

"What are you hoping for?" my grandfather asked me.

This was two years ago last week. I was sitting in his living room in a South Carolina retirement home. He smiled as I told him about my first year of graduate study. As a retired professor—we always called him Doc—he latched onto my talk of tenure and doctoral admissions, of learning to teach and advise. This had been his life for decades, and he was obviously proud to be passing it on.

"And what are you hoping for?" I asked him when I'd finished.

All kinds of realities flashed through Doc's eyes as he paused. "What am I hoping for?" he repeated. The lung cancer he'd held out against for ten heroic months; his almost complete immobility; the previous months' parade of visiting grandchildren on pilgrimage. "Well," he breathed, "I'm hoping to die well."

We didn't linger on the subject, but we'd acknowledged what we both knew. This was the last visit I'd have with him. He was dead within weeks. What I carried into my mourning was that last meeting of the hearts, as adults, as fellow-students. I, at least, could face into his death with gratitude.

That tension, that practice, is what is most at stake in this morning's Scriptures. We are so often face to face with death. In the big, dramatic tentpole events of our lives, we can see that most obviously; but it is true in countless ordinary ways too, every day. We are always faced with what the Baptismal Covenant calls the spiritual forces of evil that corrupt and destroy the creatures of God. As followers of Jesus, our call and our hope is to find God

and gratitude in the midst of this death-bounded world.

Jesus walks into this week's Gospel passage with a remarkable urgency, a determination born of his sense that his earthly ministry's climax in Jerusalem is coming soon. Now, as we read this story today, Holy Week doesn't feel especially close. The next Palm Sunday is in April. At St John's, we do not plan that far ahead. We only have coffee hour hosts scheduled through the end of July! Nor should we. All of us have lives, busy lives, full lives. We do lots of things besides church. And even if all we did was church, we still wouldn't have started planning for Holy Week. The monks and nuns of my acquaintance are very busy with ordinary time right now. The church calendar, in the wisdom of its framers, has seen to that.

Yet, even with Holy Week a long way off, Jerusalem is still very near. Jesus sees his mission through its end. He sees it as all-encompassing; and he encourages anyone who wants to follow him to see their shared mission in the same light. For Jesus, nothing is more important than the work he is about. Nothing is so important that it should keep one of his followers from coming with him. And it is the sight of Jerusalem—the thought of his own destiny—that puts Jesus in such a deadly serious frame of mind.

This is one of Jesus' hardest teachings. For those who followed him, it meant overturning the basic assumptions and priorities of their culture. Indeed, those assumptions and priorities remain our own, in different forms. What, if anything, would keep you from a parent's funeral? Under what circumstances

would you choose to be homeless? That is what Jesus is asking. Shelter, family, home: All these become relatively unimportant, compared to the inbreaking, in Jesus' earthly ministry, of the realm of God. Centuries of interpretation have failed to make this teaching easy, or even immediately comprehensible.

The best handle I have on it myself comes from my own nearest brush with death—the death of my grandfather, which I talked about a few minutes ago. He wasn't a believer. So far as I know, as he looked at his death, he was looking at leaving everything behind. As his health had failed, he had to leave the house on Greenleaf Road. As it grew worse, he saw less and less of anyone but his nurses and my grandmother. In the end, he was going to lose everything, one way or another. His choice was to lose it well, to die well, to die with gratitude. For all his unbelief, I see in that choice the stamp of Christ, as we hear from Christ today.

Paul's argument in our passage from Galatians touches on the same theme more clearly, but no less forcefully. Paul and Jesus choose different metaphors, but they tend, I think, to point the same direction. This morning, they both ask us to start looking at death and change and uncertainty as chances for God to work anew.

Let me repeat Paul's words: "Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit." This image is tricky, so let me unpack it a bit.

What does Paul mean by flesh and spirit? There are books on this, lots of them, but for our purposes, Paul has already told us how to tell flesh from spirit. Flesh is what makes us go to war, what makes us reduce human bodies to toys, what makes us "bite and devour one another". But the Spirit is the bringer of patience and generosity and love. The NRSV gives the Spirit a capital S to show she is the Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the Trinity. Her fruits are good where the fruits of the flesh are evil.

Yet whether our acts are good or evil, we do them, for the most part, in the physical world. The Christian person is body and soul, wholly linked, inseparable. The point is, the flesh for Paul is not what we'd call the body. The body, for Paul, is more like a battleground, a space that two different ways of life want to control. Both ways, the way of the flesh and the way of the Holy Spirit, are part of our lives until we die. The fight between them, the danger they place us in, never stops.

Paul describes choosing the way of love, the way of Jesus, as "crucifying the flesh". For Paul's audience, this would have been very challenging language, as difficult as Jesus' hardest sayings. For anyone living under Roman rule, the cross was an image of sheer terror. It was the epitome of violence, the worst way to die, what the Romans did to those who crossed them. Whatever Paul may have meant metaphorically by "the flesh", you can't say "crucify the flesh" in the Roman world without people actually picturing a body on a cross. Paul is deliberately invoking the violence that bordered and constrained the lives

of his people.

At the same time, however, the cross for Paul is always first and foremost the paradoxical cross of Jesus, the place where the forces of evil were defeated once for all. When Paul says "I have been crucified with Christ," as he does a few chapters earlier in Galatians, that is a claim of victory. The war between good and evil, flesh and the Holy Spirit, rages in our bodies and souls. For Paul, the only hope of ending that war is to finish off the flesh. We do that, for Paul, by belonging to Christ, by following Jesus. As Paul knew by years of hard experience, following Jesus often meant leaving behind home, family, security. But as he left that old self behind—left it, in a real sense, to die—he found the freedom Christ meant for him.

Yet that raises the same question as Jesus' teaching. What are we supposed to make of this? We have lives, vocations, roles that we've agreed with God to play. We are parents, spouses, children, teachers, workers, ministers. We often cannot, and usually should not, simply leave those lives behind. Jesus calls us to put his mission first; but for most of us, that is God's mission, which we join in our daily lives.

Jesus' invitation this morning, which Paul repeats, is to follow Jesus so we can share in his death and resurrection. That is an intimidating call. Not everybody took Jesus up on it. But everybody can. Here at St John's, we emphasize that everyone is welcome at the communion circle. I can't speak for everyone else, but I do that because I believe that what we do, here around this

table, is exactly what Jesus calls us to in this gospel. It is turning our faces toward Jerusalem, toward the upper room, where Jesus loved us to the end. It is sharing in that love, all the way to its end, at least in memory. It is sharing in the victory that love won.

It wasn't a choice for me to lose Doc, or for Elisha to lose Elijah. It was, in some sense, a choice for Jesus to follow his mission, and for Paul to follow Jesus. But it is absolutely our choice whether to follow Jesus today, to join him at his table, and to share in his death and resurrection. I hope that today, you will hear something in our common prayer of the urgency of God's mission. I hope that today, you'll join it a little more. I hope that today, you'll feel some of the power of heaven's fiery chariots in your bones as you partake of Christ. I hope that today, the death in your life will be swallowed up, a little more, in Christ's victory.