

Squamish United Church
Rev. Karen Millard
Lent V
Rising From the Ashes

March 22, 2015

Scripture Readings:

Jeremiah 31:31-34

John 12: 20-33

Faith From the Ashes

I have always loved the notion of God writing the law on our hearts. I like the intimacy of that notion, it implies a kind of connection like we can have with no other. It is about being known and knowing. If there is anything all humans desire it to be known. For to be known is to be understood, is to have a connection with.

That is what the Greeks seem to be looking for in today's gospel. "We want to see Jesus" they say. To see in the Gospel of John is to know, to be enlightened, to understand. When we begin the journey of lent we pray that in these weeks we will get closer to God, we will become clearer on who God is and who God desires us to be. My hope for us in this lenten journey is that we will see Jesus more clearly.

A few commentaries that I looked at (including Gary Patterson's "Longing For Home" Lenten series) suggested that this might be the text that speaks of that 'spiritual but not religious' crowd of the day.

David Lose Writes "SBNR denotes those folks who are indeed open to a sense of mystery, curious about the divine, wonder about God and the spiritual life...but have not found those inclinations and needs met by traditional religious institutions. In this sense, they remind me of the Greeks in today's passage. They don't come to Philip asking for information about Jesus. They don't inquire about a new member's class or ask to join a committee. They don't request a statement of beliefs before joining. They simply want to see Jesus. To really see him, person to person, face to face."¹ They are looking for someone or something to fill the void in their souls. I can understand that. I am often in that place myself. I just want to see, to know Jesus and the holy in a way that changes my life and the world around me.

It is interesting that they make this request on the way to Passover, a religious celebration. Likely they know religion, but they want more. "I have no idea if they were dissatisfied with the faith of their parents or if they were looking forward to another joyous Passover celebration but also

¹ <http://www.davidlose.net/2015/03/lent-5-b/>

intensely curious about all they'd heard about Jesus. And to be honest, I don't think it really matters. What they want just now is an encounter with, and experience of, Jesus."²

Jesus responds to these seekers in the way Jesus always responds. "Follow me" or "Come and See" come check out what it means to walk with the holy, come and experience it, not just through ritual but through action. Jesus is suggesting that to know him you might have to risk, you will need to be open to see things differently. It might take more than sitting in synagogue for a Sabbath or two. Patterson writes "Sometimes I feel more like a rich young ruler, who wants to follow, but who has so much personal "stuff," so much tradition, so many church worries, that I miss the chance of a real encounter." It is easy for us who live, work and breathe church to get caught up in the "stuff" and forget our purpose. That is a fervent prayer of mine for us and we head into this very busy, overwhelming season of transition and change for Squamish United, that we will remember what our purpose and call is, in the midst of the business and stuff that we have to tackle.

Even in the midst of all that we have on our plate what if someone was to come to us seeking to see Jesus. What if we were Philip and people came to us and asked "who is Jesus?" "What does Jesus have to do with the church?" Would we know how to answer? Would they see the answer in us? Would they recognize Jesus when they came into this place?

Jesus continues the challenge of getting to know him when he says "I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." This is beginning to feel like a familiar theme, this need to lose your life in order to find it; that in order to flourish, to grow, to be fruitful, we will need to experience loss, suffering, even a death of sorts."³ That is one of the reasons this image of rising from the ashes fits so well with our faith journey. Even the ashes can remind us that life can come from death. We see it in their very nature, for if you were to pour ashes on your garden it acts as a fertilizer to assist your plants to flower and grow. Any gardener will tell you that you have to be careful what kind of ash you use and how much for it to be effective, but even that is a truth in our lives, we have to let die what must die and find life in that which produces.

