***A Recession Is Coming!***

A sermon preached at Lawrence Park Community Church, Sept. 29, 2019

Sermon Text: Deuteronomy 24:17-22

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Ed was not your everyday horse. He was, in fact, a talking horse. And Ed had friends. There was Buck, the dog, who talked endlessly about how one day he would follow the call of the wild, and Wilbur the Pig, who was prone to whiny complaints.

So, Ed and Buck and Wilbur were all standing around in the barn one day, and Ed says, “Well, you know, times are good. We’re all sleek and fat. Farmer MacDonald has bought himself a new tractor, a new car, and sent all his kids to a private school. It’s been the longest string of big harvests and farm expansion I can remember. But I tell you, a recession is coming! There always is.”

“Oh,” said Wilbur the pig. “That sounds bad!”

“Yup,” said Ed, the talking horse. “Recessions are bad. Commodity prices are going to fall, so Old MacDonald’s big canola harvests won’t pay anymore. When the recession comes, he won’t be able to keep up his car payments either, so he’s going to have to sell land to stay afloat. Mrs. MacDonald is going to have to look for a job, maybe. Things will be very tight!”

“Oh no,” gulped Wilbur the pig. “They’re might eat me!”

“Yup,” answered Buck the dog. “I’d leave now if I were you, Wilbur. Go feral, or win a prize at the fair or something. But, though I will miss you, Wilbur, personally I won’t really mind the coming recession. Instead of spending their hard-earned dollars on highly processed dog food pellets, I’m going to be allowed to eat real table scraps. Now table scraps may not look like much to you, but for me they’re the cat’s meow!”

“Dangerous time for you, for sure, Wilbur,” adds Ed the talking horse. “But the recession won’t make a difference to me either, thank God. The grandkids who live in the city love to come visit, ride me, and give me sugar cubes, even though I’m old and slow. I’ll get through it.”

Anyway, the next week China decided it would never buy canola from Canadian farmers again, and a hard Brexit crashed the stock markets. That gutted the McDonald’s retirement savings, and President Trump was impeached and a hurricane wiped out Montreal’s low-lying harbour. The MacDonalds, in turn, felt they had no choice. They sold the farm to a developer.

Wilbur the pig was shipped off to Cargill Foods in Guelph, for processing; Buck was sent to the cage in the pound because the McDonald’s new condo had a “no-pet” policy; and Mr. Ed? Well, poor Mr. Ed was sent to the glue factory.

And that is how the recession went down at old MacDonald’s farm.

Now, I don’t actually know that much about recessions. Here, at church, many members have more insight about recessions than I have. But even so, all of us, both the experts who didn’t predict the collapse of Lehman Brothers and the rest of us who suffered through it anyway, all of us know one thing for sure, just as Mr. Ed did. Eventually, another recession will befall us. Expansions don’t last forever. And that is a spiritual matter.

So, for the next few minutes, I’m going to explain what spirituality is and how spirituality can help guide us through the next recession, rather than simply fall victim to the coming recession, like Ed the Talking horse and Buck and Wilbur fell victim to their recession.

So, what is spirituality? Recession spirituality, even?

Well, to begin with, spirituality is not merely about private conversations between the divine and me in some hidden corridor of my mind, as I meditate or reflect or pray. This kind of spirituality may be rich and enjoyable, but it is only one step in the right direction. Total spirituality is also about how the divine also informs my work, my family life, and my dreams—everything, really.

So, imagine, for a minute, that your life is a house. Spirituality is the recognition that among all the rooms and nooks and crannies of the private house that is you, your house also has a back door that opens to the rest of the cosmos and the music of the spheres.

Beyond that back door you will find a path beyond yourself that leads into the beautiful and wild, peaceful yet dangerous, “everything else.” Of course, at best, you can only walk a little down that path into the cosmos, because you are attached to your house yourself. But here’s the thing. Spiritually, that path out your back door also runs through the same cosmos everyone else in the world and everything else in the world, and even the divine, walk along too.

