

Squamish United Church
Rev. Karen Millard
Lent 3

March 15, 2020

God Speaks in the Dark Wood

It almost felt like a joke as I sat down early Saturday morning to start my sermon on ‘the storms of life’ and being ‘thunderstruck.’ I am not the kind of minister or person who sits down the day before to figure out a service. I am a ‘j’ on the Myers briggs which means I like to be organized way ahead and when in times of ‘crisis’ that seems even more important. But as the winds howled and the windows shook and the tree branches broke off I began to prepare for today.

You see this week it was almost impossible to get ‘work done.’ I didn’t get a lot of ‘things done’ but that does not mean I did not do a lot of work. Work for me this week in some ways was the kind of work that I imagined myself doing when I felt called to ministry. Less in crisis but in real, authentic conversations. Work this week meant I had a lot of conversations. Some of those conversations were about weather or not we should go forward with Messy Church or this morning or.... anything. And what do we do with Spirit Kids if the schools close because we saw them closing all around us. I care about the people who work in this place and what will that mean for their lives and wellbeing. And then there were even more conversations about helping myself and others keep perspective and peace in this uncertain times. I had conversations about it with some of you. I had conversations with the preschool staff, with the teachers and other parents at school, at the grocery store, getting gas. (and as I write this I think Look at that. There is an advantage people are looking at one another and having conversations with strangers and as we are being told to isolate we are coming together with a common struggle - Italy can teach us that). I have found myself trying hard not to be consumed and then you go to save on foods and there is no parking and when you are lucky enough to find a spot the line up is all the way around the store and peoples carts are overflowing and I just wanted to pick up a couple things for Messy Church and I wonder if my family is going to starve because I don’t have time to shop for Quarantine and then I drive to the A&W drive thru to self medicate because I’ve given up alcohol for lent and well... stress eating I know how to do that... Wait I was staying calm :). Right? Tell me I’m not alone. I know I am not alone because I can’t even get this sermon written due to the number of text messages and conversations I am having. (Look at that continuing to connect with people I usually don’t. In fact I can tell you that I only got a little bit further in this sermon before I shut down my computer and started to make phone calls to check in on people because I was going to do that after the sermon was written but... priorities have changed these days).

I absolutely loved the poem by Lynn Ungar that was posted all over my facebook page this week and that I sent all of you in an email yesterday. I really do want to invite us into this.

Pandemic

What if you thought of it as the Jews consider the Sabbath -
The most sacred of times?

Cease from travel.
Cease from buying and selling.
Give up, just for now,
On trying to make the world different than it is.
Sing, pray. Touch only those to whom you commit
Your life. Centre down.

And when your body has become still,
Reach out with your heart.
Know that we are connected in ways that are terrifying and beautiful.
(You could hardly deny it now).
Know that our lives are in one another's hands.
(Surely, that has come clear).
Do not reach out your hands.
Reach out your heart.
Reach out your words.
Reach out all the tendrils of compassion
That move, invisibly, where we cannot touch.

Promise this world your love -
For better or for worse,
In sickness and in health,
So long as we all shall live.
Lynn Ungar

Perhaps this time gives us opportunity to hear God speak. I never use the phrase "the God's are angry" because it doesn't fit my theology but as I sit here and I write and the wind continues to howl at full force and as I continue to get text messages and questions and I find it impossible to focus I do wonder if God is trying to say something to this world and how might we listen. I did ponder the other day what the effect of all this halted travel might do for the wellbeing of our earth. I have noticed how people are coming together as they are being told to stay apart, I have noticed the deep thirst of my soul for a focus on the things that truly matter and a fight against doing the things that don't. I do not have an ounce patience for rudeness or anger right now. None really. I have no time for it. I usually have little time but now I have none. If there is anything God is calling us to right now it is to 'love your neighbour.'

As a minister I often have conversations about how God speaks. I often have people ask "why doesn't God speak to us anymore, like he did in bible times?" When I am asked that question it never takes very long before we can tell others about ways we have heard God speaks to us.

