

The Reverend Jon Hauerwas – March 21, 2021 – Losing It Psalm 119:10-16 and John 12:20-33

March 1, 2013 was a life-changing day for Jim Mismas. That morning, Westminster's former Music Director had just finished breakfast and was returning to the kitchen when he felt an unmistakable tension in his chest. He fell to the floor and called out to Bruce, saying, "something has happened. I don't know what. Call the paramedics."

Jim was soon rushed to the hospital where a CT scan determined that the aorta of his heart had dissected. It was a serious medical condition, and the attending physician was direct. "You should make some phone calls and get your affairs in order. There is a really good chance that you will not live through the day."

In the midst of his pain, the CT scan, and the unfortunate news regarding his heart, somehow Jim still found the presence of mind to recall a line from the Presbyterian Confession of 1967: "Life is a gift to be received with gratitude, and a task to be pursued with courage." That same day, he was transported to the Cleveland Clinic where he received open heart surgery. Joyfully, he returned home within a week.

On Tuesday, I called our Music Director Emeritus and asked him if I could share his story in worship with you today. After agreeing that I could, Jim provided some additional details about how transformative that experience had been. Most importantly, he said that after receiving such frightening news back in 2013, he was determined to view everything that followed as a gift.

To illustrate this point for me, he noted how many people spend their days stuck in the past, ruminating. Meanwhile, others seem preoccupied with the future, and with projecting their imagination onto what they hope tomorrow will bring. Yet, in choosing either of these paths, our focus becomes distracted and scattered from living in the now.

Collectively, we have endured a full year of the Covid-19 pandemic. Amid the trauma of this experience, many of us have pursued distractions both familiar and new, as a means of distancing ourselves from our own, painful ruminations. And while distractions may help us to avoid discomfort in the short term, the bigger issues remain.

I wonder, and perhaps you do, as well, how our lives might change if we faced our fears and leaned into the pain. And I consider Jim's example. How, having

survived the storm of open-heart surgery, he was able to cultivate a deeper gratitude for the present moment. Perhaps, he has something to teach us about how we can transform our challenges into an opportunity for personal growth. Which is, I believe, one of the major themes of Lent.

You may know that “John Calvin spoke of scripture as the lens through which Christians look at the world.”¹ And in this holy season of the church, “the trials and tribulations of ordinary lives” are perceived “through the ‘lens’ of Jesus and his cross.”² As counterintuitive as it sounds, some of those moments in life “that strike us as unfortunate, tragic, or bad are, in the gracious work of God, good.”³ This is possible because “Jesus reveals a God who wins victories through defeat and triumph through suffering.”⁴

Yet, “if this is the self-giving path of Jesus, so it will be for his followers. As the Son does his father’s bidding, even to the point of death, Jesus’ servants must relinquish the life that the world offers them in order to gain the life that is imperishable and honored by God.”⁵ From this perspective, it should come as no

¹ Will Willimon, *Lectionary Sermon Resource: Year B, Part 1*, (Abingdon Press: 2017), 209.

² Willimon, 209.

³ Willimon, 203.

⁴ Willimon, 203.

⁵ Diane G. Chen, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year B, Volume 2*, ed. Joel B. Green (Westminster John Knox Press: 2020), 104.

surprise, then, when our victories and triumphs also emerge from this modeled pattern of defeat and suffering.⁶

In our second lesson this morning, Jesus develops an agricultural metaphor for his listeners. He says, “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.”

Diane Chen writes, “it is not that a grain actually ‘dies,’” rather “it must be placed in the soil.”⁷ Or, as the Bible describes it, it must fall to the earth. From there, it can “germinate and grow into a new stalk of wheat that yields more grains.”⁸ Surely, Jesus chose this image not only to foreshadow his impending death but also because it introduces the irony inherent in the plan of salvation.⁹ The radical claim of Christ’s cross and resurrection is that “life does not end with death but emerges by way of death” – just as it is in nature.¹⁰

⁶ Willimon, 203.

⁷ Chen, 104.

⁸ Chen, 104.

⁹ Chen, 104.

¹⁰ Chen, 104.

Yet, even for Christians, this is not a popular message. The late poet W.H. Auden wrote passionately about Jesus' conception of glory. Said Auden, "I believe because he fulfills none of my dreams, because He is in every respect the opposite of what He would be if I could have made Him in my own image," that his witness is surprisingly persuasive.¹¹

"We use the seven weeks leading up to Easter as a time to journey with Jesus to the cross. Through careful introspection and spiritual reflection, we search deep within ourselves to identify where we fall short in life, to name what is wrong in our world, and to recognize our complicity in it."¹² Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it (Mt. 16)." May it be so and all thanks be to God. Amen.

¹¹ David Dark, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year B, Volume 2*, ed. Joel B. Green (Westminster John Knox Press: 2020), 105.

¹² Anna M. V. Bowden, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year B, Volume 2*, ed. Joel B. Green (Westminster John Knox Press: 2020), 85.