

The Seed Must Fall
John 12:20-33
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This weekend, I had the opportunity to spend some time with some of our brothers and sisters in Christ in the area around Poás that was affected by the earthquake earlier this year. Amongst the members of the Vida Nueva Presbyterian Church in San Juan de Poás, mercifully no one lost their life, but many families in that church lost their homes completely, others their jobs, and everyone a peaceful sleep at night. There are still aftershocks nearly every day that recreate some of the sense of terror they experience on January 8. Nearly a dozen families will not be able to rebuild on the land upon which their homes once stood. Dozens more have still received no aid from the government to help make repairs to their partially damaged homes. Those in rental housing are wondering what they will do when that support runs out. They are feeling abandoned because they have been experiencing only governmental roadblocks as they try to rebuild their lives. The ground beneath their feet is once again shifting.

To travel through that area is an experience indeed. Beyond the homes that can be seen from the road, and the fact that virtually the entire town of Cinchona no longer exists, entire landscapes have been changed. Three weeks ago, I had the chance to take the road between Vara Blanca and Heredia, and what was once an idyllic scene of rolling green hills and grazing cows, can now only be described as

lunar, its devastation including the entire sides of mountains stripped of all vegetation, a monochromatic landscape of brown replacing the green. Woe betide the area when the rainy season begins, for there is nothing to hold all that dirt which has been cleared away from the road and reconstructed into hillsides; no grass, no shrubs, no trees. A disaster of one form may simply have preceded another.

In another seismic shift this week, Habitat for Humanity International was forced to lay off more than 70 of its employees worldwide, including nearly a dozen here in Costa Rica, three of whom call ECF their church home. For both those who have been left without jobs, and those who will labor on without the companionship of their friends and former colleagues, the office landscape has changed almost as drastically as the hillsides between Vara Blanca and Heredia, at least emotionally. Mercifully, no one lost their life, but all will be contemplating changes they didn't expect to be making any time soon. While the changes they have experienced may not have all the same implications as those affected by the earthquake, the ground beneath their feet has also shifted again just a few weeks after the same earthquake near Poas made a mess of their office far away in La Uruca. One disaster preceded another.

As we draw closer to Easter during our sojourn in Lent, our texts take us further away from our own repentance and closer to the death of Jesus. "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified," Jesus tells Andrew and Philip, and in

the coded language of the Gospel of John, Jesus is speaking about the time of his death. Whenever Jesus speaks of “the hour,” or “his glory,” it is that hour, or however long it really was, that he spent on the cross, and the hour in which all he came to do was fulfilled. In our passage tonight, he describes what will happen when *that* seismic moment arrives, the event which will take the ground out from under the feet of the whole world: “Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” The spiritual landscape of the world will change completely, and all will be scrambling to find their place in it. The disciples, as we will read about in the weeks following Easter, will contemplate changes they didn’t expect to be making any time soon, for a future they never could have imagined. The powers of this world, the evil and the strife and the terror, will need to regroup to fight a battle they have already lost. Everything will become new.

Another seismic occurrence took place this evening and I hope you felt it. It happened when young Edwin Emery’s head disappeared into the water behind me. It happened as sure as the earthquake in Poas, as sure as the layoffs at Habitat, and as sure as the hour of Jesus’ glory, even if its effects won’t be felt for some time. Edwin’s spiritual landscape has changed, and ours with it. Maybe not today, maybe not next week, but sometime following this evening, Edwin Emery will contemplate changes he didn’t expect to be making any time soon, for a future he never could have imagined. He will realize that the ground beneath his feet has

shifted, movement that will require him to orient himself to his new surroundings. You see, he is a new creation, the old has passed away, and everything has become new. The body of Christ has changed irrevocably, as a new member, and all of his gifts, have been added to the communion of the saints. Can I get an “Alajuela?”

In his letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul says this: “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with Christ by baptism into death, so that, just like Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.” Edwin Emery is now walking in the newness of life. You see, Edwin didn’t just go beneath the surface of the water; he came back up, and thanks be to God for that, on many levels. He has now been buried with Christ, and raised with Christ, and so his life will never be the same. And for that reason, we give thanks to God for Jesus Christ, and for the grain of wheat that fell into the earth and died, so that it could bear much fruit, a harvest that now includes Edwin Emery. That’s the great irony of both Jesus’ death, and our baptisms, right, that death precedes life, rather than the other way around? Once again, God takes the logic and wisdom of the world and twists it into a gift to be shared with that same world.

