

Century Plant

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Luke 9:51-61 and Galatians 5:1, 13-25

The *agave americana* is a succulent plant commonly found in the deserts of Sedona. With its enormous leaves, capable of storing large amounts of water and sharp spikes along the edges of those leaves for discouraging thirsty animals from preying upon it, it is clear that evolution has given the *agave americana* the right tools for living a long and healthy life in the desert. Which is why the *agave americana*'s non-scientific name is, the Century Plant. And, even though Century Plants don't literally live for 100 years, they can live 10, 20 or 30 years!

It's unclear, however, what Mother Nature was thinking when she designed the Century Plant's means of reproducing. When a Century Plant is in bloom it will send up a long, straight stalk that can grow as high as 20 feet or more. At the top of the stalk, high above the ground, yellow flowers appear and seeds emerge.

A blooming Century Plant is a sight to behold. But don't sit around waiting for it to happen. The Century Plant only blooms once in its lifetime. Once it produces and drops the seeds that will bring forth new life, the Century Plant dies.

So, here's the mystery. Why does the Century Plant only bloom once over a decade's long lifespan? And what tells it when to bloom? Science has pretty much determined that most other species of plants respond to environmental signals like temperature, soil moisture and amount of sunlight to know that it the season for them to bloom. It's not as if the plant chooses for itself, so much as the timing of its reproduction is dictated by outside circumstances. But whatever initiates a Century Plant's seemingly random, solitary, and fatal blossoming remains a mystery.

Sometime in the vicinity of the thirty-third year of his life, something seems to have signaled Jesus that it was time for him to give his life in order to sow the seeds of salvation. Luke's Gospel puts it in these words: "When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem."

A few things worth noting about that verse.

"When the days drew near" implies a sense of impending fulfillment of some greater purpose. There is a hint of inevitability in those words. As if the timing involved was determined outside of the realm of human decision. "When the days drew near *for him to be taken up*" carries ominous undertones of finality. The benefit of centuries of hindsight informs us that "to be taken up" as it relates to Jesus, pointed to his death and resurrection.

Finally, the words “he set his face to go to Jerusalem” reminds us that despite the fateful tone of the first part of the statement, Jesus maintained the power to choose his own destiny. And, what Jesus chose, was *to set his face*--or decisively commit himself— to go to Jerusalem, undeterred by the sacrifice that would be demanded of him there. If you have any doubts about the difficulty of that decision for Jesus, and how much he struggled to make the correct choice, just remember how he prayed on the night before his crucifixion: “Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me. But not my will but yours be done.”

Whatever tipped Jesus off that the days were drawing near for him to *give his life for the life of the world*, and why he set his face to embrace that destiny, remains as much of a mystery as whatever it is that sets in motion the Century Plant’s mechanism for creating new life, at the cost of its own life.

For Jesus, it may have been an inner whisper of the Spirit. Or it might have been an awareness of the inevitable outcome of his conflicts with the powerful people who opposed him. One thing we know, is that Jesus willingly chose to follow the path to Jerusalem and to destiny.

Along the way to Jerusalem, Jesus encountered people who were given a choice to follow him and become his disciples. One person told Jesus that he would follow him *wherever he went*. On the surface, it sounded like this man was ready to set *his face* to joining Jesus on his journey. Until Jesus told him that “Foxes have holes, and birds have nests: but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” Which amounted to a poetically stated, full disclosure statement; a warning that following Jesus would involve sacrifice and rejection. Apparently, that was enough to change the man’s mind about following Jesus. Jesus encountered two other men who made their own excuses not to follow him. Finally, Jesus said, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.” Picture that. Someone who is plowing a field while looking back over his shoulder is a person who is distracted from their purpose and is divided in their allegiance. It is the exact opposite of someone who is “setting their face” towards what lies ahead.

We may not understand the process by which a Century Plant determines the time when it will blossom to give new birth; or whether it is aware of the price it will pay for it, but we do know how it works in people. God has given us the freedom to choose for ourselves the direction towards which we will, or will not, set our face. Because love is not love unless it is freely chosen, despite the consequences. And we are endowed with the freedom to love God with all our being and to love our neighbor as we love our self. The other side of that freedom is the freedom to choose not to do either of those things.

The Apostle Paul warned the Christians in Galatia against the misuse of freedom when he wrote, “For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Americans are famous proclaimers and defenders of freedom. But which kind of freedom?

Is freedom merely independence from any responsibility for the welfare of others, so that we can set our face only towards our own gratification? Or is it liberty from an obsession with our personal privileges, that enables us to set our face towards serving others who are less privileged, even when that service might call for some sacrifice on our part?

Paul broke it down this way: “Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh.” When Paul says that the flesh and the Spirit are opposed, he doesn’t mean flesh as in our physical bodies and needs. He talking about flesh in the sense of the ego which sets its face only to satisfying its own needs and wants.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was saying much the same thing as Paul when he wrote, “*When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.*” He didn’t mean Jesus calls us to our literal, physical death; though Bonhoeffer himself did literally give his life for his faith when he was executed by the Nazis. More generally, he was talking about dying to that within us that resists and rejects the Spirit’s call to love God and love neighbor no less than we love ourselves.

It is the freedom that is discovered only in dying to our attachments to the things of this life that come at the cost of that which is of eternal value. The difference between a freedom that enslaves us to the pursuit of our own selfish desires, and the freedom that emancipates us to live the life God designed us to live is the difference between the three might-have-been disciples who excused themselves from following Jesus on the road to Jerusalem because of what it would cost them, and the Savior who set his face to go there for their sakes—and ours, without counting the cost to himself.

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