Paterson continues "It's true for us as individuals; and it's true for us as a church. What would it be like for us as a denomination, or a congregation to "fall into the earth and die"? To give up everything we have and simply follow this Jesus? To let go of the financial reserves, the buildings, the traditions. What happens then? Do we just disappear, or we do find new life, new ways of being faithful disciples?"⁴

² IBID

³ <http://www.garypaterson.ca/2015/03/16/longing-for-home-lenten-study-week-five/>

⁴ <http://www.garypaterson.ca/2015/03/16/longing-for-home-lenten-study-week-five/>

It seems to me we are doing some of the very risking Paterson calls us as a church too. In our “Memories and Dreams” conversation last week Walter reminded us that perhaps we as a church and congregation also need to be pruned to find new life. He shared how he has cut back the bushes at times much to the dismay of others, and yet he does that because he knows that in the near future that will bring new, vibrant abundant life from what appears to be dead and gone. In this season we just might find new ways of being faithful as we let go of some of the things we hold onto that are more about what we have done in the past and less about our faith. I think we will find new ways to be faithful and to be community together as we are forced to rediscover who we are.

Paterson shared the following poem

Francis Dorff: "Lightening the Load"

The first thing we have to do
is to notice

that we've loaded down this camel
with so much baggage
we'll never get through the desert alive.
Something has to go.

Then we can begin to dump
the thousand things
we've brought along
until even the camel has to go
and we're walking barefoot
on the desert sand.

There's no telling what will happen then.
But I've heard that someone,
walking in this way,
has seen a burning bush.

“The first thing we have to do, is notice how we’ve loaded down this camel with so much baggage we’ll never get through the desert alive. Something has to go.” It’s easy to say, eh? A lot harder to do. In fact, says the poet, we may end up having to surrender even the camel; but she also points out that walking through the desert on bare feet may be the only way to see a burning bush. It’s that paradox at the very heart of the Christian faith, crucifixion and resurrection, dying in order to find new life.”⁵

⁵ paterson

We even see Jesus encounter this struggle in the garden when he asks for “this cup to pass from him.” And in our passage today John 12:27 “Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say –‘Father, save me from this hour?’” He knows it is hard to sacrifice, he knows it is hard to let go. And yet he finds reassurance in the clap of thunder. In that powerful sound he heard God say this will glorify and change the world. Jesus is reassured and he lets the crowds know that they are to take notice.

Paterson writes “At the very least, it’s an ambiguous sign; suggesting that Jesus himself had to go forward in faith. The probabilities of death were high; the likelihood of new life, of bearing much fruit, well, that remained to be seen. No guarantees.

Nevertheless, Jesus chose to hear the thunder as good news. Maybe that’s always the way it happens, the only sign that God offers is one where interpretation depends on faith; where we have to trust that God is present in all things working for good, and that even in the moments of suffering there is nothing in all creation that can separate us from the love of God.”⁶

Jesus tells the crowds This voice was for them to know God. He calls them to recognize the light that is present that they may see God, so that when they are in times of struggles they will remember they are not alone. They had the encounter they sought when they truly followed Jesus, when they chose to see. Perhaps it is when we have that kind of faith, maybe that’s when we see Jesus.

“the point of faith in Jesus isn’t just faith, or comfort, or satisfying spiritual desires. No, the point of following Jesus is that we might be drawn more deeply into the kingdom of God through our love for, service to, and sacrifice on behalf of those around us. Jesus comes to demonstrate God’s strength through vulnerability, God’s power through what appears weak in the eyes of the world, and God’s justice through love, mercy and forgiveness. And he calls those who would follow him to the very same kind of life and love.

Is this the Jesus the Greeks want to see? Is it the Jesus we want to see? I have no idea. But I do know that the Jesus who reveals the heart of our loving God by going to the cross is the Jesus we get, and the Jesus who is raised again on the third day to demonstrate that love is more powerful than hate and life more powerful than death is the Jesus we are called to ... This is the one, in the end, who has promised to draw all of us – SBNR, RBNS, both, and neither – to him.”⁷

So let us follow, let us let go and let die what must die so that true faith may rise from the Ashes.
Amen.

⁶ paterson

⁷ <http://www.davidlose.net/2015/03/lent-5-b/>