

NO TURNING BACK
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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church
Transfiguration of the Lord

Based on Mark 9:1-10. The Turning Point: Toward Jerusalem

“Something beautiful is trying to happen.”

These were the somewhat surprising words of Van Jones, CNN commentator, on that truly ugly day – January 6: Epiphany – on the other side of the Capitol insurrection.

“Something beautiful is trying to happen. You have to believe it to see it.”

I don’t know about you, but I want to believe it! I want to see it! The beautiful thing that is trying to happen amid too much ugliness that will not seem to go away.

This is exactly what it means to walk the Way of Jesus: to see a beautiful *kairos* moment for what it is, even in its ugliness: a “time outside of time,” when the veil is lifted and the truth of our too human ugliness is revealed, while the grace of divine beauty that is possible within us finds a way to break through.

This is exactly what it means to walk the Way of Jesus: to see a beautiful *kairos* moment for what it is, even in its ugliness: a decisive turning point if we are willing to take it, when conditions beyond our control coalesce into a vortex ripe for pivotal action, calling the human condition to return to its divine vocation.

This is what we want January 6 – Epiphany – to be. And not only that, but also the murder of George Floyd and the COVID coronavirus and even the climate crisis that is now so big that even reputable scientists are starting to wonder if the human race itself is at risk.

We want them all together to be a *kairos* moment: signs of the coming reign of God in our time, working overtime to propel every one of us to deeper discipleship. To dedicate ourselves even more profoundly in body and spirit to the beauty that can be, when we who are human live as God intended all along. In humble reverence toward this earth from which we come. In passionate love for God and one another. Treating the rest of creation – human and otherwise – the way we would want to be treated. *With liberty and justice for all.*

Something beautiful is trying to happen. You have to believe it to see it.

What Van Jones says publicly to all who will hear, Jesus says privately to his inner circle of faithful followers in our Scripture lesson for today.

This is the turning point of the ministry of Jesus, midway through the Gospel of Mark

In the beginning of Mark’s Gospel, Jesus commits himself so radically to the coming reign of God – in resistance to the reign of violence and corruption that rules the day – that he surrenders his body and his spirit to that reign of God in his baptism. Jesus commits himself so radically to the coming reign of God that he stares down his inner demons in the desert before he proclaims that peaceable kingdom throughout the towns and villages of Galilee.

By now, fishermen on the edge of subsistence have followed the lead of Jesus. Mothers and grandmothers have taken up the ministry of the coming reign of God. All have joined together in one great non-violent direct action campaign engaging the power of civic and spiritual leaders to recover their divine vocation – and change their current ways – in order to live as God’s Beloved Community.

The backlash has been fierce. Jesus tries to warn his inner circle: The consequence of my ministry will be my death. “If any want to become my followers, let them ... take up their cross and follow me.”

His disciples do not want to hear it. Especially Peter, formerly known as Simon. “The Rock.”

“Rocky” might be a better translation of the humor of the nickname Jesus has given to Simon. The underdog uneducated boxing champion of the Jesus Movement. With the guts and stamina to go the distance. Rocky/Simon/Peter emphatically has *not* joined the ministry of Jesus to take up a cross. The cross is THE primary symbol of violence and corruption in his time. The epitome of all the ugliness Rocky wants to destroy. Rocky/Simon/Peter has no intention of *ever* taking up that ugly instrument of torture. He wants to bury it!

Jesus drags him with James and John to the mountain for a *kairos* moment all their own.

Something beautiful is trying to happen, Jesus is saying to his disciples in this mountaintop moment. Even as we take up the ugliness of the cross. Even as we journey toward Jerusalem and the inevitable violent response that will come. You have to believe it to see it.

Even still, Rocky/Simon/Peter does not get it. He sees the beautiful thing unfolding on the mountain with Jesus, but he does not get it. He is too afraid. Rocky/Simon/Peter does not yet know what it means “to rise up from the dead” – to rise up from the ugliness of the worst humanity can do and be – even though he knows full well the consequences of the worst humanity can do and be – because Rocky/Simon/Peter is still holding on to life as he knows it. A way of life that has been, as Pope Francis says of our current condition, “seriously ill.”

This is where we are, you and I, one liturgical season beyond the Capitol insurrection. Nine months beyond the murder of George Floyd. Eleven months into the global pandemic. Decades in to the climate crisis. Brought to our knees in a human condition that is, currently, seriously ill.

In the midst of that illness, Jesus tells us to pick up our cross, to take hold of the ugliest most violent symbol of hatred and oppression of our time, and follow him to the heart of the centers of power and call them to change their way of life. We see this *Kairos* moment unfolding before us, this moment that calls us to something beautiful, this moment that beckons us toward our divine vocation, but we don’t get it because we are afraid. We are still holding on to life as we have known it, as seriously ill as that life has been.

How many times have we said, “I can’t wait until the pandemic is over, so we can get back to normal”? How many times have we said, “This too shall pass,” – and of course it *will* pass – but not in the sense that we will recover what we have lost.

We do not yet know what it means “to rise up from the dead” because we have not yet fully conceded, in body and spirit, that this way of life cannot continue. There is no going back to what we had before. Even if we wanted to. And we should not want to.

And so we join Peter and James and John coming down from the mountain, moving on from that *kairos* moment, terrified of truly letting go. We still don’t get it, this beautiful thing that is trying to happen, even in the middle of all of this ugliness.

Which leaves us with the same questions as Peter and James and John, as we turn toward the season of Lent. What *does* it mean to rise up from the dead? What *will* it mean on the other side of COVID, as if there will ever in fact be another side? What *could* it mean for the whole of creation, including most especially that part of human creation ravaged by 400 hundred years of white supremacy?

We do not yet know the answer to that question.

What we do know is this: Jesus has told us to take up our cross and follow. To hold up the ugliness and call it what it is. To surrender the way of life that is seriously ill. In order to become that something beautiful God is trying to make happen. That something beautiful we were created to be all along.

So we continue that journey together.

Amen.