

Scripture Readings:

Deuteronomy 34:1-12

Matthew 22:36-40

Get a Grip On Letting Go

A familiar modern day prophet spoke these words: “And another reason that I'm happy to live in this period is that we have been forced to a point where we're going to have to grapple with the problems that men have been trying to grapple with through history, but the demands didn't force them to do it. Survival demands that we grapple with them. Men, for years now, have been talking about war and peace. But now, no longer can they just talk about it. It is no longer a choice between violence and nonviolence in this world; it's nonviolence or nonexistence.

That is where we are today. And also in the human rights revolution, if something isn't done, and in a hurry, to bring the colored peoples of the world out of their long years of poverty, their long years of hurt and neglect, the whole world is doomed. Now, (I'm just happy that God has allowed me to live in this period, to see what is unfolding.

Now, we are poor people, individually, we are poor ... collectively we are richer than all the nations in the world, with the exception of nine.... the Negro collectively is richer than most nations of the world. We have an annual income of more than thirty billion dollars a year, which is more than all of the exports of the United States, and more than the national budget of Canada. Did you know that? That's power right there, if we know how to pool it.

We don't have to argue with anybody. ... we need to go around to these stores, and to these massive industries in our country, and say, "God sent us by here, to say to you that you're not treating his children right. And we've come by here ask you to make the first item on your agenda -- fair treatment where God's children are concerned. ...

*Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people will get to the promised land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about a thing. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.”¹

¹ Thomas R. West and James W. Mooney eds., *To Redeem A Nation: A History and Anthology of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Brandywine Press, 1993), pp. 86-88.

Martin Luther King Jr. spoke these words on April 3, 1968 the night before he was assassinated. This is of course one of the most striking uses of this text. That great modern-day prophet used the story of Israel's first great prophet to speak of hope and faith to a people who needed both.

That story can continue to speak to us today, even in the midst of disappointment, or fear we are called to live by faith in the God of Moses, the God who does indeed fulfill promises. When I read this text on Wednesday morning it spoke to me but as I often do when my week is getting away on me and I want to keep the scripture fresh in my head so that I have a sermon to preach on Sunday, I pulled out the text again on Wednesday night.

I pulled out this text at a time when I was feeling a loss of hope, after listening to people's fears and discouragements. And it was in that moment that I was reminded of people who struggle much more than I ever did and didn't give up. I thought not only of Moses, but also of Martin Luther King Jr., and of Terry Fox, and Mother Teresa and then I recalled the following poem.

Langston Hughes' Mother to Son

*Well, son, I'll tell you:
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
It's had tacks in it,
And splinters,
And boards torn up,
And places with no carpet on the floor --
Bare.
But all the time
I've been a-climbin' on,
And reachin' landin's,
And turnin' corners,
And sometimes goin' in the dark
Where there ain't been no light.
So boy, don't you turn back.
Don't you set down on the steps
'Cause you find it's kinder hard.
Don't you fall now --
For I've still goin', honey,
I've still climbin',
And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

I read this poem and then I remembered my Grandmother who told me stories of living through very, very hard times right here in Vancouver as she lived through the depression. And my other grandmother who was actually left orphaned on the doorsteps of a church and somehow she was 'saved' and adopted by some members of that congregation. And I remembered where I came from and how it was in my genes to believe in hope, in abundance, in the possibility of more.

See when we allow worry and fear to dictate our actions and our conversations we lose hope. We lose the purpose of our calling as people of Christ. How do we love our God and our neighbour when we aren't willing to strive for the best of all humanity.

On a blog where that poem was written a blogger stated "This is one of the pieces I read when I need some motivation. For those times I just need to suck it up, shut up, and keep it moving. A reminder that there are many people who have achieved MORE than what I have achieved with MORE obstacles that I may have had. It also triggered a question in me: Do we perform better when we have more obstacles?"

*I think it is a fair question. When we are people who are used to living in security, used to for the most part being able to dictate how we live and survive we are less willing to risk because we rarely have to. I learned in our meetings yesterday a statistic that really struck me. Did you know that "Giving statistics in Society: despite unprecedented wealth in America, charitable givings are proportionately below what they were during the Great Depression... and the same study further revealed that almost half of all charitable giving in the US comes from households with annual incomes under \$30,000."

