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The Rev. Dr. Andrew Armond (03/17/2024, Fifth Sunday in Lent)

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Let us pray, Almighty God, be the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts, the acceptable in thy sight, O Lord our strength and our redeemer, in the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we pray, Amen.

The speech of the wild was a 2007 film based on the 1996 book of the same name by the adventure writer John Crackauer. It tells the story of a young man, Chris McCannless, who had everything going for him, at least according to the way that we typically measure value and worth. He was bright, earnest, and motivated. He had a scholarship to Emory University in Atlanta, but he also had a deep spiritual longing, not for organized religion, which he had already rejected, but for the truth of life that he found in nature. Like the romantics of the 19th century, people who were deeply affected by the second industrial revolution, people who were concerned about the countryside of England and parts of Europe sort of being turned over into industrial wastelands. McCannless was deeply disappointed with this world, a world that he found to be deeply disenchanted, a world with nothing pure left, no pure experiences, no pure natural beauty unspoiled by the stain of human touch, a world in which people turned on one another, a world in which no one could be trusted, a world in which everyone was greedy and selfish, a world in which technology had turned people into automatons with no originality, no curiosity, no pure love of life to be found, Chris wanted to get away from society, and I was going to show you the clip where he says this in the film, but I couldn't show it in church.

But he's sitting in a bar with a character played by Vince Vaughn, and when I used to show this film to my students, when I used to teach this story, they loved this, right? He was sitting around and he just started saying, society, society man, society. This thing that he found to be is just so corrupt, this thing that he just wanted to get away from, and so he did. He got out and he headed out for the great wilds eventually of Alaska. He had many adventures and he made it for quite a while in this Bohemian lifestyle, but it eventually caught up with him on the Stampede Trail, miles from civilization. He found a solitude and the quiet that he had craved his whole life. He found this closeness to nature, but he was dying because he had made one mistake. He had eaten a poisonous plant. He thought it was a potato plant and it was a poisonous plant. And so as he's dying, he's still writing and keeping his diary, and he wrote this, happiness only real when shared. There was much Chris probably got right about the spiritual vacuum of the modern world. It is true that we are far removed from the ways of our ancestors. We're far removed from the sources of life, from the seasons, from agricultural festivals that made sense to people of previous generations, but that don't mean very much to us anymore. Just ask any kid who wants to know what's really in a chicken nugget. In Chris, I think was right about sin, though he wouldn't have used that theological term. It is easy to become disenchanted with ourselves and with the people around us. It's easy to expect more of them and ourselves to see just how often we seem to fail. Even us good people, us church-going people, we can't seem to get it right, no matter how hard we try. And I think Chris was right about a third thing, not just the individual failings of individual human beings, but this sense that he had that there are systems of sin that entangle us and others in their grip, like these tentacles going out. Even not just on a personal level, but on a systemic level. There are systems of oppression, systems that dehumanize, systems that as our baptismal covenant puts it, are the evil powers of this world, which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God.

These are the systems of the world that lead to what's happening in Haiti right now.

What's happening in Gaza right now?

What's happening in Ukraine right now?

Systems of sin, like tiny rivulets joined together to this mighty river that is carrying away hundreds, thousands in its torrents and waves, carrying starvation, disease, chaos and violence.

Jesus says, now is the judgment of this world.

The Greek word there is crisis.

Now is the focal point.

Now is the crisis moment.

Now is the moment of decision for this world.

Now he says the ruler of this world will be cast out.

And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.

I want you to imagine that you are a first century Palestinian Jew, hearing this miracle worker say this.

You have been expecting the restoration of the kingdom of Israel for hundreds of years.

It's something that your parents and your grandparents and your great grandparents have been talking about.

A leader who will eventually emerge and stop the oppression of your people.

The constant stream of empires who have swept through your homes and towns, taking those homes and your children and your most precious yet few possessions, carrying off your scholars and teachers to foreign lands, disrespecting your most deeply held traditions.

And now the ruler of this world, he's about to be talking about the emperor of Rome, right?

Now this person will take his rightful place as the rightful ruler of Israel.

What a cause for hope, what a miracle.

And then this miracle of miracles dies a criminal's death on a shameful tool of Roman torture.

Talk about disillusionment, despair, anger and confusion.

And yet we still want and expect God to work this way.

We still want and expect God to show up as a political leader who will carry off our

enemies and remake society in the way we want it to be.

We still expect God to show up in power, not weakness, in violence, not peace, in vengeance, not forgiveness, in eating out punishment, everyone who deserves it, except us.

Not in offering every offender grace and mercy.
We still expect God not to die in the first place, but to fit nicely
and neatly into the
box that we have so carefully made for God.
And God, thank God, is still in the business of breaking that box
apart, of breaking apart
our expectations of who God is and what kind of work we think God
should be doing.
Jesus is trying to join 12 to communicate through this simple,
beautiful metaphor that
you see has to be buried in the earth before it can spring to new
life.
Things have to die before they can live again.
You know this.
There are things in your life that have died so that something else
could have been born
and risen to new life.
And maybe this morning something in you needs to die so that God can
raise something else
new in you.
I think our lives are a series of little deaths and resurrections,
right?
Our friendships die and are resurrected.
Our marriages die and are resurrected.
Our jobs, our joys, our sorrows, our health and sickness, our grief
and hope.
And each season of life something dies and something new is born.
If we wish to see Jesus as these Greeks said, we wish to see Jesus.
And to know Jesus, we must look to the cross.
There's no other way in which we can see Him because God died on the
cross.
So that we might have many resurrections in our lives and an ultimate
final resurrection
after each of us dies.
If we are looking for hope, we must look to the cross.
And the death of God on the cross lies our greatest hope.
Jesus has told parables before of sowing seed and waiting for God to
provide the fruit
and the blessing.
But he had come to the realization that he was, himself, the sea of
eternal life, the
one who had to be planted in the ground so that you and I and
countless others could be
grafted onto his vine so that our branches could be connected to him
and therefore to one
another as well.
The judgment of this world, the crisis of this world, the driving out
of the ruler of
this world happens on the cross, not on a battlefield, not with Jesus
on a war horse.

It happens when we are faced with a love too deep for words and we turn away from it and anger and fear and shame because it's too good to be true. We can't believe how easy it is and we turn into ourselves as a result.

It happens when God becomes completely vulnerable.

As the prayer book says, stretching out his arms of love on the hardwood of the cross so that everyone might come within the reach of his saving embrace. It happens every time we worship, every time we walk in the way of God's love, every time we repent and return to the Lord, every time we baptize, every time we celebrate the sacraments of holy communion, every time we extend the kindness of God to a family member, every time we extend the mercy of God to a stranger, every time we decide to walk away from the evil powers of this world that corrupt and destroy the creatures of God, every time we confess the faith of Christ crucified, the one who triumphs over the ruler of this world through the vulnerability of love, not through the violence of conquest.

Every time we accept God's free gift of grace in the crucified one, the one who died and the one who bears much fruit in you and me.
Amen.