

EXTREME WISDOM, EXTREME FAITH

Lent 5 – Cycle B: Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 51; John 12:20-33

One of my fascinations in the various texts of the Bible is the genre of writing known as wisdom literature. Usually, we think of whole books, such as the Book of Proverbs, the Book of Job, or the Book of Ecclesiastes, as wisdom literature; and we associate wisdom literature more with the Hebrew Bible than we do the New Testament. But I've come to realize over the years that even though we can think of the writing of the Hebrew Bible as falling into categories such as historical, legal, devotional, and prophetic, the boundaries for wisdom literature are not that clearly drawn; that wisdom literature's teaching function of deepening readers' knowledge and understanding of God and of God's ways is something we encounter in a great number of the books of the Old Testament, as well as in the parables and sayings of Jesus in the New Testament.

Interestingly, two of this morning's readings have wisdom streaming through them. The first instance occurs in Jeremiah where God is reported by the prophet as saying to the people of Judah, "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts." The context for the Book of Jeremiah is the final fragile years of Judah, the southern kingdom. Babylon was growing in power and was a constant threat to Judah's existence. And in fact, it all ended badly for Judah in 586 when Babylon invaded Jerusalem, destroying both the city and the Temple. But this morning's reading refers to the time before Babylon's invasion, years of great fear, suffering, and longing for the people of Judah. Without question, they anticipate losing everything, not only their kingdom, but also their identity and traditions. In their current anxiety, they begin to second-guess the value of their history as God's beloved ones. Enter Jeremiah with a vision of the future in which God will re-establish the people and renew or even replace the covenant made with Moses. And the law, God's great gift through Moses which formed the Hebrew people spiritually, will not be able to be lost in this future time Jeremiah envisions. It will not be on scrolls in the Temple, scrolls that are easily destroyed by burning. Each person will carry within himself or herself such a knowledge and understanding of God's steadfast love that faith will not fail; God's love and mercy and forgiveness will be the coordinates of their life together. God will be within them and among them, replacing the present distance and weakness they feel as disturbing reports of the border attacks by Babylon arrive in Jerusalem with increasing regularity.

In today's Gospel, we enter a similar time of uncertainty, this one not for the Hebrew people, but rather for Jesus and his followers. The context for this passage is the week before Passover in Jerusalem. Jesus, especially, senses that the opposition to his ministry will come to a head; that the week will end badly for him and his disciples. And so, in the midst of their anxiety, in this climate of fear and foreboding, he teaches them about God in a simple-but-profound observation concerning the life cycle of a grain of wheat. This tiny parable suggests that the wisdom and power of God transcend human reason and logic; that with God death is not the last word; that in the embrace of God's love, loss is gain; that God's steadfast love is stronger than the power of evil; that even should Jesus die, the gospel, the living Word of God will not die with him.

I grew up in a church in which God's Word, read and preached, was the essential content of Sunday worship. Typically, there were three readings and a responsive psalm, at the end of which the choir sang a small tract, "Write these words in our hearts, we beseech thee, O Lord." I don't think that I realized how formative that liturgical fragment had been for me until years later, after I had been well immersed in Lutheran worship for a while and realized I needed to rewrite my faith story.

When I indeed looked back and saw the despair I felt at age 26 when my father died, how anger at God came easily in the years that followed, how faith was an impossibility for me for at least two years following my father's death, and then returned only when friends, who turned out to be friends in Christ, patiently joined me in my struggle and doubt and gently re-introduced me to God's grace – only then did I realize that God's Word was still written in my heart; that all those stories and parables and accounts of God's steadfast love in the Bible had now become my story as well. I realized that in my desperation for meaning in life, in my longing to feel something more than abandonment, I had been in Judah during the last years before Jerusalem fell; I had been with Jesus in Jerusalem when everywhere he looked he saw conspiracy and betrayal, and yes, abandonment too.

Some years ago, I had a conversation with a parishioner about what calls me back as a Christian whenever I struggle. Without hesitation, I found myself saying that it was the wisdom teaching of Jesus that hooks me; and not just teachings such as today's parable in our Gospel, but all of the parables in which the veil is lifted and we are able to glimpse the reign of God, present and available for the transformation of our world. It is wisdom born of faith which, in turn, reflects wisdom.

I cannot begin to imagine the despair felt by the disciples in the days and weeks following Jesus' crucifixion. Reading between the lines of the various Resurrection accounts, we can see that they needed the Pentecost experience, the grace and power of the Holy Spirit, to fully remove their doubts and second-guessing.

The wisdom literature we have in Holy Scripture proclaims God's steadfast love. Faith allows us to see that our knowledge of God's steadfast love has been written, by God's grace, on our hearts.