

“Dying to Bring Forth Fruit”
The 5th Sunday in Lent – March 21, 2021 – John 12:20-33/B

Grace and peace to you from God the Creator, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

At the inauguration of President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris, we were introduced to the 22-year-old American Youth Poet Laureate, Amanda Gorman. Her poem, “The Hill We Climb,” delivered with poise and passion, launched her into fame’s spotlight.

A few months later, Gorman tweeted this: *“A security guard tailed me on my walk home tonight. He demanded if I lived there because ‘you look suspicious.’ I showed my keys and buzzed myself into my building. He left, no apology. This is the reality of black girls: One day you’re called an icon, the next day, a threat.”*

In a subsequent tweet, Gorman added: *“In a sense, he was right. I AM A THREAT: a threat to injustice, to inequality, to ignorance. Anyone who speaks the truth and walks with hope is an obvious and fatal danger to the powers that be.”* Today’s Gospel is setting us up for the climax of the greatest story ever told. It is also a story of *“one day an icon, another a threat.”*

We are poised to enter the most Holy Week of the Christian calendar, when we will retell Christ’s Passion (his arrest, crucifixion and resurrection) which is the core of our Christian faith. We will listen for all the echoes in the story and we will pay attention so that the symbols can do their work on us. Because just as the Jews of Jesus’ time connected to their historical and religious roots annually, we, too, must return to **our** story of salvation each year. For Jews, the festival is called **Passover**, and marks their escape from slavery - through the Red Sea and the wilderness - to the Promised Land. This was **Ex-odus**, literally, “the way out,” and each year faithful Jews gathered in the holy city, Jerusalem, to celebrate **freedom**.

Scholars estimate there were about 100,000 residents then, but that 3-4 million more would come into the city for Passover. They came from all over Israel and even as far as Greece and Rome. And today we will begin to feel the shift in the crowds around Jesus. *“One day you’re called an icon, the next day, a threat.”* Jesus, the icon, was gaining in fame and popularity. This day, he was headline news: fresh from Bethany, where he has raised his friend Lazarus from the dead.

Some Greeks who had arrived for the festival sought out one of Jesus’ disciples, Philip, and made the request, *“Sir, we wish to see Jesus.”* These Greeks were likely proselytes, some of the first Gentile converts to Judaism, and as such their presence at the Passover festival would be significant, especially to Jesus. Why? Because they were **a sign** that the Word about him was spreading beyond Israel. They were **a sign** of “the nations” gathering, and of the Age of the Messiah beginning. Once he heard that there were Greeks attending the festival, Jesus proclaimed, *“The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.”*

Now, if you had just read straight through the Gospel of John to this point, you would know that Jesus has made his “hour” a topic of great importance in his ministry. In Chapter 2, at the wedding at Cana, Jesus told his mother, Mary, *“My hour has not yet come.”* Twice in the chapters that follow (7:30 and 8:20,) *“they sought to arrest him but could not - because his hour had not yet come.”* But now, Jesus recognizes that his hour **has come**. And even as he chooses his own destiny, he points back to his Father and asks God to *“glorify your name”* in all he is about to do. The heavenly voice that responded was like thunder, or perhaps an angel speaking, but no one knew for sure what it meant. Like the Greeks, the crowd wanted to see Jesus, and (in fact) we want to see Jesus as well. So here’s a hint. Especially in John’s Gospel, seeing is believing, so when we

hear the Greeks inquire about getting an audience with Jesus, we might also hear, “*Sir, we wish to believe in Jesus.*” And so do we, so do we.

But what good is the believing that comes from seeing? (Well...) Sitting just feet away from Amanda Gorman on Inauguration day was former First Lady Michelle Obama, who subsequently interviewed her for a recent issue of *Time* magazine. She asked the young poet if art can have an influence on social change. Ms. Gorman replied, “*Absolutely. Poetry and language are often at the heartbeat of movements for change.*” She then recalled how at a Black Lives Matter rally she saw banners that read, “*They buried us but they didn’t know we were seeds.*” The image that those words conveyed touched Ms. Gorman very deeply.

From small beginnings, great things can arise, and grow and bear much fruit. Women won the right to vote after many thought the cause was dead and buried. Same for the abolitionist movement, the civil rights movement, the LGBTQ movement, and many others. A goodly number of those who worked for those rights never saw the fruits of their labors, but unknown to them, eventually, **they** were the seeds that bore fruit.

I just wonder if the Greeks got what they were looking for when they asked if they could “see” Jesus. Scripture is not clear if he even *met* them, but when Philip and Andrew tell him there are Greeks who want to see him, Jesus takes one last opportunity (and I do like to think that the Greeks were standing right there, listening...) to teach them what they all will soon have to believe in. “*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. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also...*”

In other words, *If you want to see me; then be ready – because what is coming is what you must see.* Echoes of his earlier teaching, “*If anyone wants to be my disciple, let them take up their cross and follow me.*” Life with Jesus – less like spectacular signs and fame; more like speaking threatening truth to power. Life with Jesus is serving others. Life with Jesus is sacrifice. Life with Jesus is laying down control of your life.

Remember, **God is the Sower of Seed** - lovingly, extravagantly, selflessly. Seed scattered and grains of wheat planted into the darkness of earth will lose their old life; yet will not be destroyed, but mysteriously **transformed**. The Son of God was “planted” into the world, from the swirling cosmos “in the beginning” - into the created earth that God so loved - to bring forth a new crop. And we see and believe and follow, being planted in faith, trusting that our investment of our lives will bring forth a “God-harvest” of transformation and new life **for all the nations**.

So, what happened to those Greeks? The Bible doesn’t tell us that, either. They simply came as a sign to Jesus and then disappeared from the story. But I like to think that they not only saw Jesus, but heard him teach, then saw him die and raised, and they believed. Perhaps they were telling their stories back home when the apostle Paul came to town to start a community called church. Perhaps they were among those to whom Charles Spurgeon referred in a sermon in 1875 – those who were “Dying to Bring Forth Fruit.” That would be my hope for them, and for those of us who plant our lives in the midst of God.

Because once we allow ourselves to believe - giving up all of our energy and essence for others – then someone will come close to us, and we will **know** that deep inside **they want to see Jesus**. As children of Light, as part of the Body of Christ, **you have** the Jesus so many want to see; **you know** what Jesus told you; **you are** the seed dying to bear fruit.

Seeing the pain of someone's grief, depression or anxiety, you plant yourself beside them for a time - And God produces a deepening understanding and bonds of relationship...

Seeing the destruction of disease and poverty and natural disasters, you plant yourself in a ministry project - And God produces restoration and community...

Seeing the evil we are all capable of - You plant yourself to speak up, to walk out, to proclaim - And God produces justice and maturity...

God is the sower, the planter, the one who brings forth new life, so, remember it's not up to us to succeed alone, for one day we might be icons, and the next day, a threat. Then we might raise the banner that reads, *"they buried us but they didn't know we were seeds."*

As author Barbara Brown Taylor reminds us,

*"When the hour comes,
each of us has a grain of wheat
with which to cast our vote.*

*It is the grain of our lives,
and all of creation is holding its breath
to see what we will do with it."*

Amen.

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Resources: Michelle Obama, "Unity with Purpose" February 15/22 *TIME Magazine*; Dennis Sepper, "Of Fruit and Seeds" for *ELCA Faith Lens*; Robert H. Smith, *Wounded Lord*; Karoline Lewis, *Working Preacher* podcast; Barbara Brown Taylor in *God in Pain*