



Sermons from Northwood United Church

"Wrestling the gods: Life through Death"

Jeremiah 31:27-34, John 12:20-26

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May the words of my mouth, the meditations of our hearts, and the actions of our lives be acceptable in your sight O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

I am sure that when computer analysts get together they tell amazing stories about system crashes and evil viruses, and when plumbers get together they have absolutely gross stories about disgusting situations, and I know that when nurses or doctors get together, they have incredible stories. You may not know that when ministers get together, the weddings or funerals from hell stories come out. Like the one about standing at the graveside in Salmon Arm, after the funeral director had leaned over the open casket to close it up not realizing that his cell phone had fallen into the casket before it was closed. And then, just before the casket was to be lowered, receiving a call. Nobody could quite figure out where the sound was coming from, except him. He didn't let on- just lowered the casket and carried on.

I remember one story that went around a while ago when the then Principle of VST was travelling around speaking in different churches. He was in a large church in Victoria where he was speaking at two services. During the first service, somehow a bird got in and was flying around among the rafters. And Bud, being the experienced preacher that he was, just carried on, although it was really hard to maintain the attention of the people with this bird swooping down every once in a while, or perching above people's heads for a while.

Between the services, a group with a ladder tried really hard to capture the distracting creature, unsuccessfully, so Bud carried on stoically. He was having an easier time during the second service until about half way through, the swooping bird came in contact with a spinning ceiling fan and dropped dead to the floor among some elderly parishioners. Everything stopped as a very helpful usher took the deceased bird from the sanctuary, and Bud picked up where he left off. Until a few minutes later a member of the congregation collapsed in the balcony, emergency personnel were called, a helpful doctor stepped in, the ambulance siren going, pulled up, and took the person out on a stretcher.

Now, at this point, had it been me, I would have cut to sing the closing hymn and admitted that God's winged creatures won this one. Bud managed to salvage a few moments on behalf of VST. I'm not sure I would have had the presence of mind. I am sure I would have wished for a re-do, rewind. Let's start this thing over.

Have you ever been in situations when you think that all hope of salvaging your plan has gone out the window? You look at the relationship and wonder, how did we ever get here? How did the judgement take over and the grace take leave? You look in the mirror at sag where its not supposed to be, and breath that is not as easy as it used to be, and you may think like the 90 year old who said, "If I had known I would live this long I would have taken better care of myself." In language school in Guatemala last year, as I struggled to retain vocabulary, and deciphering grammar, I thought more than once, if I had just done this while my mind was younger and more malleable. If only we could get a new start for Israelis and Palestinians, a redo for ...

Well, "The time is coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with Israel and Judah, not like the old covenant which they broke. I will set my law within them, and write it on their hearts. I will become their God and they will be my people. No longer need they teach each other to know the Lord; all of them, high and low, shall know me, for I will forgive their

wrongdoing, and remember their sin no more." To the people who first heard these words, sitting among the ruins of ancient Jerusalem, surrounded by the destruction of their Temple, their religious and cultural centre, facing the seemingly impossible task of putting life back together again, this must have been such a reassuring, empowering and somewhat unbelievable word. And the promise of a new start is at the heart of what we, their distant decedents in faith, believe- that the time is coming when the brokenness of life will be healed, when our so very persistent inclination to soil our nest, to think only of the immediate benefit or appetite, will be overwhelmed by the deep love that is written on the heart of life. The time is surely coming. Someday.

But in the meantime, the oil gets sucked out of the ground and the CO2 gets released into the atmosphere, Israel digs in, Palestinian extremists swing back, the rhetoric of fear wins another round in the polls, the bird hits the fan, and the preacher looks up and thinks, really? While we are waiting for the new thing, how do we shape our lives?

And Jesus says, "I tell you the truth, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains a single grain. But if it dies, it brings forth a good harvest." If you hang on to your life, it will slip through your fingers, but if you let it go, it will take on an amazing, eternal quality.

Did you know that this very text has a great history in the United Church of Canada. It was the central text at the service that brought together the Methodists, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and Union Churches in the Mutual Street Arena on June 10th 1925 to form the United Church of Canada. And the preacher of the day took that image, of a grain of wheat falling to the ground and dying and spoke of the law of life that must come through death. And friends, I believe there is a law, or core principle, or essential mechanism at the heart of things, that we see in the garden, and in the cycles of the seasons, and in the rise and fall of ideas and organizations, and in our human life. Even in our internal world we can see the working of the law of life through death at work. It is at work in the great evolving movements of the world, when members of one generation offer themselves for the sake of a future generation, planting seedlings for trees in whose shade they will never sit.

And rarely has the world seen as clear an illustration of the law of life through death than the life of Arch Bishop Oscar Romero, who, 35 years ago this week spoke out against the politics of the United States and publicly warned then President Carter against interference in his country. When appointed Bishop they thought he was a safe, conservative candidate that wouldn't rock the boat, but over his time as Arch Bishop of San Salvador, he came to see the way the poor were not just unfortunate, but were ground into poverty because of greed and hunger for power. He underwent a conversion, and found himself speaking out: "I have frequently been threatened with death," he said. "I must say that, as a Christian, I do not believe in death but in resurrection. If they kill me, I will rise again in the people of El Salvador... A bishop will die, but the church of God, which is the people, will never perish." And it will be 35 years on Tuesday, as he was saying pass at the altar of a convent that the death squads broke into the chapel and shot him dead.

Priests and Bishops are still threatened with death in Central America. But I can tell you that this week he is alive all over Central America. I saw his picture, larger than life, on the wall of a cantina in Pana Jachel. Services will happen all week, and that for which he stands has not died in the hearts of people. It is written on their hearts- the promise of life that comes through death. That promise- that if you try to save your life you will lose it but if you give it away, you will find it- that promise can be seen in every place where Jesus is taken seriously, where the cross is seen as a sign of God's fierce commitment to this world, and a way of living, written on the hearts of the people, alive at the heart of the body of Christ.

It is a promise that leads us, Christians of every generation to say things like, "I see a new heaven and a new earth for the old heaven and the old earth has passed away and the sea is no

more... And I hear a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. God will dwell with them as their God; they, God's peoples, and God's very self will be with them, and will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." And the one who was seated on the throne says, "See, I am making all things new."

The promise of life through death. Whether we are a preacher watching the bird hit the fan, again, or a plumber up to our elbows in... whatever, or a Palestinian on the Gaza strip, or you or me in whatever our place in life, may the promise be written on our heart. Amen