

SERMONS FROM ST. FRANCIS

Lent 5, year B

April 2, 2006

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The Days are Surely Coming

Texts: Jer. 31:31; John 12: 20-32

“The days are surely coming,” writes the prophet Jeremiah, beholding a vision, “when God will make a new covenant with Israel.” Do we realize the cost to those words? This is not a toast at a feast of good things in good times. These are words borne out of unimaginable suffering; words used by Jeremiah, moved by the Spirit of God, to steel his people with hope in extremely hopeless times.

Imagine it. Jerusalem is under attack by an army 100's of times stronger. The city walls are now breached, the slaughter, the rape and the plundering have begun. The Temple, the heart of Israel and every Jew, is now on fire. All seems lost -- and it is! But Jeremiah points this suffering people forward with those moving words, “The days are surely coming when God will do new things. Hang on as best you can! God will have the final and victorious word!”

It is hard to recapture this prophetic power for we are not seeing the destruction of our way of life as those poor people did. Or are we? Global warming is racing faster than we had feared. We have begun a war that is spawning death and more enemies. Poorly trained clergy press their flocks to zealotry like ignorant armies clashing at night. Election time is approaching so the terrorist alert will soon be raised to orange. What are we leaving our children and the next generations?

It is not my point to be alarmist, but to recapture the extreme context of Jeremiah's visionary words, “The days are surely coming.” For my point is neither new nor original: we need the very same hope and vision of which Jeremiah speaks for ourselves because our world's a mess.

In today's Gospel the scene is far more felicitous. People are living, not dying. It's as if we switched channels from a disaster movie to lighter drama. Not a burning Temple, but a religious festival where people are joyous, even laughing and dancing, glancing at one another with a sense of wellbeing. It all looks so serene and promising.

Against that backdrop some business is being transacted. Several Greeks want to meet the Jew called Jesus. And, well experienced in the affairs of the world, they wisely make their appeal for an audience with Jesus through a person who has a Greek name, Philip. They use a Greek to win sympathy for their request and Philip goes up the chain of command to Andrew. Then Andrew and Philip go together and tell Jesus.

It all looks so, well, after the extremities of Jeremiah, so normal. Andrew and Philip convey to Jesus the Greeks' request, "We wish to see Jesus." We do not know the Greeks' intent but, given the chance, I think we all would want to see Jesus. He's still famous. So it's still in the normal range of things.

But the Gospel of John this morning has Jesus say some extraordinarily strange yet simple things. In the midst of the normalcy of a festival, in Jesus' tent, in Jesus' life, an inner struggle is taking place. St. John records that Jesus' coming days of death are becoming the fulfillment of Jeremiah's hope that "the days are surely coming when God will act." Well, here are those days. They have arrived in the great three days of Jesus' passion.

Now you can read the death of Jesus as just an historical event or just a strange story. Or you can read his death in the narcissistic piety of revivalism, of total human depravity, of hatred of the human body -- especially our sexuality, of a dark human hopelessness. Or you can read the story in a different depth. And John is hinting at that depth with paradoxes since only paradoxes can communicate that depth.

"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." What depth of wisdom does Jesus have here for us? That life requires certain kinds of self-sacrifice and that self-sacrifice is very fruitful?

Yes! Simply that!

But our instincts for self-preservation get in the way. Try to stop breathing! To rise above your instincts requires an outside grace, a movement of the Spirit in your heart that empowers you to do even truly noble things. Have we realized how many times our parents must have died like that single grain so we could have something fruitful in our growing up, how they sacrificed themselves for us? True life is not the absence of death, but always just in front of it.

It is in this context that the next saying needs to be carefully construed, namely, "Those who love their life will lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life." The "hate" here is neither hating the goodness of life, nor any morbid mortification of the flesh. It is to hate any kind of life that is simply instinctual, selfish, destructive of self and community. You get it right when you realize you want to hate *that* kind of life. Then you will be loving a life that is balanced, constructive for both self and community; an eternal life now.

And finding the strength to hate the bad and love the good brings you into Jesus' tent to meet him --just like those Greeks. And to meet him at one of his own roughest hours. For he knows he will die several days hence as the ultimate expression, the mentor, the archetype of a self-sacrificial life for others. The days that are surely coming have surely arrived.

In Christ's death, God gives us the grace-power through baptism and its remembrance, through Eucharist and its celebration, to die with Christ daily to destructive parts of our lives led by the instincts of greed, vanity, violence and lust. Christ's resurrection means that we begin to live lives for others and therefore, like the seed of wheat, fruitfully for ourselves.

This is how Jesus' death, as St. John says, will draw all people together. This is how Jesus' death has drawn us together here in this place. And grace is changing us and empowering us to change the world a little at a time.

By God's grace, may we live, love and act sacrificially as a community of faith knowing that the days are surely coming when no one else will need to suffer or die before their time. No more suffering and death -- that's the hope, the dream, the vision.

Amen

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