

**Mar. 21, 2021  
Christ the Servant, Reston  
Lent 5**

**Jeremiah 31:30-34  
John 12:20-33**

**There isn't anyone else who, more than I, would like for spring to quit playing peek-a-boo and land here for good. Daily I search for signs of spring, and I am beginning to see them. Birds are chirping, the Cherry Blossom Festival is in the offing, and the Nationals are playing pre-season games in Florida. However, on my way to church, along Colts Neck Road, I see trees which still haven't dropped last fall's leaves yet. It's like they didn't get the leaf memo.**

**Sooner or later they are going to have to bury the brown and go with the green and here's how it is going to happen: The old leaves swing by their stems from the branch in the same way a child's loose tooth swings from the gum. Between the base of that stem and the branch a tiny little bud is waiting to be born. And, as it emerges, it will push that old dead leaf from the branch and it will come fluttering to the ground. The new green leaf will pop out in a matter of hours and, one grand morning, I will drive down a green street.**

**If you haven't noticed it in nature then you will notice it in scripture. In order for there to be new life, something else has to die first. Death comes before life. It is a paradox. A paradox. A paradox isn't two piers in a pond. A paradox is a statement that seems to contradict itself or to conflict with common sense, but which contains a truth. Scripture is full of paradoxes.**

**Paradoxes are head-scratchers. They are the thinking person's faith. The more you ponder them the more "aha!" moments you have. Here are some paradoxes of our faith:**

**The first is that we find God by being lost. We often talk about "finding God." It is impossible to "find" God unless God is lost. But it is not God that is lost. Think about it. It is like the fallacy of Christopher Columbus "finding" America. It was here all along. Native Americans don't celebrate Columbus**

Day. Something can't be found if it was not lost. Is it God who was lost, or were we the ones who were lost? God has been here all along. So, maybe it is not so much about finding God as it is about God finding us.

Another paradox of our faith is that you don't get anything unless you give. Jesus told the parable of the widow who gave her two mites – all that she had – to illustrate this paradox. This is especially true of worship. We don't worship to “get.” We worship to “give.” To give God praise. To give God glory. To give God thanks. But you would be shocked (shocked!) at what you get from what you give. Doesn't it make you wonder about those people who come away from the service and mumble over lunch, “Boy, I didn't get much out of worship.” Doesn't it make you wonder if God isn't mumbling, “Yeah, I didn't get much out of you, either.”

Another paradox of our faith is that we do not become full without first becoming empty. How can fullness exist without emptiness? Think about it. When you say, “The hole is full” you are positing the existence of a hole. Full has no reference point without empty. You can't say “I filled up my tank with gas” without admitting it had been low. So, we can't pray “Fill our hearts O' God” without either admitting that our hearts are empty or admitting that they are full of junk which needs to be thrown out.

So, scripture is full of paradoxes, but the one which is the focus of today's gospel concerns some Greeks who wished to see Jesus. When the word came to Jesus that some people wished to see him, Jesus began to teach them that the time was approaching for his own death. It is as if he were saying, “If you wish to see me, you must see what happens to me. You must see that I am about to die.” And then he told them a paradox, “Very truly, he told 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.” He then spoke of his victory over death and the new and eternal life that would come to the faithful.

He was saying, “In order for there to be life, there must first be death.” It is the ultimate paradox of our faith.

**Jesus had to die before we could live. We, too, must experience a death before we experience new life. Now, wrap your minds around this: This is what baptism is. The going under the water signifies the drowning to our old selves and the coming back up to a new life in Christ. There is a branch of Christianity in South America which baptizes people in water-filled coffins – to make the point. Another church has a cross-shaped baptistery. Same point. Death before new life.**

**Sometimes we think of religion this way: When we die we go to heaven and live forever. But what our Lord invites us to do is bump that whole scenario up one lifetime. When we die to our old selves at baptism we begin to live in God's kingdom.**

**A favorite seminary professor of mine, Dr. Walter Bouman, used to put it this way; "The question isn't, 'Is there life after death?' The question is, 'Is there life after birth?'" What do we find after we die to our old selves? What do we get after we give our lives to others? What fills our hearts after we have emptied them of all the junk?**

**Do you remember the one about the lost motorist who goes over to the farm fence and asks the Vermont farmer how to get where he was going and the farmer replies, "You can't get there from here." Well, you never heard the rest of the story. The farmer wasn't saying much else, so the motorist tries to engage him further in conversation. "Have you lived here all your life?" he asks. The farmer just stares out past the barn and replies, "Not yet."**

**I'm finding that very few people in Northern Virginia have actually lived here all their lives. Have *you* lived here all *your* life? But maybe the question for us isn't, "Where have you lived all your life?" but, "Have you *lived* all your life?" Luther said we should die daily and each and every day come up to a new life in Christ. Have you died yet?**

**In a couple of weeks we will have a Good Friday Service. It won't be live. It will be pre-recorded. It will follow the stations of the cross. But I would**

encourage you to attend. It would be most appropriate to do this before experiencing our Easter Sunday service. Our faith is a wonderful paradox. You won't fully appreciate the new life until you have appreciated the suffering and death. Please ... please do not be Easter-only people. It's all nice and warm and cozy to see the flowers and sing the alleluias and you may come away with a sense of being spiritually full. But you won't appreciate how full you are unless you know how empty you were.

The trees along Colts Neck will give leaf soon. But they're going to have to shed their old ones first. It is Lent. We watch and we wait for the green blade to rise.