Spirituality is the refusal to hide in our homes or routines or in the middle of our comforts in order to busy ourselves with private concerns only. Spirituality is a centrifugal force that throws us out into the cosmos so that we must confront its hidden meanings, its wonders, and even the dragons I and my neighbours must sometimes slay if we want our neighbourhood to stay safe.

Ultimately, spirituality is a deep, inner yearning for wholeness and safety and good even though the cosmos is big and dangerous as well as lovely. Spirituality is a divine whisper from beyond, on the path, that promises us our lives do not have to be pinched and small when it comes to peace or joy or love.

And the recession? Well, it is one of the dragons we dance with.

Naturally, with recession, the money we have to fight global warming or to build subways or to bring clean water to First Nations will shrink. With recession, some of us will worry about our retirement portfolios, and cut back on foreign travel or new cars or maybe even eating out. Meanwhile, with recession, many of our neighbours in this city may face even more trials than we do—they will lose jobs when more car manufacturing is moved to Mexico or their car dies. During a recession, some of our neighbours in Toronto will be unable to get into the job market because employers are cutting back on planned expansions. Other neighbours will fall into credit card debt or miss rent payments or quit university. When the coming recession hits, the city’s homeless shelters will be full beyond capacity and the strain on welfare and unemployment and bigger deficits will lead to unease and anger and perhaps even civil unrest.

Which gets us back for the first time to the book of Deuteronomy. First, notice that these instructions—consumer protection instructions, really and welfare laws—about not requiring a down payment that leaves a woman naked, about making sure to leave some wheat in the field and grapes and olives on the tree for people who can’t afford to buy groceries in the market—these are civil, secular bylaws in a spiritual book, the Bible. How strange is that?

The entire books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, in fact, are like that. They are full of civil and practical laws about farming and the poor, about raising kids and what to eat. We laugh at many of the laws now, and we find some of them very objectionable—as Jesus or Paul did in their days. But the principle underlying all these civil laws in the Bible is clear—all of life is spiritual in that all of life is an opportunity to love God and neighbour. Which is exactly what Jesus said about these laws, when he summarized them.

Second, there is no condemnation or blaming of the rich in the book of Deuteronomy. Spirituality does not preclude some being rich, some poor, and lately, at least, fewer and fewer in the middle. This is important. The message that the rich who go to church too often hear is that wealth in and of itself is somehow suspicious (at least until the church needs some of it). But it isn’t. Wealth is dangerous, yes; tempting, yes; but wealth is nevertheless essentially good, like many other dangerous and tempting things.

And third, whether we are rich, or poor, we are one, bound together, whether we like it or not. We walk that cosmic path beyond our private lives with many others and doing so ties us together in many unexpected and important ways that require, in the end, that we bless each other.

Humans are not a bunch of animals, not even beloved pets, that can be discarded when the recession hits, like Ed and Wilbur and Buck were discarded. We’re all going to be in it together. When we open the back door of our homes to the others who walk the cosmos with us, we will—we can, we must—walk with, and comfort, and encourage those who suffer, rather than leave them to their own devices. This is our spiritual worship.

We will not begrudge others their gleaning—unemployment insurance or welfare. And as captains of industry, we will do our best to be good farmers ourselves, always with an eye to those we walk with. So, we will farm or produce or sell or risk capital with the intention not only of filling our silos, but with the intention of taking care of people who have no silos to fill.

And any of us who are able will, besides cutting back on many things, as we ought to do during a recession, we will also plan on giving more to charitable causes during a recession, because . . . well, all our parents were slaves in Egypt a generation or three ago—or, perhaps just poor working folk—and our grandchildren may again, one day, be the same. During recession, we need to both remember with thanks and think ahead with love.

In sum, to be spiritual is to get beyond ourselves and our private concerns, as important and worthy as they might be, to prioritize a walk where by embracing the neighbour our appetite for the divine will be satisfied.

Spirituality that is good and approved is the decision to leave the house of self to become fully alive in and with the cosmos. Even when a recession hits.