

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

March 21, 2021 – LENT 5 YR. B

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: “*Going the Distance with Jesus*”

Jeremiah 31:31-34 (God’s promise to be with His people)
Psalm 51:1-13 (A plea for God’s mercy and forgiveness)
Hebrews 5:1-10 (God designated Christ as our High Priest for all time)
St. John 12:20-33 (Jesus’ crucifixion will draw many to God to receive His salvation)

I imagine most of you have experienced at some time or another what could be called “a point of no return.” It may have been during a wilderness hike, a long car ride, when you were working on a project, or even in a conversation or a relationship. It’s that point at which it’s too late to turn around and start over. You’re in too deep, and you have to follow through to the finish.

I guess you could say I found myself in just such a situation when I first came to St. John’s. I left the church one dark, foggy evening, and missed turning onto 322 West from Route 10 North. Eventually, I found myself heading onto the Pennsylvania Turnpike toward Reading with no U-turns available. This was definitely a point of no return! Okay, I *did* know how to get home to Cornwall from Reading—but that entailed an additional 45-minute (stressful and tiring) drive.

In life, the point of no return often coincides with the moment when we consider giving up. It could be that thigh-burning switchback you skied through as you hurtled downhill; the impossible hours of overtime you put in; or the ridiculous amount of mileage to the next Turnpike exit. Usually the awareness that we cannot turn back originates in the desire to turn back.

Our Gospel lesson for this last Sunday in Lent lets us in on a moment when Jesus openly discusses His having passed the point of no return. It is when Jesus—who, remember, is fully God and fully man—acknowledges that He is “troubled.” Even so, He declares His intention to follow through on the task for which He came to Earth: To save the world through His suffering, death, and resurrection. But Christ also admits that He is aware of the difficulty of the task He is about to accomplish; it is not easy.

The conversation depicted in John, Chapter 12 comes after Christ’s triumphal entry into Jerusalem that was the beginning of His torturous path to the Cross. Jesus is hanging out in Jerusalem when the disciples come to Him with word of some admirers who want to meet Him. Instead of doing what seems like the natural thing and acknowledging His fans, Jesus begins telling the disciples that He is going to die. Now, Jesus is famous for His seemingly strange timing. Although it may *seem* “off,” His timing is always perfect.

Jesus begins to share with His friends what it means to be a servant of Christ, and what it will take for those who want to share in His life. He speaks of how a single seed will remain only a small, impotent kernel, unless it is buried in the ground, where it shucks off its shell to become a plant that will later produce many seeds. He continues this teaching by saying that if they love their life they will lose it, but only if they don’t care so much about their life in this world will they keep it—for eternity. Then, as if the idea of dying to self and hating one’s own life was not dramatic enough, Jesus declares that His true servants will follow Him wherever He goes. And a few days later He walks intentionally to the Cross. No doubt, His disciples felt the burn.

For not only was this the point of no return for Jesus, but also, it was the point of no return for followers of Christ, whether the original disciples, believers throughout history, or us, sitting in our comfortable pews in a heated church in 2021. For if we accept Christ’s invitation, we will either lose everything, or gain everything. This kind of a challenge does not come with cautious, middle- of-the-road options. It’s an all-or-nothing decision: hold on to your measly weak life forever and remain in eternal darkness; or let go of yourself—*your* priorities, plans, ideas—and live forever in God’s Light.

Living fully in Christ is not just *saying* you’re a Christian, putting a little Jesus fish on your car, or showing up for Mass on Sunday. Being a faithful follower of Jesus requires that we go where He goes—to the lost, the poor, and the needy; experiencing humiliation and finding humility; serving rather than being served; loving unconditionally; and allowing ourselves to be led by His Holy Spirit.

It means dying to ourselves that we might live in Him. It requires us to take a good, hard look at our lives and begin cutting out whatever comes between us and our ability to serve God and others. It means that we don't stand up for ourselves and act in our own power, but rather, that we submit to and rely on God.

What God sent Jesus to do was not easy or simple. What God calls us to do will not be easy or simple, either. If Jesus was “troubled” by the magnitude of the sacrifice required of Him, we too will need to push through our fears and anxieties to do what is required of us, following where He leads.

Thankfully, Christ's sacrificial death and glorious resurrection are sufficient for all time, meaning that we don't have to save the world—or ourselves. Only Jesus could do that for us, and He *did!* But following Him into abundant life now and eternal life later will require us to persevere through the difficult stretches. It will mean we have to hang in there when we feel we may have reached the point of no return and long to be back in that familiar place on a road we recognize. There is no courage in pretending we have no concerns about following Christ. Rather, there is courage in acknowledging our fears, then moving forward anyway. For, directly after we see Christ admit His heart is troubled, we see His resolve to go forward and do what God has called Him to do.

And because He does, God the Father sends powerful encouragement. When Jesus declares, “Father glorify your name,” a voice comes from heaven: “I *have* glorified it and I will glorify it *again!*” This endorsement straight from Heaven provided affirmation that what Jesus was about to do was sanctioned and blessed by the Father. Later, followers of Jesus would experience persecution, imprisonment, torture, and martyrdom. Through it all, I'm sure the Lord helped to remind them of who Jesus is, and that their perseverance through difficult times would bring glory to God.

As we head into the final days of Lent, and prepare to walk the way of the Cross with Jesus during Holy Week, we are presented with an opportunity to purposefully *let go and let God*. I invite us to use these days in the Church year to continue exploring through prayer and repentance what it might mean for us to truly die to ourselves, so that Christ can give new life to whatever circumstance we are facing. Then, *let go and let God*, so that we can learn to value nothing higher than eternal life with Him.

Although at first glance it may seem strange that Jesus goes from hearing about people who want to meet Him to talking about His death, the timing was no accident. For, just as His disciples came to Him with the news of more people who wanted to meet Him, Jesus begins to explain the way in which all persons throughout history—regardless of age, race, or country of origin—could come to know Him.

Those so-called admirers, some unbelieving Greeks, merely wanted to snap a selfie with the notorious rabbi. But instead, Our Lord was about to accomplish what would save them from death and hell. Christ declares: “When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all men to myself,” explaining that through the power of His death and resurrection, He would ensure that *every person ever born* would have the same chance to meet and hang out with Him—and that includes you and me.

This morning, each of us is faced with passing the point of no return with Jesus. You can go where He goes, do what He does, be led by His Holy Spirit, enter into a blessed intimacy with God, and be empowered by His love. Or, you can sit in your pew week after week and keep on with business as usual. You can continue to be a slave to the same old insecurities and frustrations, or you can choose to focus on service to others, and spreading the merciful and compassionate love that motivated Christ to die for us. You can use these final days of Lent as an exercise in letting go and letting God, or you can continue on with your plans for Easter baskets for the grandkids or what you'll wear to church that day. The choice is yours—no turning back.*

Let us pray: Lord Jesus, give us grace to leave behind our old lives, to lay our anxieties and self-absorption at the foot of Your Cross, and to follow You wherever You lead, for only then can we truly live. We ask this in Your Holy and precious Name. Amen.

* Inspired by “The Point of No Return,” *Preacher's Magazine* (Lent/Easter 2009).