



The Promise of Trouble

John 20:20-33

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This passage is, essentially, the beginning of the end for Jesus. The setting is in Jerusalem, during Passover. Some Greeks show up in town and they make one simple request. "We wish to see Jesus," they say, which makes all sorts of sense if you consider the events that have taken place. This Jesus they wish to see is the man who changed water into wine at a wedding in Cana. He's the one who talked to Nicodemus under cover of night and the Samaritan woman in broad daylight. He fed thousands of people a satisfying meal with nothing more than the scraps in a schoolboy's lunchbox. He asked people to consider their own sins before casting stones at someone else's. He gave sight to a man who had been blind since birth, and said no more should we assume that sickness or injury was the result of mistaken living. He caused everyone to start thinking hard about everything they'd always taken for granted, and then, this was the real kicker, when his friend Lazarus died, he walked straight into the tomb and told the dead man to get up, cast his grave clothes aside, and come back to life. And with God as his witness, that's exactly what happened, meaning not even death was safe from this guy, this prophet, this teacher, this ... Jesus.

"We want to see Jesus," the Greeks said, and they certainly weren't the first to say it. The more he did, the more he healed, the more he challenged, the more attention he

garnered. That's why he had thousands to feed in the first place — wherever he went, people were following. People wanted to see Jesus. Some, I'm sure, were excited, and others were afraid, and others still were just annoyed or downright agitated.

But the Greeks who wish to see Jesus, they were the first out-of-towners to ask. These Greeks weren't local folks who heard about him from their next door neighbor or at the market picking up some fish. These Greeks were Gentiles from across the sea, which meant word about Jesus was spreading — far, and fast. And Jesus knew — he knew the way only the Father's Son could know — that when the authorities heard about this, they would redouble their efforts to arrest him. After all, he was already a dead man walking for making a dead man walk. After Lazarus was raised, the chief priests and the Pharisees came together and determined, "If we let this man go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then what will happen to us and everything we hold dear? It is better to have one man die than to have the whole nation destroyed."

All of which is to say: when those Greeks show up and say, "We wish to see Jesus," Jesus knows his end is beginning. And so he says to his friends, "My soul is troubled."

The way that we tend to interpret this statement and the way that I have preached it before is to suggest that Jesus is grieved and

distressed, that he is enduring inter turmoil about what he knows is being asked of him, about what he knows will befall him.

Today, at least, I am no longer convinced that is what Jesus means when he says his soul is troubled. I am no longer convinced for a variety of reasons, including what I have learned about and from John Lewis. Mr. Lewis was a political activist who served in the House of Representatives for Georgia's fifth congressional district until he died last summer. He dedicated his life to protecting and advancing the rights of Black people in the United States. He was one of the original Freedom Riders and he led the first march from Selma to Montgomery across the Edmund Pettus Bridge. It is impossible to talk about civil rights or the end of legalized segregation without talking about John Lewis.

In his memoir, he wrote, "My parents told me in the very beginning as a young child, when I raised the question about segregation and racial discrimination, they told me not to get in the way, not to get in trouble, not to make any noise." Given the history of race-based violence in our country, that advice was understandable. But later in life, Lewis would become famous for encouraging Americans to engage in "good trouble, necessary trouble," trouble that is willing to travel down a long, hard road in its commitment to the pursuit of justice.

Mr. Lewis' affinity for the phrase "good trouble" prompted me to dig even deeper into Jesus' words to his friends. "My soul is troubled," Jesus says. But the Greek *tarasso* offers a very specific nuance I had never noticed before, in large part because I hadn't gone looking for it before. It is "to stir up, to trouble, to agitate, to distress, to grieve," yes, but then there is a little note tucked into parentheses, printed in a smaller font, that says, "in the sense of stirring up or setting in motion that which prefers to remain still and at ease."

"My soul is troubled," Jesus said, "and it is for this reason that I have come to this hour."

"My soul, the very center of my being, is stirring up that which prefers to remain still and at ease in this world. It is for this reason that I have come this hour."

