

The Lutheran Church of the Atonement
Florissant, Missouri
Fifth Sunday of Easter -- Year B
May 1-2, 2021
Acts 8:26-40; First John 4:7-21
St. John 15:1-8

Today's Gospel reading all but invites us to go on a late night walking tour of Jerusalem. John has reported that, the supper being over, Jesus and His disciples have left the Upper Room, where they have gathered, a site traditionally understood to be on the south side of the Old City. Now, they are to make their way through the city, and across the Kidron Valley to the Garden of Gethsemane, an olive grove on the east side of the city, where they have found accommodations for the Passover. Our route, of necessity however, will take us up the Temple Mount and past the imposing sight of the Temple itself. And, there on the façade of the temple our tour group will see one of its most memorable, most unmistakable features, the Golden Vine of the Temple, the vine which depicted one of the most consistent metaphors of their Hebrew Bible, Israel as YHWH's "true vine," brought out of Egypt by YHWH, Israel's God, and planted in the land that YHWH had promised,...a golden vine with 12 golden branches spiraling down the imposing pillars that guarded the entryway, each representing one of the 12 tribes of Israel.

And, as our walking tour now approaches the Temple heights, Jesus does not even need to point, as all eyes are drawn to the Golden Vine, and -- as He has just done at the Supper -- Jesus takes a piece of their history and He transforms it. He re-interprets it, according to YHWH's plan of rescue for His people, indeed, for the whole human family. And, Jesus says, "I am the true vine,...I am the vine," He says, "and you -- you Twelve -- are the branches."

But, perhaps remembering that of the original 12 branches only two remain in any form, He has our walking tour turn around and look back to the south to the infamous Valley of

Hinnom, where, even at this late hour, the smoke and the stench are still rising. For the Valley of Hinnom is Jerusalem's garbage dump. In fact, the Valley of Hinnom, the Gai Hinnom, from which the word "Gehenna" is derived -- one of the New Testament's words for "hell" -- the Gai Hinnom was a place of continual burning, a place of perpetual fire. And, yet, those on the tour need not be reminded of the Gai Hinnom's sorry history. For, the Gai Hinnom was the abominable place, that cursed place, where, under the leadership of Kings like Ahaz and Manasseh, their ancestors, our ancestors, the ancestors of YHWH's own people, had sacrificed their children to the pagan god Moloch, an abhorrent activity which, not surprisingly, had called down the judgment of God. And, even now, our little tour group is reminded, the fire continues to burn, to burn up all that is useless and unproductive. This is a place of curse. And, our tour guide makes the connection. "You are the branches, He says, but those branches which do not bear fruit, He says, will be "gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned."

Our tour guide gives His little group a moment to reflect. No, we haven't sacrificed our children to gods like Moloch. But, perhaps, we have made idolatrous sacrifices nonetheless, sacrifices to gods with names like success or security, like reputation or influence, like amusement or pleasure.

But, the hour is late. Our walking tour must keep moving. So, we turn back, and, once again, our eyes are drawn to that magnificent Golden Vine. And, our tour guide's words continue to echo in our ears. "I am the true vine,...and you are the branches;....if you abide in me you will bear much fruit;...you cannot bear fruit unless you abide in me;...my Father is glorified, as you bear much fruit;...but, if you fail to bear fruit, you will be pruned, so that other branches may bear fruit."

And, now, as our tour group makes its way toward the Garden under the light of the bright Passover moon, another light begins to break. For, if Jesus is "the true vine," then, Jesus is the true Israel. He is the One in whom all of Israel's story will now come together. He is the One who will now accomplish God's purposes, when, all too often, Israel herself had failed. He will now be the One to rescue God's family from the curse of sin and death. He will be the One whose "branches" will now reach out to the world with God's "fruits" of faith, hope, love, peace, and joy -- the fruits of which He Himself had so often spoken, as recently as this evening's supper.

And, now, as our little group descends into the Kidron Valley, one of our number starts quietly singing the Psalm, the familiar Psalm, the Psalm about the vine, the Psalm about the vine brought out of Egypt and planted and tended by God, the Psalm about the vine which failed to bear good fruit. Now, others join in the song: "Have regard for the vine you have planted, O God,...restore your vine, O Lord."

"Restore your vine, O God," we sing as our walking tour draws to a close, as we make our way up and out of the valley and enter into the Garden. Our tour guide goes on now. He seems preoccupied, and He needs time to pray. Our group is quiet now. None of us is a vintner, but each of us remembers that branches that turn in on themselves cannot bear fruit, but must first grow outward toward the light. And, under the bright light of that Passover moon, we see Him fervently in prayer, praying that, perhaps beginning in this Garden, He might undo the curse brought down by humanity's disobedience in another Garden, that He might undo that curse -- and so accomplish Israel's purpose -- through His obedience in this Garden.

Yes, our walking tour is over, but His summons to abide in Him remains. His urging to bear the fruit of faith, hope, love, peace, and joy remains. The others, it seems, have

fallen asleep. But, perhaps, we should remain awake. Perhaps, we should abide in Him. Perhaps, we should continue to follow, through whatever this night brings. And, perhaps, when the Sabbath is over, we should resume our tour, but in another Garden,...as the morning breaks and the light returns,...on the Festival of First Fruits. Amen