

Sermon March 26 Lent 5

Today is Lent 5, and we move through Lent, this is my last sermon before Easter. What better time to reflect on Easter readings and the themes of death and life?

The central theme of our Christianity is resurrection. For me, familiarity has drawn the stinger from resurrection at Easter - when we know the ending is happy, the big bad wolf isn't very scary.

Recently a few of our elders informally discussed "is the church dying?" To respect privacy, I won't give names, or repeat the talk verbatim. All of us still attend church this week - so no one is dead by a long shot.

We agreed that our primary understanding of church is 'community' not the institution, the clergy, or the buildings.

We are a group of people seeking God. We must create a spiritual, emotional, and intellectual place where courageous people can talk about everything important. God calls us to go forward - run/crawl/walk/limp/swim - towards Spirit. The elders' courageous open discussion is healthy.

If we do not create and use such a place, we must repent and change, or our community deserves to die.

Consider today's Gospel, and the whole range of Gospel stories. Jesus wished to avoid arrest, torture and crucifixion. Duty to God's call, going towards Spirit not comfort, was more important.

A few saints from the start might accept torture and death without concern. Most saints and all of the rest of us won't. When the people and communities that we love might die, when we might suffer, then the big bad wolf is plenty scary.

Canadians primarily understand our world in secular terms, and Canadians here on Vancouver Island even more so. Think of the parable of the mustard seed ... our times and place are indeed hard rocky soil for churches. This too shall pass.

The bones that were Israel lie scattered over the land. There has been suffering, and death, and rot. Even Ezekiel is incredulous that God might put flesh on bones, and breath in lungs, and life will renew. If prophets like Ezekiel are incredulous, and Jesus and Peter would prefer not to go, and then we with our doubts, errors and hesitations are in good company.

Humans crave understanding and connection even more than status. Every secular philosophy of life, every religion must address these issues as individuals and as community. I congratulate all who can find peace in their heart, and the desire and strength for kindness and compassion without God, or God in very strange disguises.

I didn't. I suspect most won't.

Religions with hundreds of thousands of years of collective experience struggle to avoid shiny paths to dark places. How much more risk without experience! We celebrate freedom. Since WW2, some common expressions of freedom have evolved - free to do what I want:

1. within social limits [don't yell *fire!* in a crowded theatre], to
2. according to the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, towards
3. with no consequences.

Notice how community shrinks from a role in #1 to nothing in #3. The spectacular emojis and performative ethics on social media are for display, not learning or persuading.

Can a soul be filled by itself alone? I say no... a hermit is with God, not alone — and so very few of us are hermits.

I am confident that two and more will always 'gather in His Name' in Metchosin. The church will continue. Almost as certainly, they will be linked to this building and parish history, but that is less essential.

- To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace // [the Lord] will put my spirit within you, and you shall live

This sermon very deliberately does not use the image of Lazarus arising from the dead. The church is not dead and will not be dead. Shine with each other, "and all these things will be added unto you". Hallelujah! Hallelujah!