



Sermons from Northwood United Church

“This is no Yard Sale. This is Loss.”

Mark 8:31-38

The Very Rev. Peter Short March 4, 2012

Were you aware that Lent is not about Lent? Lent isn't really about Lent because it's about life. Same thing with religion. Religion is not about religion, it's about life. Any religion that isn't about your life is what Joni Mitchell would call “ice cream castles in the sir.” Northrop Frye was more prosaic about it. He said that any religion that isn't an axiom of daily life is just useless mental lumber.

So I want to speak with you about your life; your life that has turned out like...well...who could have predicted it? You couldn't have written the script. I want to say only what you already know; that in life there always comes a time to leave. In fact, in a lifetime there are many leavings. Leave a childhood, leave a relationship, leave a job, leave a dream. And in leaving there is a saying goodbye to the world as you knew it. Loss. In leaving there is loss. You know this because you have lived. And beyond the leaving and the loss? Well, God only knows. The new moon is no moon at all.

So here's the question that makes of the gospel such an astonishing event of leaving and of loss and of life: Why did God take that wild plunge off the high balcony of heaven? Down and falling; down and falling toward the world. God down! It looks like God – this is hard to believe – it looks like God is going to light down there in Palestine of all places – geography of nowhere; stony stubborn land, that place.

But that's where God ends up. Having leaped from his heaven God opens his eyes in a stable as a newborn. Look, he's been cleaned up by his mother. Now she's wrapping him in birthing bands.

And now the years going by; his seasons turning. Why is that young man walking from village to village and hanging with the dregs and gathering that little posse of followers? And why is he talking of a “kingdom” and him being “the way” when it is as plain as the nose on your face that any real kingdom belongs to Herod and even Herod the Great not fit to bend down and untie the shoelace of Caesar?

And why would “God down” end up on a cross, naked and shamed? Are we to imagine that this is some kind of victory? And some sort of love story? What is even more strange is that this might be a path to follow through the world; and that the one who walked it is one who saves.

God didn't have many takers when he called for company on his pilgrimage through the world. But he kept putting the offer out there just the same: “If any of you want to come with me you must forget yourself, carry your cross and follow me. Because if you want to save your own life you will lose it. But if you lose your life for me and for my good news, you'll save it.”

Why did God leave everything and leap off the balcony of heaven into flesh and blood? I don't know the answer to that; it's hidden in the heart of God. The Catholics call God's descent into the world a mystery. So it is. That's a good word for it.

I don't want to talk about what this all means. I'd be talking through my hat. I suppose it means something different in every life. Who could cover all that? All I want to say is that something happens in you when God's loss becomes a love story for you. How it happens I don't know. But I know this: if you want to get there, you have to leave here. What has to happen in you is a leaving. And leaving is loss. It is also, strangely, life.

Here's a poem called “On Leaving”. It's by New Brunswick poet Don MacKay.

On Leaving

“Leaving home is the beginning of resemblance.”

- David Seymour

On leaving, you circulate among the things you own
to say farewell, properly,
knowing they will not cease to exist
after your departure, but go,
slowly, each in its own way,
wild.

So long and thanks, with one last chop, tap,
twiddle. It won't work just to
flip them into negatives – minus T-shirt, minus Roger
Tory Peterson both east and west –
nor to convert them into liquid assets. This is no yard sale, this is loss,
whose interior is larger than its shell, the way you wish
home was. Do not dig the dog's bones up
nor the rosebush by the porch.

Choose a few companions of no weight –
a crow feather found in the parking lot,
the strawsmell of her hair, a few
books of the dead, 1000

Best Loved Puns. And leave. There is a loneliness
which must be entered rather than resolved, the moon's
pull on the roof which made those asphalt shingles
shine. A time for this,
a time for that, a time to let them both escape into
whateverness, a time to cast
away stones, to stop
building and remembering and building artful
monuments upon the memories.

To leave.

To step off into darker darkness,
that no moon we call new.

- Don MacKay

When Jesus began his pilgrimage toward the cross he invited people to go with him; to follow him. First it was Simon and Andrew. The gospel says, Jesus was going along by the lake when he saw Simon and Andrew casting their nets for they were fishermen. Jesus said to them, Follow me. And they left their nets and followed him. Going on a little farther he saw James and John in the boat with their father and he said to them, Follow me. They left their father in the boat and went with Jesus.

The movement here is very simple and very powerful. If you're going to accompany him you have to leave. If you are going to follow him through the world you have to leave where you are. Simon and Andrew, leave your nets. James and John, leave your father in the boat. You can't go with him and stay where you are.

I don't want to say that this is easy – that leaving is just some new way of thinking about faith; just a fancy move with your brain. This is no yard sale. This is loss.

If your life needs to be in his company, you'll have to leave. When you hear him say, "Anyone who wants to come with me..." you'll have to leave. Maybe you don't know what you have to leave. Maybe you don't know what you have to leave behind in order to go with him. But probably if you think about it, you do know.

Why does it have to be this way? Hard? Why can't we just believe and be happy about the security of God's love? It's because leaving is about making room in your life. You make room in life for new life. You open a way in your world for a new pilgrimage with Jesus. That pilgrimage takes you places you never dreamed of. It makes you new. That is to say, it makes you alive. Then you know in your own way what it is to leap off the high balcony and down into life.

As the poet says,
To step off into darker darkness,
that no moon we call new.

When does the new moon come? The new moon comes when the old has passed away. Thus is confirmed the word of the apostle: "If anyone is in Christ they are a new creation. The old has passed away. Behold, the new has come."