

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Psalm 119:9-16

Hebrews 5:5-10

John 12:20-33

Nobody likes to talk about death...or think about death...or speculate about death. It's not a conversation starter. It's more of a conversation closer. It doesn't matter whether the subject of death comes up as a theoretical construct or whether it's about the speculation of what it will be like. Certainly no one wants to talk about their own death even though they know it is inevitable. It is the unknown. It is a novel experience...one we've never had before. As far as we know, we have never been alive on this earth before and we will never be alive on it again. Death is mysterious and scary. If it is the death of someone we love, it means loss...sometimes very profound loss as our lives change forever without the one we love. And that loss can be very painful...physically, emotionally, spiritually and mentally...painful. Death is as much a mystery as life itself. And it's just as real. Nobody likes to talk about death...or hear about death...but here is Jesus just a few days before Passover in Jerusalem telling his disciples and followers, "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." He's telling them that the crucifixion is coming. He's telling them that he will die soon...and not a quiet and peaceful death, but an excruciatingly painful and humiliating death in front of crowds of people gawking at him and taunting him in the most cruel ways possible. It's small wonder that his disciples can't hear him. It's too horrifying a scene to even imagine. All four of the gospels tell the story about the end of Jesus' life and most of their descriptions are similar...with a few notable exceptions in the gospel of John. In Matthew, Mark and Luke Jesus prays in the Garden of Gethsemane just before he is arrested and he begs God to "let this cup pass from me." In a very human way, Jesus wants to get out of this cruel and painful death. But in the end, he yields to God and says, "Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet not what I want, but what you want." (Mark 14:36). The gospel of Matthew tells this version, "And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want." (Matthew 26:39) And this version in the gospel according to Luke: "Then he withdrew from them about a stone's throw, knelt down, and prayed, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet not my will but yours be done." Then an angel from heaven appeared to him and gave him strength. In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like 2 great drops of blood falling down on the ground. (Luke: 22:41-43) Jesus knew what was coming. He didn't just sense that his life would be ending soon; he knew that it was about to end and he knew exactly how it would happen. Imagine, if you can, what it would be like to be able to see all these nightmarish events before they happened. In a sense, you live through them twice! But in the gospel of John, Jesus' comments on what is about to happen to him are different. "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.' This is a far more resolute Jesus. He is not resigned to his fate. He is stepping into his mission...determined to see it to completion. So what is this mission? All of us have heard an explanation for what it was that Jesus did by willingly going to the crucifixion and allowing that to happen. For most of us, this mission that Jesus carried out was one that

would provide the forgiveness of individual sins and provide a kind of substitutionary atonement through which Jesus takes on the divine punishment that human beings deserve in order to relieve us of our condemnation and guilt.¹ This is the rationale and explanation that has been explained to us since we were old enough to know about death and Jesus on the cross. He died for our sins. He died because we are sinful creatures. But the gospel of John has a slightly different approach to understanding Jesus' mission. In John 12:20-33, Jesus' crucifixion judges 'the world' and drives out the 'ruler of the world'...the one we know as Satan...the same one that Jesus contended with for forty days in the wilderness...and defeated. The crucifixion is the final showdown. According to commentator Charles Campbell, "the world" here is not the same as God's creation; it is the fallen realm that exists in estrangement from God and is organized in opposition to God's purposes. It might be more aptly named "The System" of structures and institutions that aggressively shape the lives of human beings and holds us captive. "The System" is driven by a spirit or force who is the ruler and the one we refer to as Satan or the Devil. What are the characteristics of the system that hold us captive and take us down the path of death? They are driven by the same motivations and works of the flesh that lead to death. They are described to us in Galatians when St. Paul explains that they are: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing...and I expect St. Paul would accept our adding greed and perhaps even consumerism. We buy and we buy and we consume and we consume even though we know that the consumption is not giving us life and may very well be killing others working in sweatshops in other parts of the world. We also live in The System that creates and supports hierarchies of winners and losers. The System is a zero sum game. If somebody wins, somebody else must lose. And it perpetuates racism and sexism and ageism. The rules are not fair! And they are maintained by violence in order to bring order out of chaos by violently defeating 'the other.' We see aspects of this phenomenon every night on the evening news and every morning while we eat our breakfast. We've come to accept that 'that's the way it is; that's the way it's always been; and that's the way it always will be.' The System dictates that the way to deal with threats from the enemy is by violently defeating 'the other'...by violently eliminating them...as the System in his day tried to do to Jesus who refused to defend himself and refused to fight back or engage the System on their terms. He explained only that he is not from this World or this System. He is from another kingdom. Jesus says, "If my kingdom were like this System, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here." (John 18:36) In other words, the system that Jesus operates within is very different from the System that we find in this world. Jesus' rejection of violence is precisely what distinguishes his way from the way of the System. On the cross Jesus publicly and dramatically judges the System by exposing it for what it is—not the divine regent of the world, but an opponent of God's purposes; not the way of life, but the way of death. By exposing the System in this way Jesus 'casts out' its driving spirit; for once we see the system for what it is, we begin to be set free from its captivating ways. We are set free to die to a life shaped by the System, in order to live fully and freely in the way of Jesus. (John 12:25-26).² So when Jesus says, "Those who love their life will lose it [they will turn their backs on the System], and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.[because they didn't walk away from the System]" He's talking about a System that indulges all those impulses that draw us away from God and kills us in the process; not a System that honors God and thrives. Jesus is inviting us into a new way of life; a way of life that defies the System with an alternative way of life...and he painstakingly taught us all the things we needed to do to live his way of life. We can understand the cross now in a different light and we can see the way of life Jesus modelled for us in the midst of a violent world. Historically, we know of mere

mortals who have chosen the way of life that Jesus has taught us...the way of life that he wants us to follow. We can look at some of the most famous...Mahatma Gandhi who wrestled India out of the grip of the British Empire and never made one violent move. We know about Nelson Mandela who destroyed the system of apartheid in South Africa without a single act of violence. And in our own country, we know and some of us watched the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. bring the underbelly of racism out into the open where it could be exposed for the hateful scourge that it is. Jesus defeated evil on the cross...all kinds of evil...violence and cruelty. It still exists today, but none of it got the better of Jesus. Without lifting a finger in anger or violence, he exposed all 2 that was wrong and sinful in the world he came to save. And he asks us to follow the same path.

With God's help and strength, we can and we will.

Thanks be to God.