

The Mystery of a Grain of Wheat
 John 12:20-33
 March 21, 2021
 5th Sunday in Lent

“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.” John 12:24 I have read this passage many times before, usually during Lent. Each time, a different aspect seems to come into focus. Sure enough, it happened again. I’ll tell you which one in a minute.

I bet you have experienced it over and over, and maybe even as recently as today. It’s one of those mysteries hidden in plain sight. It’s also one of those secrets that can trouble the soul, so we often turn away from it or close our eyes to it. Here it is:

“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” (John 12:24).

It’s a mystery and the secret to life. It’s the pattern of loss and renewal that runs throughout our lives and our world. Look at the way this pattern is present in your life. Have you ever fallen in love and committed your life to another? Remember those days? If so, you had to let parts of your old life go and something of your single life died so that you could be with that other person.

How about parenting? If you have ever been a parent or a grandparent, you have to let go so she or he can grow up. Have you ever been the caretaker of another? If so, you could name the parts of your life that you had to let go of so that another might live with dignity, compassion, and love.

Most of the time in order to gain something, there is something we have had to give up. What are the costs and sacrifices you paid for an education or a career? Often it takes letting go of some things so that other things could arise. What’s more, you would probably do it again.

For every choice we make, every yes we speak, there is at least one no and probably many more. This same pattern is in nature. You can see it in the changing of the seasons, falling leaves and new blooms, and the setting and rising of the sun.

Think about the scriptural stories of loss and renewal. Innocence in Adam and Eve died so that consciousness might be born. Abram left his country and kindred so that he might be made a great nation, renamed Abraham, and be a blessing to all the families of the earth.

Jacob lost his old identity and was wounded so that he could become a new man, Israel, with a new life. James and John left their father, boats, and nets to become disciples of Jesus and fishers of people. Jesus taught his disciples, “The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again” (Mark 9:31).

That’s the mystery. It’s everywhere. It is a pattern of loss and renewal, dying and rising, letting go and getting back, leaving and return. It’s at the core of our baptism and it’s what we declare during communion: “This is the body of Christ, which has been broken for you; this is the cup of the new covenant poured out for you.” In some churches they say, “Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.”

What in your life do you need to let go of today? What might you need to leave behind? Jesus was good at leaving things behind. He traveled lightly, and was always pressing forward to a new thing. What needs to die so that something new can arise? It becomes a pattern in Lent.

I don’t think it’s a coincidence that today’s gospel is set in the context of the passover feast. Remember what that’s about? The passover is the celebration of the Israelites’ liberation from bondage in Egypt. It’s about freedom and new life. It’s about letting go, leaving behind, and moving into a new life.

The Israelites were also familiar with leaving things behind, things like slavery and even the temple in Jerusalem. There is something about this pattern that is the lens through which we see Jesus.

Some Greeks come to Philip and say, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” I don’t know why they want to see Jesus, but I have a few guesses. Jesus turned water into wine. He cleansed the temple as you heard a couple weeks ago. He healed the paralytic. He fed 5000 with a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish. He walked on water. He gave sight to the man born blind. He raised Lazarus from the dead. He turned things upside down. Often it was about letting go of the old and adopting the new.

“Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” That’s the Jesus I want to see. Don’t you? Philip and Andrew tell Jesus. And Jesus says to them, “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.”

How obscure. Did they get it? Do we? I doubt it. That's his response to those who want to see him; to the Greeks, to you, to me. Now you've got to know that dying is about more than our physical death.

Yes, it is that but it's also more than that. You hear a lot about that during Lent. We die a thousand deaths throughout our lifetime. The loss of a loved one, a relationship, health, a job, opportunities, a dream; all deaths we didn't want or ask for. But we also experience a thousand resurrections. Even the gloomy philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer said, "Every parting gives a foretaste of death, every reunion a hint of the resurrection."

Other times we choose our losses and deaths. We give up parts of ourselves for another. We change our beliefs and values so that we can be more authentically ourselves. And sometimes there are things we need to let go of, things we cling to that deny us the fullness of life we want and God offers: fear, anger or resentment, regret and disappointment, guilt, the need to be right, approval.

Seeing Jesus isn't a spectator sport. It is a way to be followed, a truth to be embodied, a life to be lived. It's being a grain of wheat that falls into the ground and dies so that it might bear much fruit. That's where we see him. It's the letting go, the emptying, the leaving behind, and the dying that makes space for new life to arise.

This month marks the anniversary of the assassination of Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero in 1980, after preaching on today's passage – John 12, and preparing to serve communion. He was gunned down. The seed that was his life was buried, but continues to yield abundantly in the hearts and minds of his people.

He was very important to me as a young man in 1980 living in Chicago, as my home church was a sanctuary church for Salvadoran refugees. You've probably had at least one time in your life when it felt like some aspect of you died, and you looked back on it as if to say, "I never want to go through that again, but I wouldn't trade that experience for the world."

What is that time for you? What happened? Whatever your experience was, you were changed and your life was renewed. It might have been one of those times when you were the grain of wheat that fell into the earth and died. Maybe it was even one of those times when you knew you had seen Jesus, when you experienced the holy, when you were absolutely convinced that God was present and working in your life.

An important part of my life and ministry has been searching for the holy, and inviting others to come along with me. But like you, I've also had losses. The loss of a relationship, the loss of a friend, the loss of a beloved pet, and the death of Jackson's twin brother shortly after he was born.

God knows I've learned a lot about myself and life as a result of losses, and my life has been reshaped and reformed because of them. I bet yours has, too. Jesus has a way of hanging around people who have experienced losses. He knows a lot about that. Just look at what he was saying about seeds today.

What is your grain of wheat that needs to fall into the earth and die? Lent is the season to ask those questions, perhaps more than any other. Advent calls us to watch and wait for something to be born, but Lent is more circumspect. We wait for something or someone to die.

In the end, we need to trust Jesus' promise: "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." It is one of life's hardest lessons, but also one of the most promising. Sometimes the truth is best spoken in paradox. Jesus knows a lot about that.

In the midst of the crowd, Jesus spoke about how his soul was troubled, and asked God to "save him from this hour." Soon, the seed that was his life would be buried in the soil, and in that moment, no one knew what the future would hold. It is a matter of faith.

In the meanwhile, gather up your seeds – all of them – your wild hopes and dreams. Give them to him. Let him put the seeds in a bag and throw it over his shoulder, carrying them all the way to the cross. Let it all go into the deep, dark earth where seeds go to die. What happens from there is a secret – a mystery. But we have his word. He said a single grain of wheat holds the secret of life and death. Jesus was about to discover that mystery in his own life, and soon we will too. Amen

John 12:20-33

12:20 Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks.

12:21 They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus."

12:22 Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus.

12:23 Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of God to be glorified.

12:24 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.

12:25 Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.

12:26 Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

12:27 "Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say--' Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour.

12:28 Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again."

12:29 The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him."

12:30 Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine.

12:31 Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out.

12:32 And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself."

12:33 He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.