

Squamish United Church
Rev. Karen Millard
Lent 1

February 22, 2015

Scripture Readings:

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Mark 1:9-15

Rising From the Ashes

Lent began on Wednesday. A few of us took in the service at St. Johns and had an *ashen cross made from last years palm branches marked on our forehead. This was a reminder of our mortality and our need for repentance. It was thinking through this very service and how lent begins that caused me to jump to the theme “Rising from the Ashes” for this year. While we were at the Christianity 21 conference in Phoenix with this very theme I felt a strong tug from the spirit to go in this direction.

Lent so often is a time where we feel we are to mourn who we are and repent of our sins for 46 long days. Reverend Debra Bowman posted on the first day of lent “Oh, the guilt Olympics. God save us.” I understand the need for repentance, but if it means wallowing in self-deprecation and sorrow I don’t really understand where it fits with the biblical story. Karoline Lewis wrote about Lent “If it means giving up things, constant reminders of how worthless and temporary I am, any glorification of suffering, then it means nothing to me. If it means embracing the importance of self-reflection when it comes to your identity as a disciple, who you believe Jesus to be, what (if anything) the cross really means to you, how you understand the meaning of the resurrection, and that you take the resurrection forward to the meaning of the ascension, then Lent has meaning to me.”¹

I am excited and energized to spend the next several weeks discovering how we *might “rise from the ashes” as we journey with Jesus towards the cross and ultimately the resurrection. Our faith story is one of dying and rising again. So let’s discover together what that means for us as individuals and as faith community. I don’t even know what your ashes are made up of, but consider them to be the things that must die so that you might live, consider them to be the things you must let go of so you can rise up.

The first scripture we read today reminded us that if our lenten practice becomes one is about showing how pious, religious or suffering we are, than we have lost the purpose. We are to celebrate the gift of life God has given us. Our faith and religion - this lenten season is a call to walk the road with Jesus, and in doing so our hope and desire is that we will draw closer to The Holy, our hope and desire is that we will discover more of God and in the process more of

¹ workingpreacher.org

ourselves so that we might live more fully. If that becomes our journey, I believe we then too will in natural fashion offer more life and hope to all we encounter.

So much of our lives we have been programmed to live our lives and faith in a certain way, in a box life religion. I don't blame any of us really, that is all we know. For most of us it is what we have been taught. I can guarantee that some of my colleagues would struggle with this lenten series I am leading us into, because it's all about abundance and rising up, rather than simply repenting in our sac cloth and ashes. And yet the closer I get to Jesus and the more I engage with the spirit the more I am convinced God wants more of us than guilt driven faith. I believe the Spirit is constantly driving us towards transformation and new life even in the midst of the wilderness. (in fact dare I say, more so in the wilderness?)

Let's go back to the gospel of Mark. As I was reading the scripture this week I had a lenten epiphany. How's that for messing with the church calendar? I'm getting myself in trouble already. But here it is anyway. Have you ever noticed what happens in this very short passage?

Jesus is baptized, blessed and honoured as beloved and chosen by the Spirit, and then "immediately" that same Spirit drives Jesus out into the wilderness. In the wilderness he faces trials and temptations from Satan himself and yet he comes out transformed, proclaiming the good news.

*The same Spirit that baptized and honour Jesus sent him into the wilderness. I have heard that time and time again, but this year it struck me anew. The question and Spirit I am wrestling with is this. If the Spirit can do this for Jesus - what about for us? Perhaps the same Spirit that built the church is now driving the church into a time of wilderness. Perhaps the Spirit longs for us to wander until we rediscover our call.

Now I have to confess I am already struggling a bit with my own theological preference here. Firstly, I want a God who will do anything to keep us from struggle so the idea that **he** might send us into chaos is a bit frightening and I'm not sure how that sits, but I am always willing to wrestle with this story in my faith and scripture. Secondly, I am not the kind of Christian who believes in an interventionist God - you know the one that answers our prayers to win the hockey game. And yet I do believe in prayer, and I believe God is alive and active in our world and our church. So perhaps the Spirit **is** driving us into a time of wilderness so that we might discover the purpose of the church once again. And if that God isn't driving us into the wilderness perhaps **she** "isn't preventing our being in the wilderness." As Debra Bowman said "isn't it in that wilderness that we see Jesus give up bravado, desire for power and excess?"²

*I threw this lenten epiphany idea out to some of my colleagues and these are some of the conclusions we came to. Jenny Carter said "I think that the Spirit is driving us in the wilderness so that we might be transformed. It's just that for so long we thought we were "special" (church

² Bowman, Debra - Gathered Wisdom conversation

lady special) and not like other institutions...*she continues*, I for one look forward to it.”³ You see what I hear Jenny saying is that God is reminding us that we have the same mission as the rest of the world. And we have perhaps gotten caught up in our tradition and lost our way. (It is not that tradition and the church are bad, or wrong, it is simply time to refocus and transform). Just as Jesus called the people of his day to transformation, we too are being called. After all it is transformation that happens in the wilderness.