A life without risk and a life without faith is not the life we are claiming to live when we say we are Christians. Our example in Christ is one of hope. Our God is a God of _____ (can anyone guess my next word?) abundance. (When I was writing this I thought people must be getting tired of me talking about a God of Abundance but then I went to a stewardship conference and guess what the speaker talked about all day...that's right Abundance...so I will continue).

I have been blown away in this community by the gifts and resources it has. By how we have come together to dream and create a vision, a legacy, a community of hope. How you care for one another, love one another, how you come together. And I don't say that lightly. You may find this hard to believe but I have been in a lot of congregations and Christians are not always the most hospitable people. You have so many gifts and visions of abundance. But this week I have discovered that some people are back to living in the fear of the unknown. And I am reminded that change requires we step out of the boat, or as Deb Bowman would say 'walk in the swamp' for a bit. Perhaps this week feels like the swamp and that's okay because it's human, and it's hard and our questions and worries are important. I don't want you to stop expressing them.

But faith is not about certainty. The scriptures image of the Spirit is free, wild, not captive. Not even in the captivity of the church as we know it today. We need to get a grip on letting go of what we think God is. We need to get a grip on letting go of how limited we think we are. We need to open up to the freedom of the Spirit. Jesus said "whoever would save his life must be prepared to offer it up." That is the way the kingdom of God works. We are created to serve, love and care for God and one another not just look after our own worries.

We need to grip onto the center of Jesus' message, and the laws of Leviticus, and the words and the lives of the prophets "The greatest commandment is Love the Lord your God and your neighbour as yourself" And let go of the fears and greed of holding onto what we think we own and deserve over those we are called to live and care for.

I didn't come into the church in a time when it was highly respected so perhaps that is why living differently or changing things isn't as difficult for me. I can acknowledge that living differently is hard work. And it requires living into the unknown. It demands faith.

We need to remember that Church and Religion don't create the Spirit – the Spirit already exists! And the Spirit will work with us or without us. And when we are gone the Spirit will remain.

I resonate with Joyce Rupp when she writes "I finally realize why I've grown to appreciate autumn so much. It is because the trees tell me so much about life, especially about the inner seasons of our lives. Each year as I begin to notice that the leaves are going golden, I reflect that the trees seem to give themselves over to the "letting go" process much more freely than humans. Trees readily allow the season to make it appear that all is lost and that there is no green growth left. But they know better, for even at their most barren moment, when one can look among the branches and see scars and knotholes the leaves once hid, the trees already show terminal buds with the secret of next spring's leafing in them.

We humans have a lot to learn from autumn trees. No one of us wants to be so surrendered, so vulnerable to winter as the October trees. Yet, each of us, if we are truly open to growth and change, will experience this in our inner selves. Our relationships and our experiences of life will ask us to be open, to be willing to let go in order that new growth can come."²

Our individual and faith lives in this time and place are asking for just that. I feel compelled to remind us that we have an opportunity to live in the Spirit of faith and promise. I wonder what would have happened if Moses had sat down at the burning bush and said "God it's just too hard." Or maybe right when the people started complaining, what if then Moses not only complained to God but refused to go forward.

If that image seems to distant for you lets use another modern day example. Do you think Terry Fox wasted his time and energy? Do you think he ever worried or got tired? Do you think he gave up when the Spirit prodded him on? And honestly, Do you think he didn't "make it?" He didn't fulfill his purpose? I hope I would be hard pressed to find someone who says yes.

The life of a Christian calls us to be encourages, motivators, to live in hope, to draw the course out for others to live more fully. Our faith requires and helps us to live with long-term ambiguity. With no wonder or ambiguity there is no faith. Peter Short reminds us that "Sanity requires a certain ambiguity. The only absolute certainty belongs to the madman! I can't explain it, I just

² Rupp. Joyce. "Fresh Bread" October, pg. 129

live with it every day – ambiguity. There are many voices in my head, and they are often contradictory...” But the church and faith life exist in hope and promise.

The Jesus tradition is marked by the fact that it is always alive. It’s hard to kill. That’s why we know God’s truth will come to us again and again. We do need, however, to distinguish living tradition from mere habit. We have to know what to let go of and what to hold onto.

We don’t know what the days ahead will look like. But I believe God is asking us to stand on the mountaintop of hope, breath in deep and look towards the promised land.

Amen.