



Sermons from Northwood United Church

“What to do when you don’t know what to do”

Acts 9:1-20

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May the words of my mouth....

There is a community that has been helping me with my sermons these Easter spring days. On several mornings I have wakened, gone down to the kitchen and looked out the window at the tree slowly emerging, bud-bedecked for spring. And in this tree the siskins, juncos, chickadees, house finches, sparrow and the occasional varied thrush have been foraging like mad. Spring, and the community of earth seems to know exactly knows what to do.

I remember once in Nakusp setting up a mirror over a robins nest at just this time of year so I could watch from the kitchen window, the progress of little blue eggs in a nest in the car port. And there I was this week, looking out at all this foraging, nesting frenzy as I waited for the sermon to reach the point of hatching in my heart and mind, all of us in this creation trying to allow God to work through us, something that can bring forth life. Something tells me that it comes a little more naturally to the buds and the birds than it does for me.

But this is one of the wonders of this season. Nature just knows what to do. The robin knows naturally where she fits into the scheme of things, and the rhythms of life so naturally flow through her. It is like she knows who she is and where she fits. I envy the seeming ease with which she knows who she is and what she ought to be about. It has never been quite so easy for me.

We are in the season of Easter and our scriptural focus rests on what happened in the community of Jesus right after. And it was one chaotic time. Reading a commentary on this part of the story this week, one phrase caught my eye. “What do you do when you don’t know what to do?” The community of Jesus right after the incredible events of that first Easter was in exactly that kind of a state. Not a clue what to do next. They had been through an amazing three years of following and learning from Jesus, being his community, catching his vision, and then in Jerusalem the whole thing fell apart. The wheels came off, there was this angry confrontation with the authorities and he was crucified. And then some women said his body was gone and they and others said they had seen him. They were blown away by the experience. What do you do when you don’t know what to do? Well, you go back to Galilee, back fishing. Why? I don’t know. Not out of some deep sense of calling to fish. No, because they don’t know what to do. The fact is, they are small town Galileans. That’s who they are, and when they don’t know what to do, they do what comes most naturally for them. And Jesus meets them there.

What do you do when you don’t know what to do? I was told this week of a little 6 year old boy who offered this advice. “You stop what you’re doing, you sit down, and you ask for help.” Not bad advice for many situations in which you don’t know what to do. Especially 6-year-old-sized situations.

I wonder if there wasn’t some of this going on for Paul as he was led the rest of the way to Damascus after his blinding experience on the road. I wonder if this powerful persecutor of the early church wasn’t feeling his vulnerability. I have this picture in my imagination of Paul, who had been breathing violence and murder on his way to Damascus, all of a sudden brought to his knees and struck blind by an encounter with the risen Christ. And at that point this powerhouse of persecution has to be led into the city by the hand, crawls into a room, and starts to pray. This is unfamiliar territory for Paul. He’s used to being in control. He is used to being

the man with the mission, the guy who knows what he's about. He is used to being the one who strikes fear in the hearts of others, and his impoverished little heart is just quivering in fear.

I am guessing that every one of us here has had a moment, maybe a few, in which we were stuck, and all our usual ways of being aren't working and we bump up against mystery, usually painful mystery. What do you do when you don't know what to do? It can happen to us personally, to any of us, when we find ourselves in over our heads and we really don't know what to do. It can happen to us collectively. I think we are in it as we begin to take account of what the powerful misuse of social media to destroy the self-worth of young people. I am thinking of these girls, Amanda Todd and others who have been bullied and humiliated to the point that they take their own lives. And I don't think that anybody quite know what to do.

Well friends, there is so much I don't know about what to do in these circumstances, but I do know that God thoroughly inhabits those moments. That in many ways, if we have the spiritual guts and the presence of mind to recognize that we are over our heads, God can work in those moments powerfully and redemptively. The situation in which we haven't a clue is a momentary opening for God's transformation.

Oh, that's not what it feels like. That's never what it feels like. The Christian tradition has made wonderful mythical hay out of Paul's amazing conversion on the road to Damascus. It was a great moment that changed his life. But let's be real folks. He did not welcome that moment. He was devastated. He was a strong man with a strong mission, and that experience brought him to his knees. It was devastating. He was terrified. He was stripped bare, made utterly vulnerable, and, when the dust finally settled, it changed his life, turned him around. This was no gentle turning. He had no clue what to do; he was cornered; he had no choice but to confront the truth, the reality of his life. I think he made a choice in that room sitting there blind and bewildered. He prayed. "I don't know what to do. I don't know why this is happening. I could just curl up in self-defense, but I think I'd better pray."

We never welcome these moments. It just goes against our nature to welcome the discomfort, to embrace the chaos of not knowing what to do, with a relationship, with an event. When you really don't know what to do, a choice is made to either close off in self-protection, or to stay open, stay vulnerable, allowing room for Spirit. And it is hard to stay open, to resist the easy answer, not just react and close ourselves off. But just as the disciples emerged from their confusion after Easter, just as Paul emerged from blindness, the scales fell from his eyes, God is able to take us in that place of not knowing what to do, and move us to a deeper life, to a new way. But only if we are open to the Holy Mystery that is able to remind us who we are and where we fit in the universe.

When you don't know what to do, that is a huge opening for God. We who love to be masters of our own destiny are, in that moment, able to allow God to be master of our destiny. Good news in a most unexpected place. Amen.