

“Lent, Continued.”

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St Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, KY

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Although the flower-laden celebration of Easter is still two weeks away, the first buds are appearing on the trees, the first blooms are bursting forth, and spring is officially upon us. Fresh fruits and vegetables are becoming more numerous in the markets and patio seating is a little more comfortable than it has been for a while. Add to the blossoming spring rising immunization rates, students and teachers returning to classrooms, and an almost daily increase in travel, and it seems almost impossible that it should still be the penitential season of Lent. We have verdant life on the brain, even as we take another step closer to the cross and the grave.

The truth is, this cognitive dissonance between the season of growth and the season of penitence, while a bit confusing, is not unhelpful. We are in the almost-but-not-yet, in more ways than one. We have passed what was likely the last freeze, but most gardeners are still waiting to move sensitive plants outdoors. 1 in 4 adults in Kentucky have received at least one dose of a Covid-19 vaccine, but the majority of those adults have not yet reached full immunization and there are still many more waiting. Easter is right around the corner, but we must still walk through Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday together first. Like the thoroughbreds as they round the third turn, we can see the finish line but we have not quite reached the final stretch.

In this in-between season, we meet Jesus in Jerusalem. At this point in our narrative, Mary and Martha have witnessed the raising of their brother from the dead, and have anointed Jesus with

costly perfume as if for his burial. Jesus and his disciples have entered the Holy City and received a glorious welcome. Gentile believers have sought Jesus out, a sign of growing fame and growing danger. At this sign of the nations seeking him, Jesus understands that he has reached the final days of his ministry. His hour is coming, and his time has come.

Jesus proclaims one of his briefest parables in this moment. “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.” This agricultural metaphor rings a similar note to many of Jesus’s most famous parables; seeds sown in rocky and fertile soil as an image of evangelism; the kingdom of God as a mustard seed, a small thing with enormous potential; vinegrowers and vineyard owners as images of God’s relationship to those who choose to serve him. This time, it seems, the parable is more of a prophecy than a metaphor. Jesus, the grain of wheat, must die, must fall into the grave, in order to be raised in victory over death. But Jesus, teacher to the very end, does not leave us with something so simple.

Immediately Jesus builds on his parable with an interpretation, one that complicates and challenges the parable rather than clarifying it. “Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” With these words we know that Jesus is not only referring to his own death, but the life and death of all peoples. As those who love their life remain single grains, those who hate the life offered to them by the world bear much fruit in eternal life. Jesus offers up this parable to help his followers see themselves in his death, and see their calling in his resurrection. In saying his goodbyes, Christ promises to bear good fruit, and encourages his disciples to do the same.

This single grain of wheat reveals to us a glimpse of our own reflection, a new interpretation of our position in the almost-but-not-yet of a Lenten springtime. Anyone who has ever grown

anything from a seed can assure you that the Son of God left a few steps out for the sake of brevity, in this parable of fruitful growth. Yes, the seed must fall into the soil in order to grow. Yes, once it grows it bears good fruit for eating and new seeds for planting. But, just as Christ went down into death and remained there before he was resurrected on the third day, there are some things that have to happen in the in-between. A seed planted in good soil will shift, and crack, and grow, and change, absorbing moisture and reaching slowly upward to the sun and downward into the earth. This is where we might see ourselves in the story today, in between the lines of a very short parable amidst a very dense passage of scripture.

We are seeds that have fallen into the earth, cast into an unfamiliar world, separated from what we knew and hidden for a time from the sun. In this liminal place we are finding surprising sources of nourishment, and the refreshing rain reaches us little by little. In the Lenten darkness we are shifting and stretching and outgrowing our former selves. We are casting off the shells that enabled us to get here, but which no longer serve our growth, trading them for deep roots and broad leaves. We have not yet burst forth from the earth, but neither are we idle underneath its surface. The grain of wheat is not dead. It is changing into something very different, nearly unrecognizable, that it might bear good fruit. Our Lenten journey continues here.

Jesus reminds us that he is right here with us, in the muddy underground growth. “Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also.” By refusing to skip ahead to the last chapter, by observing the uncomfortable in-between of these last weeks of Lent, we are following Jesus, walking in his footsteps, traveling the same path on which he traveled for our sake. And by following him, we find him, constantly finding us. Soon, we will burst forth with him into the sunshine. But first, pay attention to your roots. You’re going to need them when the harvest comes.

