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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
3/25/2012, The Fifth Sunday in Lent  
Jeremiah 31:31-34, Psalm 119:9-16, Hebrews 5:5-10, John 12:20-33  
Falling

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This is a sermon about falling. A couple weeks ago, my brother-in-law, E.L. Brown, who is dear to me, fell off the roof of his son's work shed. He fell about fourteen feet. The safety line broke or was cut by the tin roof, and he fell. There were big farming tools lying on the ground. If he had fallen on any one of them, it would have been awful. But by God's grace, he fell onto an empty patch of ground. He injured his ribs, but he just shook that off. Didn't even go to the doctor. Just got up and back to work. He was awfully grateful not to have been badly hurt.

Much more grave is the fall of our sister-in-the-Lord Georgia Lind. You might have read in the *New York Times* about her fall a few days ago into an old well on the property of her historic property on Staten Island.<sup>1</sup> We will be praying for Georgia in this morning's prayers, and her husband, David Waldman, desires your private prayers for her too, so let's be sure to do that. I mean to speak a bit more about this awful fall toward the end of this sermon. I know that many of us hold high affection for Georgia and grieve that she has been injured.

Meanwhile, I want to talk about today's Gospel Lesson. It also speaks of "falling." Even before I learned about my brother-in-law's fall and about poor Georgia's fall, I had been drawn to our Lord's saying this morning about the grain of wheat falling into the ground:

<sup>24</sup>Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat *falls* into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. (John 12:24, RSV)

I guess I've known this passage all my life. I grew up in church, I grew up reading my Bible. I've long been acquainted with this passage, and till now, I've always been rather peaceful about it. But this time, it has struck me hard. Maybe I'm getting older. Maybe I've seen a lot of folks in desperate shape. Something has caused me to be almost horrified by this passage this time round.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/03/23/woman-falls-through-rotting-floor-in-staten-island-and-is-trapped/>

Imagine I visit someone in the hospital -- let's say, someone suffering from heart troubles and facing grave surgery. Now imagine I say to that one, "unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone." That would be hard pastoral care. You come to someone facing heart surgery. That one is anxious, naturally. He could be worried, she could be worried, not only for himself, but also for the family. "What will happen to my loved ones if I should die?" So, he is in danger and is troubled, and the pastor comes along and speaks about a grain of wheat falling into the ground. The problem here is that it is too *personal*. It is entirely too well fitted to the condition of the person facing the surgery.

But that is exactly the pastoral care Jesus is giving *himself* in this passage. The die has already been cast. In just the preceding chapter of St. John, Jesus has raised Lazarus up to life. Such a miracle could have charmed and melted the heart of even his fiercest opponent, yet it does no such thing. Rather, it intensifies the opposition.

Then from that day forth they took counsel together for to put him to death. (John 11:53, KJV)

And so it is that when Jesus raised his old friend Lazarus back to life, it unleashed his own destruction. In our passage this morning, Jesus knows it. When he speaks of a grain of wheat falling into the ground, he means himself. He knows that he is soon to die:

<sup>23</sup>And Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of man to be glorified." (John 12:23, RSV)

It is this context that Jesus speaks of the seed of wheat falling into the ground. He is not simply speaking in abstraction. He is not just stating a general principle. He is speaking of himself. He is preaching a high spiritual principle whose meaning is highly personal. It is a principle perfectly adapted to the path now before him. This young man -- thirty-three years of age, according to tradition -- knows that death looms and will have him!

## **OTHER CASES OF FALLING**

As it turns out, the idea of "falling down" appears in some other prominent passages in the story of Jesus. Let me mention some of them. My idea is that when we weave them all together, they yield a comforting context for considering the plain, practical reality that you and I fall too in this world. We fall from roofs, we fall into sickness, we fall into debt, and at last we fall into the

ground. But none of our falling is fatal, thanks to the willingness of Jesus to fall into the earth that he might gain the world.

So, here are some other Biblical cases of falling. I am choosing just a few from the Gospel of St. Matthew.

