

March 21, 2021, St Luke's, Eastport, The Ven. Lauren Welch

5 Lent, Jeremiah 31:31-34, John 12:20-33, Ps 119:9-16

In the name of Our God who reigns in the power that is Love.

Nature knows the principle of life and death and has a way of teaching us many things. This time of year winter is changing into spring; darkness is giving way to more light. Nature all around us is waking up from the sleep of winter.

I have a crepe myrtle tree in my front yard and I marvel as I look out my window and see this tree which looks dead. It is in need of pruning which will happen very soon. We will remove the twiggy growths, all the crossing branches, all the branches growing toward the center of the tree. We will also remove the basal suckers that originate from the root system of the tree. Then gradually we will remove side branches to expose the bark of the trunks. It literally will look like dead trunks standing. Some people even refer to this as Crepe Murder!

And yet deep underground the root system of the crepe myrtle is being nourished. Come June we will see signs of life, and by August the tree will be in full majestic bloom of luscious green leaves and beautiful pink flowers. A transformation that looks impossible at this time.

Jesus understood nature and in today's Gospel tell us, "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."

John tells us that Jesus is talking about his death on the cross. This hour that has come for Jesus is associated with his obedience and servanthood. If we are to follow Jesus and receive God's honor, our call is to follow this way of obedience and servanthood—a way that may be painful.

Although the cross is the center of our faith, it is not always the first story we share and reflect concerning Jesus. We are more likely to share the stories of Jesus's healings (the man born blind, raising of Lazarus), the miracles (the wedding at Canaan, feeding of the 5000); stories of the compassion, love and inclusion Jesus offers.

Lent is a season in the church when we reflect on what is dying and needs pruning in our lives; because it is not serving us well, or is already beginning to decay. We have the opportunity to begin nurturing something new that will enhance our lives so that we will more fully blossom into beloved children of God.

We all learn behaviors, ideas, biases, prejudices, stereotypes, and beliefs, that become the lens through which we navigate our world. Then one day we begin to acknowledge that the world may be more or different than we thought. We have the opportunity to choose what we will believe and how we will act differently. Choosing to let go of old ways that once we thought

served us well may be painful because we have held them so long. Letting go can feel like something inside of us is dying and will never be the same. There is grieving for what was and is lost in the letting go. And yet it is the only way to allow new growth, new life to emerge and blossom.

Acknowledging, and letting go of anger, resentment and bitterness that can be harmful by increasing our heart rate, and blood pressure, by causing all kinds of health issues— that acknowledging and letting go might open space in our hearts to seek forgiveness and to forgive ourselves and others more readily. (We all make mistakes and do things that we wish we had not done) Such acknowledging and letting go might even help in lowering heart rate and blood pressure!

Recognizing and letting go the myth black and white history are separate opens us to explore a more complete and complicated history of the United States of America.

We begin to acknowledge the accomplishments of all people living in each era. We might have celebrated Vivien Thomas in the 1940's as an African American surgical technician, who without any college degree, became a surgery research pioneer. He is most famous for developing the procedure to treat blue babies (cyanotic heart disease). This procedure became known as the Blalock-Taussig Shunt (named after the cardiologists who first performed the procedure. It was not until 2003 when PBS produced a documentary *Partners and Hurt* Johns Hopkins Hospital gave credit to Vivien Thomas. Hopkins now has a portrait of Vivien Thomas recalling his accomplishments. This is only one example among hundreds of black scientists, inventors, educators, and artists who changed our life that are not well known to white people because we do not know our all-inclusive history. Pete Stark reminded us enslaved people's talents were exploited and not given due credit. We may never know all -enslaved people contributed to our history.

It is so important Briayna Cuffie is writing the Black History of Eastport. This history has the potential to create a more compassionate Eastport; a Community seeing Christ in the other uniting as one community through her stories.

Of course to know a comprehensive history of the United States we would examine the legacy of slavery instituted to benefit the white economy. How that legacy continues once slavery is abolished through the black codes, Jim Crow, lynching and present day mass incarceration. This is painful to confess. Yet, it is by confronting past evils, deciding to repent, desiring to restore broken relationships, broken promises, broken policies and providing restitution for damages and harm perpetrated reconciliation is possible.

Instead of perpetuating white internalize superiority, we intentionally choose to develop and nurture relationships with our black and brown siblings. It means spending quality time together. We may go out of our comfort zone to connect with each other; our lives are so separated

Once we begin to have meals together, to plan programs and attend cultural / church events together, we begin to share our lives on a deeper level. We have a chance to listen to one another's stories without discounting thoughts or feelings and without judgement. We begin to trust one another. We rejoice in the creativity, perseverance, knowledge, wisdom of our black/brown siblings; and lament with their pain; with the injustices still prevailing in our communities. Then following their leadership we work together to change public policies of inequity and injustice to repair the brokenness. It takes intentionality, time and learning to value other ways of being and doing.

As we begin to develop relationships and to know the other, whoever the other may be, we begin to know God more deeply. Our world view enlarges and includes more of God's creation as good. We see more clearly the Christ in each one we meet and in all creation.

In our first reading, God tells Jeremiah that God will put God's law within the hearts of his people--write that law in their hearts; so that they will know God within themselves. Developing a contemplative relationship with God and spending quiet time prayerfully listening to God, as today's psalm says "to meditate on God's commandments and give attention to God's ways" is a process of letting go of productivity and just being with the source of our life.

Creating a deeper relationship with God in quietness and silence, we might hear the still small voice of God calling us, be more attentive to insights, and come to truly know God dwelling within.

St Luke's is praying, listening and discussing racial injustices, racial inequalities. How you might address these issues to create beloved community at St Luke's and in the surrounding community.

I wonder as we go into this last week of lent before Holy Week, what might we need to continue to prune that separates us from God, one another and creation?

The crepe myrtle needs to be pruned every year because it only blooms from new growth. Lent gives us the time each year to prune our own lives of what is no longer serving us, or is dying. This so new life can begin to blossom in us as we become more fully who we are created to be.

The opportunities for a new world order where all are welcomed and all empowered to thrive are limitless if we let go of what is dying around us and choose to embrace what is "loving, liberating and life giving."