stand up and raise your heads,
because your redemption is drawing near.'*
Luke 21: 25-28

Do you know when Jesus said these words? They were spoken just a few days before his death, shortly after he had entered the holy city of Jerusalem. He had entered in a triumphant procession, a procession which the church reenacts each year on Palm Sunday.

Once they were inside the Holy City, his disciples looked around in fascination: the architecture was stunning; the buildings magnificent; the temple glorious. "Look at the temple, they said, how it is adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God..." "Just wait," Jesus said, "the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another, all will be thrown down." And then, a few days later, Jesus was arrested and falsely accused and nailed to the cross. And then he died. And then he was buried. In this way he became the temple which was thrown down and destroyed, with not one

stone left upon another.

But he also became a seed planted into the ground. And just as new life comes from a dying seed, so too new life came from the death of Christ. A new life - not just for Jesus but for the whole world, and even the whole universe.

Out of the death of Christ came a new creation: a world where wisdom, compassion, and justice are at home. A world where all suffering has been wiped out. A world where the forests and the waters and all wildlife are restored and renewed. A world where power is used differently--power for good, for healing, creation care. A world of peace, where even the struggle between animals will be unnecessary, where the wolf will dwell with the lamb, and where joy will never again be marred by pain and suffering. A world where all sorrow, sighing, and grief are utterly unknown.

Jesus spoke of this new creation again and again. He gave birth to this new creation the way a mother gives birth to a child: with great pain and suffering, but also with a final and glorious triumph.

This new creation has already begun but it is not yet completed. We can taste a bit of this new creation even now: in the sacraments; in acts of grace and mercy; in moments of deep prayer; in the beauty of nature; the companionship of animals; the comfort of friendship; the mystery of love.

These experiences are small bits compared to the immensity of the new creation which is yet to unfold, but these small bits are precious, and we must hold on to them, especially in times of worry and anxiety.

When the 24-hour news cycles fill our living rooms with news of terror and destruction, when anxiety and dread overwhelm us, when we lose all perspective and experience destruction only as bad and never as life-giving, then these little glimpses of the new world will help us remember the other side of destruction, the side which is renewing and creative.

When we dip our finger in the baptismal font, when we kneel at the altar and taste the bread of tomorrow, when we sip from the cup of salvation, then perhaps these small acts can give us something to hold fast, in the face of the sometimes terrifying mystery of the birth of the new creation and our own rebirth as well.

May you know yourself held in the safe and loving embrace of God in all your endings and beginnings.

Amen.