## **FALL DOWN AND WORSHIP ME!**

The first case comes early on in the public career of Jesus. Immediately after Jesus is baptized by John in the Jordan River, he is led by the Spirit out into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. Jesus firmly conquers the first two temptations – the temptation to turn the stones into bread and the temptation to throw himself off the pinnacle of the temple. Then it is as if the devil takes the gloves off and makes his most direct appeal to the love of money that has defeated so many of us:

<sup>8</sup>Again, the devil taketh him up into an exceeding high mountain, and sheweth him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them;  
<sup>9</sup>And saith unto him, All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt *fall* down and worship me. (Matthew 4:8-9, KJV)

Now, Jesus is willing to fall into the ground like a grain of wheat, but *this* falling he is entirely unwilling to do. He will not fall down and worship Satan:

<sup>10</sup>Then saith Jesus unto him, Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve. (Matthew 4:10, KJV)

By lesser and greater degrees, all the rest of us have yielded to the temptation to fall before the temptations of the devil. It began with our ancestors Adam and Eve and continues its weary march through humanity to this day. *Except* for Jesus! He was the one among us who did not fall. Neither yesterday, nor today, nor forever does Jesus fall:

<sup>15</sup>For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. (Hebrews 4:15, KJV)

So, that is my first case of falling. Jesus does not fall into sin.

## **AND THE RAINS FELL**

My second case of falling is of the house that fell. It was buffeted by wind and rain, and, sorry to say, it was not built on a strong foundation:

<sup>27</sup>And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell: and great was the fall of it.  
(Matthew 7:27, KJV)

Our church here, Immanuel, and our apartment buildings and even tall skyscrapers are built on good Manhattan granite. But the house in this saying is built, not on rock, but on sand. It was a poor foundation.

Who is this one who builds on sand?

<sup>26</sup>And every one that heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man, which built his house upon the sand: <sup>27</sup>And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell: and great was the fall of it. (Matthew 7:26-27, KJV)

There he is: the one who hears the holy teachings of Jesus, but does not act upon them. He is the one whose house falls.

In this teaching, it is as if Jesus turns from his own life, with all its purity, to us. He asks us to be conformed to him. Why? Because he does not want us to fall.

## **THE GRAIN OF WHEAT FALLS**

And so we return to today's saying about the grain of wheat. Jesus says that the grain of wheat *must* fall, else it remains alone. Jesus is determined to not remain alone, and so he is ready to fall into the ground. That is the way forward for you and for me. We are the one who have built on shifting sand too much. We are ones who have fallen before the temptations of the devil all together too much. And so Jesus is willing to fall into the ground on our behalf that we not fall into the ground in any final way.

## **GEORGIA**

I think my parish email about Georgia Lind might have reached some of you. Or you might have read the story in the newspaper or seen it on television. This past Friday Georgia Lind fell into an old cistern in the historic property she and her husband, David Waldman, had just bought. Georgia was thrilled by this property. She was exploring it, delighted by it. Then, in an instant,

everything was disrupted. David was two feet from her when suddenly she disappeared. She fell through old wood flooring into a hidden well. David said it was the most horrifying thing he has ever seen. She suffered a head injury. She came through the surgery well in the sense that the surgeons accomplished everything they hoped for. Now we must wait and pray for her body to heal. David covets our prayers.

While we were waiting for the surgeon, David said something very moving. He said this: "I would gladly have fallen in her place." I asked his permission to include his line in this sermon because I thought it would help us to understand what was going on when Jesus spoke of the grain of wheat falling into the ground. When I asked him whether I could repeat that line today, he said, "Yes, but I do not feel very heroic." Well, heroism is not the point. Love is the point! It was the voice of love speaking.

So it was with Jesus. When he spoke of the grain of wheat falling into the ground, he was not simply teaching a lesson in agriculture. Something higher was going on – much higher! It was the voice of Love speaking. Georgia Lind is that precious to Jesus. You and I are that precious to him. And therefore he fell into the ground, that you and I need never suffer such a fall as he did.

## **SPARROWS**

And so I am happy to be able to end this sermon with one more mention of falling in St. Matthew's Gospel. I mean the sparrow:

Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will *fall* to the ground without your Father's will. (Matthew 10:29, RSV)

You and I fall from time to time. We fall into fatigue, we fall into poverty, we fall into sin. We are not yet in the Kingdom where are falling days will be done and behind us. Meanwhile, there is too much falling going on. And so I appeal to you to be careful out there. But when all of our care comes to an end and we've done what we can, still there is Jesus, that lovely, loving grain of wheat who was willing to fall into the earth that you and I might fall into heaven, through his grace and merits, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.