

The Rev. Jerrold Thompson
Sermon for the Fifth Sunday in Lent
St. Mark's on the Campus
April 2, 2006

THE TIME DRAWS NEAR.

We can feel it in the gospel reading for this morning: “. . . unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies,” Jesus tells his disciples, “it remains just a single grain, but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”

Jesus sees the writing on the wall. Not just because he is who he is, but because the world in which he lives—the world in which *we* live—is as it is. He knows that there's sometimes a profound cost to serving God, and Jesus sees that *he* is about to pay *his* cost. The cost can be quite different for each of us.

Jesus doesn't pretend that serving, paying his cost, is easy. He tells his disciples that his soul is troubled. He knows what's coming and he's dreading it, as I suspect all of us would.

Have you ever *dreaded* something? That test for which you really aren't as prepared as you would like to be, if you're prepared at all?

I remember taking an exam in college one time on a D. H. Lawrence novel that I hadn't read. (With all the faculty members in this congregation I feel like I'm making a “true confession”!) By senior year in college I had a sense of what I might be able to get away with in this regard, and I *had* listened closely to the class discussion about the novel so I was able to ace the exam anyway! But I assure you that I didn't walk into that exam with the sense of false security that those comments might leave with you. In fact, despite what I thought I might be able to do, I was, in fact, dreading the exam.

As I was preparing for this morning, I asked my wife Carol about what she dreads.

Like so many of us, Carol dreads funerals. No matter how deep our faith, it can be hard to know that we must walk through those hours of saying goodbye to someone we love. Those hours in which the past and the present merge into an unknown future—a future without that loved walking with us in the flesh.

I remember a girl telling me a story one time about fight she had with her little sister, and how she dreaded being bitten again by her sister. They were fighting over the remote control. In the midst of their struggle, the little sister bit the older sister in the back. In relating the story, the older sister told me about the remote control flying down the basement stairs. Then she said with more wisdom than she realized, “Neither of us got the remote; I had a bite on my back; and she got into big trouble. So fighting didn’t solve anything.”

Even when we learn lessons from experiences, they can be so negative that we dread a repetition of them.

My wife, Carol, also recalled a time when she was walking along a concrete sidewalk and she tripped. She vividly remembers the time between the moment that she tipped and the moment that she hit the concrete—those few moments that seemed to last forever, as she fell, dreading the pain, dreading the ripping of her flesh, literally looking at what was coming and unable to do anything about it.

I, too, remember a time like that. Before I bought the Toyota I drive, I owned a bright green Geo Metro. When one of my clergy colleagues first saw it he asked if I had one for every liturgical season!

I hadn’t ordered a bright green Metro. Initially, I had a very dark bluish purple one—grape, was the color the company called it. It was the only car Carol and I have ever bought new; we don’t buy new cars and we only did this time because Carol’s father was very generously paying for the car and he wanted us to buy a new one.

My little grape car and I were very happy together—for six weeks and 1425 miles. Then one day Andrew and I were driving to the library. Andrew had just turned three and he was strapped in his car seat in the back. Carol was nine months pregnant with Elizabeth, but thankfully they weren't in the car with us.

Andrew and I were tooling along at about thirty-five miles an hour when a full-size Ford Ranger pick-up truck—a big, red monster—as big as this nave, or at least it seemed to be at the time—with an iron bar running along the side of it—this truck turned left in front of us. We were no more than fifty feet apart.

I remember thinking at the time, “This is it.” Those moments between the time that truck turned and the time that it stopped my car were filled with dread.

Needless to say, *that* was not **IT**. I was deeply grateful for air bag technology that day. The car was totaled, Andrew and I were not. I walked away with only broken sunglasses. Andrew had a scrape on his shoulder; he remembered recently how upset he was that we weren't going to the library! Of course *I* thought he was screaming and crying because he was upset about the accident!

My story about that dreaded day ends well.

Jesus' story ends well, too. Ultimately. As *your* story will end well, and as the story of this world in which we live will end well, too. Ultimately.

However, if we are going to serve God, we—like Jesus—are going to walk through some things that we will dread when we see them coming. Sometimes those realities will result from our own failure to get ready for what we know is coming. Sometimes they will result more from our clumsiness about following the way of Jesus. We'll misstep; we'll trip and fall. At other times they will come about because someone is attacking our back, with or without provocation. In the end, neither of us really will benefit. And sometimes we'll dread what's coming when we witness something turn onto our path that we would avoid if we *could*. But

we can't. Whatever its is, it's barreling our way, and the only thing we can do is live with the consequences of whatever happens.

In our reading this morning, Jesus knows that the time is drawing near; this is **IT** for him. "What should I say," he asks. "Father, save me from this hour? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name."

In the face of dreadful circumstances, when you and I are troubled in our souls, we sometimes have a choice about how we are going to respond. At those times, we can ask that—even in the dreadful situation in which we find ourselves—we can pray that God use it for good, that God's name may be glorified through that very situation.

One day we all will face that pick-up truck around which we're not going to keep moving. Between now and then we can pray that we might trust God when our souls are troubled that we might offer our troubled soul to God, and that we might be drawn more and more deeply into the eternal life of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.

As Lent draws to a close, let us focus our hearts on following where Jesus has led the way. For the time draws near.