Stirring up that which prefers to be at ease sounds like an incredibly accurate and succinct description of Jesus' entire ministry. Upsetting the status quo where evil and illness and ignorance carry the day. Upsetting the status quo where individual security is prioritized above communal flourishing. Upsetting the status quo where death wins again and never looks back.

"Very truly, I tell you," Jesus says, "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. Those who love their life, lose it, and those who hate their life in this world, will keep it." These words of his are hard to hear. But Jesus always knows what we need to hear most. And while sometimes it is, "Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid," and sometimes it is, "In my father's house there are many rooms," and sometimes it is, "I am light of the world, I am the good shepherd, I am the resurrection and the life," other times it is, "Why are you still so slow-witted," and, "Woe to you," and, "Those who love their life, will lose it, and those who hate at their life in this world, will keep it."

What we most need to hear from Jesus is not always what we want to hear. W. H. Auden once wrote, "I believe in Jesus because he fulfills none of my dreams, because he is in every respect the exact opposite of what he would be if I could have made him in my own image." And by that standard, Auden said, if we do not resent Jesus and all he asks of us at least a little bit, perhaps we have yet to love him enough or understand him adequately.

Because what we most need to hear from Jesus is not always what we want to hear. And what Jesus knows his followers need to

hear, back in Jerusalem during Passover and here in Columbia today, is that if we love our lives too much, if we do everything we can to protect our lives the way they are — if we successfully prevent change, avoid conflict, skip over pain — then at the end, we will find out that we really had no real life at all. But if we hate our lives in this world, which means if we hate all the ways we compromise our lives by chasing comfort, safety, and superiority in this world — if we hate that enough to stop chasing it and start chasing God, well, then, there will be more life than we know what to do with.¹

Those are the choices Jesus offers Andrew and Phillip and anyone else who was there to overhear. They are the choices available to him, too. The way of self-preservation is safe, and if Jesus loved his life enough to save it, he could have. But he loved something else more than his life. He loved the life he knew all of us could have if he was willing to give his up. Because a grain of wheat cannot grow unless it dies. For the seed to do what it was meant to do, it has to be given up. It has to fall into the earth and surrender everything it might have been all on its own. It has to allow itself to be buried, to sit in the dark, in the quiet, under pressure, until its hour comes, when it cracks wide open and new life springs forth — a green shoot that will climb toward the sun until it breaks through the soil, becoming golden and strong, a stalk of wheat that will become the bread of life, ready to feed the world, ensuring that no one will ever go hungry again.²

That is what trouble, good trouble, can promise us. Because good trouble can turn seeds into stalks. Good trouble can turn grain into glory. Good trouble takes the world as it is today and insists there is something more.

Which means good trouble always comes with a cost. It asks us to give up something of ourselves in service of something bigger.

But hear this, too — good trouble is always, always, always a choice. This is an important word. For there is so much trouble in this world that is not a choice — and there is nothing good about famine or abuse or genocide and there is nothing good about the murder of Soon Chung Park, Hyun Jung Grant, Sooncha Kim, Young Ae Yue, Xiaojie Tan, Daoyou Feng, Delania Ashley Yuan, and Paul Andre Michaels in Atlanta this past week. The pain and the fear and the grief that the Asian American Pacific Islander community has felt and is feeling is the sort of trouble no one should ever have to endure. It is the result of sin and evil, plain and simple. Good trouble is always a choice, a choice we can accept or reject, but a choice that ultimately shouts down death in all its forms, a choice that Jesus made and never looked back.

It's funny, in a way. Right after Lazarus was raised, the authorities gathered together, and they said, "If we let this man go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then what will happen to us and everything we hold dear? It is better to have one man die than to have the whole nation destroyed." But Jesus knew differently. Jesus knew better. "If a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies," he said, "it becomes so much more than a single grain. It will bear much fruit. It will bear more fruit than you can ever imagine. It will bear enough fruit to feed the whole world and nourish it into a new day, a day where those who follow me will be strong enough and sure enough that they will get into some very good trouble all on their own."

¹ This reflection on what it means to hate our lives comes from Barbara Brown Taylor.

² This imagery of the seed falling to earth and surrounding, then growing to feed the world, comes from Barbara Brown Taylor.