

Over the last few years, even with the interruption of the pandemic, we have been beginning more of our communal work and study together at Eden with a practice called Dwelling in the Word.

As I was reminded again through bible study this week, we have a lot to be thankful for in the ELCA's persistent and bold invitation to all people to engage in the bible. Luther wrestled the good book out of the hands of the elite 500 years ago and we reap the gifts of God's word because of it abundantly, in individual study and in coming around the Word in community. Both are necessary.

Dwelling in the Word is probably the most fruitful way of coming to the Word in community that I have experienced. Here's how we do it. Before we begin bible study, or council meetings, we start with a passage of scripture. Maybe the story of the Ethiopian eunuch or the woman at the well, the Beatitudes.

Ideally, two people – two voices – will read the chosen passage. We briefly pause in silence after each reading to think a little more about the following,

What catches your attention?

What questions does this passage create for you?

What do you think God might be saying to our faith community through this passage?

Typically, the conversation starts up from there ... whether you're with confirmation students or elders; whether you've read every page of the bible or

hardly one page of it; whether you've read or heard the passage many times before or you are hearing it for the very first time. And the discussion is so fruitful.

It's part of the Faithful Innovations experience our synod is offering right now, and in which Eden will have a team. Faithful Innovations is all about learning to sharpen our senses of discovering where God's Spirit is active in and around us. And then taking time to consider – quite deeply and openly, and with an abundance of creativity – where God is inviting us to enter into that Holy Spirit activity.

It seems to me this is the perfect time for us to engage in this kind of an experience. We've been saying all along this year that God goes with us and is preparing our post-pandemic Promised Land already. It's time to start discerning what God is up to in that re-creation and how God may use us, the children of God, for the benefit of that Divine vision – lest we miss it, right?

For me, Faithful Innovations has been a rich experience and I sent some information about it out this weekend. There are just a couple of spots left on our team and if you would like to join and be part of this Holy Experiment, please respond to that email or get in touch with me.

And for all of you who are not on this initial team, do not worry. Our Great Shepherd doesn't leave even one of us behind. You will hear more about the experience of this team and you can expect to be swept up in the activity of the Spirit too, because once that door is opened, she is hard to resist!

It was with the Dwelling in the Word questions in mind that I approached this reading from John today. There is so much going on here. If you look at the whole of Chapter 12, there's even more. It's a little like drinking from a fire hydrant.

With Dwelling in the Word in mind, and particularly the question: "What do you think God might be saying to our faith community through this passage?" what really jumps out at me is this: "Now is the judgement 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." (John 12:31-32)

First, I thought who is this ruler? The word is used repeatedly in John's gospel. It's used to identify Nicodemus and other members of the elite and powerful judges of the Jewish people. It's also used to describe Jesus' Roman executioner, who held power outside of religion over the Jewish people – and their religious rulers.

The rulers or authorities Jesus is talking about in this gospel are those who held sway, judged and sentenced the Jewish people.

In other words, people who in some fashion, at some time and perhaps still would rather you live in fear of poverty, judgment and the threat of eternal damnation, instead of the peace of God's love and the merciful judgment God has already provided us in Jesus.

We talked about judgment last week. God says the judgment has already been made –the light has already come into the world. And Jesus spells it out quite plainly again at the end of Chapter 12.

“I do not judge anyone who hears my words and does not keep them, for I came not to judge the world, but to save the world. The one who rejects me and does not receive my word has a judge; on the last day the word that I have spoken will serve as judge, for I have not spoken on my own, but (God) who sent me has given me a commandment about what to say and what to speak. And I know that (God’s) commandment is eternal life.” (John 12:47ff, ed)

Jesus is revealing more to us about what he has brought into the world. The merciful judgment already made, *and* the self-righteous and cruel rulers and authorities are driven out and no longer hold sway over God’s people.

The result of this outpouring of mercy into the world through Jesus Christ; the result of this usurping of those who wholly underestimated the God the Jewish people called out to in their distress, is the next line in this Gospel.

And it is a line that shakes the very foundations of the universe – not will shake or has shaken – but shakes, right now and always in the presence of Jesus Christ.

“And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”
(John 12:32)

That is a statement of love so wide and mercy so deep it should stop us in our tracks, right? “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”

What Jesus is saying is that in his sacrifice on the cross and all that comes with it is for all people. This is the cosmic Christ John has been preparing us for from the beginning when John introduced Jesus as God’s Word. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” (John 1:1-5)

In this unexpected and glorious turn of events, it becomes crisp and clear that Jesus goes to the cross for the sake of the long-waiting, long-suffering, often-stubborn and disobedient descendants of Abraham *and* Jesus goes to the cross for everyone else too.

- For the Jewish community he was born into
- For Mary and Martha and Lazarus and all his disciples and followers
- For the Greeks and foreigners who came seeking Jesus; and the Philipps and Andrews they asked to help guide them

- For even the rulers and authorities, many of whom couldn't help their growing belief, but were so afraid to speak it in the light of day

And the same is true today.

The human-fingerprint on God's world has certainly changed a multitude of times since John's Gospel was written down for those early followers of Jesus Christ. But what came into the world because of Jesus Christ and that cross has not changed at all. All people are drawn into the arms of Jesus Christ lifted up from the earth on the cross.

- You and me
- Your kid who you wish would go to church more
- People worshiping in other places on their sabbath days
- The one who persecutes you; the one you persecute
- The families of those who were inexplicably gunned down in GA this week, and all who suffer under the death-dealing burden of stereotypes, dehumanization and bigotry
- And those who are complicit in such atrocities and who perhaps wholly underestimate the God who hears the cries of those who call out in distress

All are drawn into the arms of the uplifted Christ on a cross. It's astounding and appropriately may bring us to our knees as we can no longer avoid it ... and

along with Jesus, we set our faces on Jerusalem as we prepare for Palm Sunday next week, and the solemn and Holy Week that follows ... the bittersweet inevitability of our Christ and that cross.

“And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”

Amen and Amen.