Graham Brownmiller called the conversation back to us as individuals and I believe it is true that we as individuals, as a congregation, and as a national church are always being called to new life, and yes transformation. We are called to rise from the ashes and struggles of life. To let die, what must die and let live what must live. Or as Graham said “what are the things that we are afraid to lose in the wilderness AND what are we afraid to LOOSE in the wilderness (set loose, set free)!”⁴

I think most of us would agree that the wilderness is more of a process than a place. Marc Coulombe wrote “We go in terrified and reluctant (or at least ambivalent) and then we get stripped of everything we thought we prized - our temptations, or deeply held beliefs about who we are and what we should be doing. And then as a reward for all our agonizing self-rendering, we get to wait for a long time in a lifeless empty place with no more than a rock for a pillow.”⁵

I’ve been there. Have you? That empty place. That place where I agonized over what I had to let go of. I have cried in the darkness of the night begging for a broken relationship to be restored, I have wept over a job that I knew I must let go of but I did not want to, I have called a friend and let them know I dare not be alone because I am afraid of myself, I have agonized with friends in deep dark depression and ...although none of those times were pleasant or easy, everyone of them was time of transformation for me. It was in that wilderness process that I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt the presence of The Holy. You see “eventually, somehow, our senses change and grace begets the realization that this place isn't lifeless at all. It's alive in ways that we were not able to see before. Our old ways of perceiving, through the deprivation of the desert, yield to a new way of perceiving. And this new perceiving, when reinforced with commitment, effort and community, causes lasting changes in how we think and act.”⁶

It isn't that we desire a desert experience, and for some of us those experiences are harder than others. I would not desire to see any of us stranded in a perpetual palpable wilderness. And yet I know we all have wilderness times, and we don't always know where we will end up when we are in them, but if we know we are not alone, likely we will survive and find our way through.

³ Carter, Jenny - Gathered Wisdom

⁴ Brownmill, Graham - Gathered Wisdom

⁵ Coulombe, Marc - Gathered Wisdom

⁶ IBID

That is why we have been created for community. Marc continues “The choice to surrender to what God is making of our lives, regardless of whether we like it in any given moment or not, is what faith is all about. To my mind, the good news is that no matter how difficult it gets, we are never leaving or losing God. Rather we are clearing away what is keeping us from knowing God more fully.”⁷

That to me is what this lenten wilderness journey is all about. It is discovering God anew. It is discovering ourselves again. You won’t be surprised to hear me say I believe we were created to soar, and I believe the church is meant to soar. But I think we have to rediscover who we were created to be.

**(Project image of impala)* Do you know what animal this is? This is an impala. It is a medium-sized African antelope. The impala inhabits savanna grasslands and woodlands close to water sources. It is a mixed forager, whose diet consists of grasses, and foliage. The most characteristic movement of the impala is its unique leap. *When alarmed, they run at very high speeds and jump to heights of 3 m (10 ft), over bushes and even other impala, while covering distances of up to 10 m (33 ft).^[20] This protects them from being pray for lions, leopards, cheetahs, hyenas, crocodiles and more.

And yet they are found in zoo’s behind fences not nearly as high. Efreem Smith⁸ asked the zoo staff how that is possible and he learned that when Impalas are babies in the zoo they keep them behind walls. Often even as adults they are kept behind cement walls at least three feet high. That way they cannot see where to jump. These Impalas as babies are conditioned not to jump. So when they grow, even though they have the capability they can’t see the possibility because they have been preconditioned not to jump. They have no idea of their potential.

Ironic, isn’t it? They can jump 10 feet high in a large field where they can see everything around them. They have the capability of eluding predators at 50 miles per hours, but a three-foot fence can keep them captive and dependent.

Why don’t they just jump over the wall? Physically they are still capable of jumping. It seems they are “stuck” behind the wall because they cannot see where they might land, they are afraid of the unknown.

*So many of us have been conditioned not to jump. It may be that we have gone through real life struggles and the adversities we have faced have stifled us. It may be that we have had it so ingrained in us to be and do life in a certain way, we dare not leap. Our “walls” are not three-foot high fences. But when we face the wilderness, it is easy to become fearful of moving on to the other side of the “fence.” Perhaps we are similar to impalas which have been moved from the wide-open savannahs of Africa to a zoo, confined to a small space surrounded by a fence or

⁷ IBID

⁸ Christianity 21 conference Phoenix 2015

wall. Perhaps that is what the church has become. Perhaps even the church has conditioned people not to jump into their God given purpose.

Faith is the ability to trust what we cannot see. Faith calls us out of the wilderness to rise up to our God-given purpose. To leap with the impala and soar with the Phoenix. In this lenten season as we spend time in the wilderness and journey with Jesus may we rediscover our purpose.

As we come closer and closer to leaping high and wide as a congregation may we discover what we are being called to lose and loose. In just a few months we as a congregation are being asked to leap not just over a wall but right out of our building. In just a few weeks we are heading onto a path that we do not know what the outcome will be, and yet, you are choosing the pack your bags and go. I do believe the Spirit is calling us out of this place, and just as strongly I believe the Spirit will journey with us every step of the way. May we embrace the journey with the leap of the impala, may with rise from the ashes like the Phoenix and soar as a community of faith into the transformation God is calling us to.

Amen.