

March 21, 2021
Fifth Sunday in Lent—Year B
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Jeremiah 31:31-34
Psalm 51:1-13
Hebrews 5:5-10
John 12:20-33

In case we had forgotten, the gospel reading from John offers us yet another reminder that Good Friday is coming. We are headed with Jesus to the cross.

The precipitating event is the arrival of two so-called “Greeks” who want to see Jesus. In this way John tells us that the good news of Jesus has reached the gentile world. Therefore his Earthly ministry is near completion. He can surrender to the inevitable.

Of course, these events aren't just about Jesus or just about God. They're about the world that God so loves. God is gathering all creation to Godself. Therefore Jesus invites his disciples into his surrender. At the same time, he seems to understand that it's not simple or easy. As he puts it here: “Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” John's Gospel is very different from the other three, but all four gospels include a statement much like this. Here, though, Jesus continues, “Now my soul is troubled.”

This week I noticed for the first time that in these two sentences from John “life” and “soul” both translate the Greek word *psyche*. In fact, *psyche* is said to have two meanings; that is, it can mean either (1) the vital animating force for something that has life, or (2) the seat of feelings that has an existence beyond death.¹ I'm still not sure exactly what's going on here, but let's hear those two sentences from John's Jesus again, substituting the Greek: “Those who love their *psyche* lose it, and those who hate their *psyche* in this world will keep it for eternal life.” And: “Now my *psyche* is troubled.”

The translation of *psyche* as “life” in one verse and “soul” in the other goes back at least as far as the King James Version of the New Testament. Maybe there is good reason for translating it in two different ways. On the other hand, maybe there is something to be said for restoring the original duplication. For some reason it just feels different; because that word is familiar to us, it lends some nuance to what Jesus is asking of his disciples. It's not just about changing their patterns of behavior. It's about reorienting everything about their very selves. This must be causing them tremendous existential chaos. It must also be a comfort to know that, right there with them is Jesus, sharing his troubled *psyche* with their troubled *psyches*.

Let's fast-forward a couple thousand years to this group of current-day disciples of Jesus. Troubled *psyches* seem to be the order of the day. Much of this is of course pandemic related. What we know, deeply if imprecisely, is that the pandemic's effect on us goes much deeper than the forced reordering of our patterns of behavior.

This past week my Facebook feed was filled with expressions of pandemic fatigue. A large proportion of my Facebook friends are clergy, so maybe it's just us. But I don't think so. There seems to be a fresh new pandemic wall appearing right in front of us. This week's episode of the public radio program *On Being* was about that. The introduction to the program said this: "The light at the end of the COVID tunnel is tenuously appearing—yet many of us feel as exhausted as at any time in the past year. Memory problems; short fuses; fractured productivity; sudden drops into despair. We're at once excited and unnerved by the prospect of life opening up again."²

That sounds about right to me. Last Sunday I reported feeling greatly uplifted by getting my first dose of COVID-19 vaccine on a beautiful sunny day. But the reality is that my life hasn't actually changed yet, and it will be a while before it does. Therefore, despite that much-needed and much-appreciated syringe-borne infusion of hope, I rather predictably crashed on Monday morning. Coincidentally and inconveniently, on Thursday morning my work laptop crashed, too. I powered my way through the week with sheer determination but little satisfaction.

In that episode of *On Being*, host Krista Tippett interviews clinical psychologist Christine Runyan, who, according to the introduction, "explains the physiological effects of a year of pandemic and social isolation—what's happened at the level of stress response and nervous system, the literal mind-body connection" and "offers simple strategies to regain our fullest capacities for the world ahead."³ I recommend that program to you. The psychologist Runyan talked about how our brains are wired to respond the way they do, offering specific examples of what's going on with them right now. One interesting brief aside noted that the way humans respond to stress is playing out in our current political life. Runyan offered some very simple mental self-care strategies, things we can do that have been shown to *positively* affect brain chemistry, and therefore to help offset the negative. The most important of these, she said, is compassion, including compassion for oneself.

As you no doubt saw in the news this week, the pandemic-related increase in hate crimes against people who are Asian American Pacific Islanders culminated in the murder of eight people in the Atlanta area, six of them Asian women. Once again, as is often the case of late, conservative evangelical Christianity hovers in the background. The crime is indicative of both old patterns and new brazenness. That, too, is often the case of late. The result was a disturbing stew of hatred for Asians, immigrants, women, and sex workers, with a dose of toxic Christian sexual shame thrown in. AAPI communities have been on alert for months.

During the *On Being* interview, it was mentioned that the nervous system has three automatic responses to danger: fight, flight, or freeze. I can sure see how those words describe the reactions of my troubled psyche over the last year.

On the other hand, when I imagine Jesus walking to the cross, I see none of these. Most particularly in the Gospel of John, Jesus is in control, even at the Passion. It's not fight, or flight, or freeze. He is simply doing what needs to be done. At the same time, his troubled psyche seems to remain committed to compassion: compassion for his troubled self, compassion for those troubled disciples, compassion for the world.

Earlier, I said that Jesus surrenders to the inevitable. “Surrender” isn’t quite the right word here, but it’s the best I could come up with. I’m really trying to describe a yielding to a different way of being, or maybe even a sort of diversion of energy. Maybe for us, at least right now, it’s about being less reactive and more intentional, and therefore saving ourselves to do what really needs to be done. I do want to be clear that whatever word is used, it’s not intended to indicate failure or capitulation. After all, farther along in today’s reading, Jesus reminds us that everything he does, including occupy that cross, shows the glory of God. I said that Jesus surrenders to the inevitable, and that he invites his followers to do the same. I think he invites us not just to the surrender, but also to the glory. If that’s true, then we also get the opportunity to demonstrate the glory of God at this time in this world.

We likely have several more months of our weird extended yearlong-plus Lent. But we have only two more weeks of real Lent this year. Maybe a good use of that time would be to be conscious of the tendency fight, flight, or freeze—to notice when they start to kick in, and to try to set them aside. We might even replace them with surrender to the glory of God: surrender to compassion, surrender to love, surrender to reconciliation, surrender to the demonstrations of new life breaking out all around us.

Notes

¹ ψυχή (*psychē*, Strong’s G5590), *Blue Letter Bible*, available online at

<https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strongs=G5590&t=KJV> (accessed March 21, 2021).

² “Christine Runyan: What’s Happening in Our Nervous Systems?” an episode of *On Being with Krista Tippett*, March 18, 2021, available online at <https://onbeing.org/programs/christine-runyan-whats-happening-in-our-nervous-systems/> (accessed March 21, 2021).

³ *Ibid.*