

**The Reverend Jon Hauerwas – Maundy Thursday Reflections – April 18, 2019. 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 and John 13:1-17, 31b-35**

William Lynch reminds us that we live by hope. “Everything that we do in life is based on the hope that doing will get us somewhere, though sometimes we know not where.”<sup>1</sup> By this definition, our very gathering this evening is a hopeful act. We know what this context means in a Christian church during Holy Week. We know that we are journeying toward the cross. And we hope that our worship will be up to the challenge of leading us there.

Our remembering is well organized. We tell the story. We set the table. We taste the bread. We share the cup. The hymns are somber, and we hope that these ancient words will speak to us now. Because, friends, it has been nearly 2,000 years since Jesus walked the face of the earth. Waiting in hope for that long requires a lot of patience. We’ve heard it said that patience is a virtue, but most of us aren’t very good at waiting. And in a world of immediate responses, 2,000 years seems a very long time.

So I offer an example, in an effort to bolster our patience. In Africa’s Sahara Desert lives a dried up ball of twigs that may not have sprouted seeds for up to 100

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<sup>1</sup> William Lynch, *Images of Hope: Imagination as Healer of the Hopeless* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), 34.

years. And yet, its name suggests that all is not lost. It is a resurrection plant. Where it lives, it may only rain once or twice per year. But for a plant that may have been searching for decades, that might be enough. <sup>2</sup>

Unlike tumbleweed in the Wild West, the dead limbs of the resurrection plant absorb water and unfurl in a matter of minutes. But, that's only the beginning of the miracle. To behold the rest, one more phenomena must occur. While the braches are extended, but not yet dried out, it must rain. When this happens, chutes quickly emerge. In a few weeks, they flower and develop seeds of their own. Then, before they can grow any larger, the sun kills them. Even so, their seeds live on, ready for when the rains return, whether that be tomorrow or another century from now. <sup>3</sup>

In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus was suffering with grief, distress, and fear. At that moment, he wanted someone to accompany him on the journey ahead, so he asked his disciples to stay awake with him. Sadly, Peter, James, and John could not wait that long. They were too tired and forgetful. And soon, they were soundly sleeping on the grass. Like us, their spiritual ancestors here today, they weren't very patient.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qK4tFicSbzc>. Accessed April 16, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

This is despite the fact that earlier that evening, Jesus took the bread and the cup and said, “Do this in remembrance of me,” calling attention not only to that moment but also to every future occasion when his disciples would share this sacrament with one another. There can be no mistaking this. Jesus wants us to remember him and to thirst for his presence like the dried up limbs of the resurrection plant waiting for the next rainfall. In short, he wants us to be patient. And the only way that we can be patient is to have a very long memory.

Cynthia Rigby reminds us that “psychological and sociological studies show that remembering often correlates with certain smells, tastes, places, and music. Consistent with this,” the Words of Institution “suggest Jesus wants us to remember him not only with our minds, but also with all of our faculties, all of our selves.”<sup>4</sup>

But, the reality of our remembering is much more complex. The details of what we once knew well can begin to shift, and change, and even disappear entirely. We may think of the elderly as particularly susceptible to this, but it can happen at any age. When called to the speak the truth in a court of law years after suffering some traumatic event, an eyewitness may struggle to remember even the most basic

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<sup>4</sup> Cynthia L. Rigby, “Holy Thursday,” *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship: Year C, Volume 2, Lent through Pentecost*, ed. Joel B. Green (Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 148.

details – things that were once so clear. At work, an employee may forget the steps taken to complete an important project. And, at home, a husband may forget to acknowledge a wedding anniversary, despite the obvious importance of that occasion.

So we come here often. Weekly. Or maybe even more often than that. Lest, we might forget God’s call upon our lives. And as we train our memories, exercise the virtue of patience, and hope that what we are doing will lead us somewhere, though we may not know where, God is also at work.

And as we strain to remember Jesus, God is pleased to forget our wanderings. As Miroslav Volf maintains, “the God of Israel, who is about ‘to do a new thing’ promises to blot their transgression out of God’s own memory.” As it is written in Jeremiah, chapter 31, “I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.”

<sup>5</sup> Or, as Stanley Hauerwas writes, “The church is quite simply those converted, those made vulnerable, to God’s history of forgiveness” – those who understand that “God’s forgetfulness’ is nothing less than our final redemption.” <sup>6</sup> May it be so, and all thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *A Better Hope: Resources for a Church Confronting Capitalism, Democracy, and Postmodernity* (Brazos Press, 2000), 149.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 149 and 151.