Jesus makes some grand claims about what his death will mean, few of which we, as his followers, can claim for ourselves, through our literal deaths, or our deaths to sin. We will never save the world no matter how many times we are

baptized. We will never drive out the powers of this world, the evil and the strife and the terror, no matter how many times we might martyr ourselves. And while we may make some new friends along the way, we will never draw all people to ourselves, as Jesus did when he was lifted up. But I do think our deaths do *something* in the same way as Jesus, and that way is seen in the image he gives us of the grain of wheat that dies alone, yet brings a great harvest. As Jesus put it more exactly, “Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat dies, it remains a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” Of course, Jesus is talking about himself; one grain of him is all that is needed for the harvest of the rest of us. But I think that same truth is not far away for us, for the death we die in baptism opens for us a world of possibilities, and a multitude of opportunities to bear fruit.

Let me explain. When Jesus says, “Those who love their life, lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life,” the life he is referring to is a life that is focused elsewhere besides God. It is the life pursuing ends that are not God’s ends, using means that are not God’s means. It is the life of the choice of self over others, or others over self, when either of those choices works at cross-purposes with God’s will for our lives. It is the life that mistakes happiness for joy, and material wealth for abundance. It is the life spent instead of the life lived. And given tonight’s message, perhaps it is best described as the life we believe comes before death, rather than after it. And so what is death?

Following in Jesus’ understanding of death, it is the moment when life begins. It’s

our baptisms, sure, but it is more than that. It's death to sin. It's dying daily. It's leaving behind daily life to find eternal life. It is each decision for God's ends using God's means. It is the key to truly understanding joy and abundance. It is to be cherished, rather than feared, and embraced rather than avoided. I hope it is clear that I'm speaking metaphorically. You see, Christ died, literally, that we might be able to die yet while we live, and live yet though we die, to enjoy the communion he enjoys, both now and forevermore.

I hope you realize what we did when we baptized Edwin Emery. We all pledged ourselves to help him learn how to die, and how to live. We all agreed to look after him and his spiritual welfare. He is our responsibility as much as he is Suzanne's. It is a sacred duty and a gift, this responsibility. It is something that requires our diligence and our own daily dying. You see, we will deceive young Edwin if we lead him to believe that his death to sin in baptism tonight is all that is required of him for eternal live. We will let him down if we do not help him to bring to harvest the abundance of blessing God is calling him to bring to the world. We will have abdicated our responsibility if he grows up only disappointed at how hard life can be sometimes and unable to see the opportunity that hardship presents. His grain fell and died tonight, yes, but it must also fall and die every day if it is to bear fruit.

In both the subtle and the seismic changes that take place in our lives, we always have the choice to live or die. It is rarely an easy choice, but it is a choice.

We have the choice to hold onto our dreams and our goals, our mementoes and our diplomas, our fears and our feelings of inadequacy, our disappointment and our trauma. We have the choice to hold onto what has been, and what could have been. We can choose to live. But we can also choose to die. We can bury those things with Christ, just as we ourselves were buried with him in our baptisms, so that they may be raised up to a newness of life that transforms them into something far more amazing than we ever could have expected. Every thing that happens in our lives is a grain of wheat, that when we let it fall to the ground and die, goes from being a single seed to abundant harvest.

If it sounds like I'm saying that by the sheer force of our wills, we turn our tragedies into triumphs, I've misled you tonight. If we could do that, we'd have no need of God. But you see, it is not the seed laboring away on its own that grows. Rather, it is the soil into which it falls, and the rain that reaches it, and the sun that warms it, all working together to transform the dying seed into something that produces a multitude of life giving grains. That is the promise of the Gospel, that God takes our dying and brings it to life, and all we have to do is slip beneath those waters and let ourselves be lifted out again, in our baptisms and everyday thereafter. May Edwin's baptism tonight, and the remembrance of our own, help us in our daily dying so that we may rise daily with Christ and bear much fruit. Amen.