

A story is told about the Baal Shem Tov, the 18<sup>th</sup> c. Jewish mystic, Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer. He is considered to be the founder of Chasidic Judaism and Rabbi Israel is most often called the Baal Shem Tov, which means “Master of the Good Name.” One day, when the Baal Shem Tov was teaching Torah, one of his students asked him a question about the very reading from Jeremiah that we heard this morning: “I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts.” “Rabbi,” the student asked, “why does YHWH say that he will write the teaching *on* the hearts of the people and not *within* their hearts?” The Baal Shem Tov smiled. “YHWH writes the teaching *on* our hearts,” he answered, “so that when our hearts break, the words will fall in.”

The Baal Shem Tov knew the importance of hearing, reading and studying God’s teaching. Both he and Jesus also knew that for God’s word to be fruitful, it must be planted in the human heart so that it can blossom. The Baal Shem Tov and Jesus knew that the transformation of the human heart often requires the heartbreak of familiar forms falling away so that God can bring forth something new. “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies,” Jesus said in our reading, “it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”

This must come as a bit of a shock to his disciples. John’s Jesus has waited until this transitional moment to let a crowd of people know that he has come to be broken and die, and in that way, will complete his embodied revelation of the loving nature of God. Not what people were expecting to hear; the festival of the Passover is quite near and his followers might have anticipated some mention. Some days earlier, Jesus raised his dear friend Lazarus from the dead and crowds of people, some of whom witnessed the raising of Lazarus, have welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem as the new King of Israel. But none of that.

A group of Greeks asking to see Jesus—with *this* news, Jesus recognized that his time had come. From early in his public ministry in John’s Gospel, Jesus has been watching for and talking about whether his hour had come. At the wedding at Cana, his mother pressed him to help a wedding couple who had run out of wine. Jesus said to Mary, “My hour has

not yet come,” but *still* he provided good wine for the wedding party. Later, when a group that John calls his “brothers” implore Jesus to go to Judea to show himself and what he can do for the world, Jesus refuses by saying again, “My time has not yet come.”

But in today’s reading, Jesus makes his enigmatic announcement: “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. 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.” People may have expected to hear how Jesus, this man who raised Lazarus, intended to use his miraculous power. Or they may have expected to hear how this Jesus, hailed as the new king of Israel, intended to use his political power. No one in the crowd could have expected to hear Jesus say not only that *he* would die, but that “those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.”

The crowd hearing this astonishing announcement includes Jews who have returned from exile who were second-class citizens in the eyes of those Jews who remained in Jerusalem—also there in the crowd. There were also probably Samaritans among them who considered themselves not Jews, but true Israelites. And, of course, there were Romans and Judean authorities or their agents in the crowd, some of whom were already plotting to kill Jesus.

For first century Mediterraneans, the whole world was watching.

And Jesus said to the whole world, “Now my soul is troubled.” “Now my soul is troubled.” There are numerous commentaries—maybe most—that claim that Jesus is troubled about his pending death, as he clearly is in the other Gospels. Maybe. But I wonder.

Death and glory are clearly on his mind. Surely, death and glory are mixed in the hearts of the people in the crowd. And the shadow of death and the glory of God mingled together on the cross are always lurking just beneath the surface in John’s gospel. Jesus’ reference to being lifted up from the earth certainly points to the mystery that will be more fully revealed after the entire paschal event has concluded with his death, resurrection and ascension.

But here's what keeps coming back to me: John's Jesus lays down his life in complete freedom. Jesus, in John's Gospel, is always fully awake to his relationship with God, his origin and his identity. He is crystal clear about his earthly mission. Jesus has a clarity of purpose that he appears to know must be realized *through* the cross. And so when Jesus says to the crowd, "Now my soul is troubled," the character of his words are quite different than his prayer in the garden in Mark's gospel, where Jesus prays for God to "let this cup pass from me." So if it is not his pending death on the cross, then what is troubling Jesus' soul to the point that he would announce it to a crowd?

I am persuaded that Jesus recognized that his hour had come when he saw gathered before him factions from all over the ancient world. A crowd divided. A humanity broken. The passage from Jeremiah describes God's pledge to write the teaching on the hearts of the people. This was God's new covenant given at a time when the Jewish nation was broken, dispirited and crumbling before the prophet's very eyes. God did not abandon the people, even after they had broken their vows and turned their hearts away from God's love and life-giving teachings.

I am persuaded that Jesus, looking with the eyes of the Word made Flesh, saw again a broken, dispirited and crumbling world. I am persuaded that what was troubling the soul of Christ—the Bread of life, the Light of the World—what was troubling the soul of Christ was looking out at a sea of people at odds with each other. What was troubling the soul of Jesus Christ was the sight of people in crisis, and his awareness of the social structures and institutions that serve to hold them captive in crisis.

Does any of this sound familiar? *We* live in a world of fragmentation and dissolution. We act as though we have forgotten that we are not chained to our own desires, habits and perspectives, especially those that are no longer life-giving. *That life* in chains is the life that we lose if we hate it. Those who cling to a life of fear and self-interest will lose even *that* live and gain nothing to replace it.

From time to time, we need to be reminded that Jesus came to set all people free. When the hour came for Christ to draw all people to himself, his obedience to God all the way to cross exposed the forces, perspectives and attitudes of fear, domination and

violence that appeared to rule the world. In this way, Jesus drove out the fearful spirit that opposes God's life-giving love, although we sometimes forget that God has liberated us and that we are awash in God's loving presence. *That* is the life that we are offered for eternity if we lose our love for our fear-motivated life.

The story is told of a great spiritual teacher who lay dying. The teacher's followers pleaded and begged. "Please," they said, "you must not leave us!" "If I do not go," the great master said, "You will never see." "But what is it that we are not seeing now that we will see after you die?" With great love and patience, the teacher looked at the gathering of worried disciples and said, "All I have ever done was to sit on the bank of the river handing out river water. After I die, I trust you will begin to see the river."

Hearts broken open so that God's reconciliation, love and grace can drop in. To see the river is to begin to grow into the freely given gift of glory, the fullness of fruitful life. Jesus did not die to pay some debt to God. Jesus died being true to God, obedient to God, and in so doing showed us that we, too, are free to die to a life shaped by fears defined by human perspectives. In dying on the cross, Jesus broke the power of fear to define us, to shape our lives. Returning to us as the Risen Christ, God offers a river of life, love and liberation to all people.

Only by dying to our fears, letting go of our shame, releasing our identity as powerless victims can God can bring us to greater abundance of life along the path that Christ set out for us. Often, obedience means letting go of patterns of life that have worked in the past. Prayer and worship can help to release us from chains of fear, not to repress our fears, but to turn our eyes always to the Risen Christ beckoning to us even now from the Eucharistic table. Our hearts break open as we die to cherished old perspectives and habits, and in our prayer and worship we consent for God to bring us renewed life in which God will be glorified again and again and again.

"To live in this world," writes Episcopalian Mary Oliver, "you must be able to do three things: to love what is mortal; to hold it against your bones knowing your own

life depends on it; and, when the time comes to let it go, to let it go.<sup>1</sup>”

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpted from “Blackwater Woods,” by Mary Oliver. *New and Selected Poems*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2004.