

“A Piece of the Puzzle”
Stouffville United Church
Sunday, January 19, 2020

Isaiah 42, Psalm 40, John 1

I went to see my mother on Friday evening– my sister and brother and I were going to walk through her house to see if there was any furniture we’d like – she is moving into a retirement residence. My mother had me lined up to take my grandmother’s tea trolley. As you may know, the tea trolley was an indispensable and necessary piece of furniture to lay out the tea service, and assorted cups and saucers. In the 1900s, many households had them, but as the next generation were asked to inherit them, not everyone wanted them. And so, they began to show up in church parlours, given as a gift to the church.

Fashions come and go. We are well acquainted with the ways that clothing goes in and then out of fashion, only to recycle back in 40 years as the next newest trend – I know I’ve said, ‘if only I’d kept that peasant skirt’, or that fringed suede shoulder bag, or that fake snakeskin belt. Just when we settle into a predictable, set pattern in our every day life, the world has a knack of reversing direction on us. And we suddenly discover that what was a constant, is no longer because it has no meaning for the current generation.

Take for instance, back in 1988, 32 years ago, the Province removed the Lord’s Prayer from the school classrooms which had been a set part of the opening of each school day for decades. And more recently, the culture has shifted the saying of ‘Merry Christmas’ to ‘Happy Holidays.

Canadian theologian Sarah Travis commented on these trends in her recent book, *Metamorphosis*, as well as the media splash that occurred in 2015 when Starbucks removed the Christmas images from its standard red coffee cup. She wrote, “In the Autumn of 2015, corporate coffee giant Starbucks inspired passionate responses when it removed traditional Christmas images from its seasonal beverage cups. The new plain red cups sparked a debate that exposed the struggle for Christianity in the age of a dying Christendom ... The controversy surrounding the coffee cup ... represents a particular view about the relationship between Christianity and culture.”¹

We know about the widening gulf between Christianity and culture, that the church is no longer a leader, a key voice in the community. None of this will surprise you. You’ve heard it before. It is a culture shift that is affecting the wider church. Travis cites a Globe and Mail article from 2010, with the headline, “Anglican Church Facing Threat of Extinction.” “The article cites a study that claims that the denomination, ‘Once as powerful in the nation’s secular life as it was in its soul,’ has been ‘moved to the far margins of public life’ and is unlikely to survive the next generation.”²

¹ Sarah Travis, *Metamorphosis: Preaching after Christendom*, (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2019), 1.

² *Ibid.*, 31.

In our church, we can recognize the signs of decline in a decreasing congregational size, and in significant financial shortfalls. We find ourselves in this in-between place – between what was and what is coming. Some call it a liminal space – a threshold between an ending and a new beginning. Some morosely label it the ‘death of the church’.

But Travis makes a case that it is actually a thrilling place to be – the birth of something new. We know that resurrection doesn’t happen until something dies. So how does a church steer a course through this challenging place of both hope and hopelessness?

Psalm 40 is both a private and a public proclamation of God’s faithfulness. “I put my hope in the Lord; he inclined toward me, and heeded my cry. He lifted me out of the desolate pit, out of the miry bog.” Let’s stay here for a moment. A miry bog.

Physically I know what it means to be stuck in a miry pit. Think back to any time you were a kid and your boots were stuck in the mud. You know the feeling of helplessness. You know the sound the muck makes when the boot finally comes out. I also know what it means to be emotionally stuck in a miry pit, when you feel so heavy-laden by sorrow and grief that you cannot pick yourself up even if you tried. And you place your hope in the one who will come and give you a hand and pull you out of the muck and set your ‘feet upon a rock’, as the psalm says, to make your steps secure.

I would suggest that as a church we are stuck in the miry bog. We are both blessed and cursed to be in this place at this time. We are cursed in that we are the ‘remnant’ of a church who are experiencing the down curve after the glorious experience of being a burgeoning, amazing church, filled with people, filled with children, filled with relationships, filled with faith and promise and hope that anything we put our hand to would happen. While we are the generation who has inherited this in-between time, we are also blessed. Because God *will* set our feet upon a rock. God *will* put a new song in our mouths.

Isaiah says, ‘It is too light a thing’ that you shall do one little thing. I will give you to be a light to everyone, to the nations. God has BIG PLANS for us. God has not given up on the church. God never has. But how will we know what God plans for us? It will involve, as Travis suggests, “a time to intentionally and courageously discern a way forward, even a way that takes us through the Valley of the Shadow of Death.” She suggests, “What if it is our *vulnerability* rather than our strength that will better enable us to carry out the mission of Jesus Christ in the world? She uses the words humility and vulnerability to express the emerging character of the church. Perhaps we need to go to a place of humility, letting go of the vestiges of what we once were – strong in numbers and resources, both financial and people, centered in the midst of the town, and instead find our new path through our humility.

By resting in our humility, we tap into a reservoir of spiritual strength. Travis writes, “A changed narrative about the purpose, function, and mission of the church in the world will be more about vulnerability than strength, more about incarnation than immortality, more about homelessness than institutional security.”³

³ Ibid., 13.

Brene Brown is the author of a number of books that have helped so many in becoming more independent and confident in being themselves. Her book, *Daring Greatly*, from 2012, was inspired by a quote from Theodore Roosevelt – “It is not the critic who counts; nor the man who points out how the strong man stumbles ... The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; ... if he fails, at least he fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.”⁴ Travis carries this metaphor to the church: “Imagine, for a second, that it is the North American church lying in the dirt on the floor of the arena. Having strived valiantly, given its blood, sweat, and tears, it finds its efforts are no longer achieving the hoped-for results. Despite every effort at growth, it is shrinking. Despite honest attempts to connect with every generation, it finds itself less and less relevant ... the thing about lying on the floor in the arena, feeling the sting of defeat, is that there is the choice to get up again, to continue to dare greatly. Before it can arise, however, the church needs to take time to come to terms with its failures, its imperfect response to a changing world, and its continual struggle to interpret God’s word and action. The church will need to wrestle with gospel, remembering that there is a good reason to rise up again and seek a way forward.”⁵

The Gospel is always a “fresh word that speaks into the particularity of time and place.”⁶ In our Gospel today, Jesus said to the two disciples who were standing with John the Baptist, “What are you looking for?” The disciples answered, “Teacher, where are you staying?” Jesus said, “Come and see.” As a church, we are these two disciples. Jesus asks us, “What are you looking for?” We say, “Where are you staying?” Jesus says, “Come and see.”

There is so much hope and promise in our scriptures, that surely inspires us and lifts us from the miry bog of the realities of the declining church.

God tells us, as a church, we are a light.

God tells us “I am putting a new song in your heart.”

God tells us, “I will place your feet on solid ground.”

Do not despair, dear church.

Be ready for a little death.

But then, as surely as the day follows the night,

new life will rise.

Thanks be to God. Let us pray.

⁴ Ibid., 64-65.

⁵ Ibid., 65.

⁶ Ibid., 67.