Have you ever had a sudden flash of insight? Have you ever had a moment of deep knowing? Have you ever hiked a mountain or gone on a little walk that by the end of it your whole perspective and life had changed? Have you ever had a moment that 'rocked your whole world?' Why do we claim moments rocked our world "when the actual world remains stable? Like the

ancients we, too, are forced to convey interior phenomena using concrete, external metaphors. What the ancients were trying to describe, which we moderns are too 'sophisticated' to realize, is how the divine speaks to us. When the ancients spoke of the deity flashing lightning and chasing it with claps of thunder, they meant that the voice of the divine often comes through momentary flashes of intuition or awareness that trigger sensations that reverberate within us like rolling thunder."

You might wonder why God doesn't speak but I know that almost all of us have had moments when "the lightbulb came on," or we've had an 'aha' moment "or a moment of clarity. When something clicked into place that impacted our life direction in some way was impacted. God still speaks. We just use different phrases. "While the Bible is full of God-talk, its authors were trying to convey what was 'heard' internally when the lightning hit. They reflected upon the implications of that flash of insight, or moment of clarity, or 'aha' experience sometimes for months or years, later recording these implications with the preface, "And God said... They weren't being dishonest. The ancients simply did not envision a time when the mythological imagination would be such a distant memory that people would take the metaphor literally!"¹

In the Dark Wood of our interior journey, when the lighting flashes and thunder reverberates powerfully and repeatedly in the same location, it is a good sign that we are to move in the direction it indicates. We feel drawn to move in this direction because it calls to our deepest self and feels most natural. Just like in the contemporary Reading this morning from "The Orchid Thief" "Perhaps we're all more closely related to the bees and other animals than we realize. When a bee is drawn to its orchid, its body produces hormones and electro-chemical signals that tell the bee that it is heading toward the right orchid. Similarly, moving in the direction to which the lightning and thunder calls us tends to produce sensations that are not only inward and spiritual but concrete and physical as well. The human body responds hormonally, electrically, and chemically when we take a step in the right direction. If you pay careful attention to your body, you may notice a sensation akin to letting go of something that you have been grasping too tightly. You may notice your breathing grow more relaxed and easy in response to a certain thought.... However your body responds, it will normally feel like something has clicked into place that triggers a sensation of inner peace or joy, even if that sensation is quite subtle and even if the direction toward which you feel called appears difficult."²

I often find those moments in solitude. I was asked the other week why I do what I do and my current answer is the fact that I feel God calling me to this place and to this work. It was only a couple weeks ago when the frenzy and anxiety was high that I tried to run away from God's message. I had to go to a clergy event. I actually tried to avoid it but I can tell you I feel like God drove me down the highway to Lynn Valley United Church. I walked in late to a clergy retreat that I had prepared and found the leader for but I had decided I did not have the time or energy to

¹ Gifts of the Darkwood pg. 67

² IBID pg. 69

go to. I knew I couldn't get there on time with school drop off etc there was no way I could get to the North Shore for the 9am start. But I went. I walked into the room and the leader said. I hope it is okay we just finished 'check-in' and we are about to go into 20 minutes of centring prayer. I refrained from saying "thank God" and said "Yes that's fine." I had no desire to 'check-in' with anyone. I was in such turmoil I had nothing I wanted anyone to hear. And so the chime rang and the silence began. By the end of 20 minutes my heart had loosened, it had slowed down, I felt the deep peace I used to feel more often than not and then she opened up with a reflection that 'blew my mind' it 'rocked my world' God spoke so loud and clear it was anything but audible. The message of God brought a conversation I had had with a group of five women from this congregation only a few days earlier full circle. We were talking about how God longed to fill our cups and so when the facilitator said "I want you to go pick a cup out from the centre of the room." I suddenly knew I was in for a ride. God said "Let me change this water into wine, let me fill this cup."

Here's the thing. God still speaks. Even in this time of absolute Chaos in our world. Take this as a precious opportunity to slow down. Take this as an opportunity for prayer. Take this as a time to rediscover the things that truly matter. I am going to do that too.

We may be together next week and we may not. I will let everyone know as we continue to monitor all that is taking place in our community and world. But in the meantime be gentle with one another, remember we all approach life stress and anxiety differently, do not judge one another's fear or stress. Be kind, love God, love neighbour and love yourself. That is all we are called to do.

Amen.