

“Now or Never”
Stouffville United Church
Sunday, January 26, 2020

Isaiah 9, Psalm 27, Matthew 4

Jesus is walking along the shore of the Sea of Galilee. I imagine he’s looking at the lake, at the people he passes by. Then his eyes suddenly settle on two fishermen who are on the beach, mending their nets. Jesus knew that the moment had come for his own ministry to start rolling out. It was now or never. With the sand and the water and the wind all about him, he opens his mouth and calls out to Simon and Peter, “Follow me!”

And they follow. They walk away from their work, their community, their families. They leave their routines, the predictability of their days. They leave it all behind. They drop what they thought was important to start a journey by following Jesus. No itinerary. No agendas. No packing a suitcase. It was obviously a now or never moment that altered their lives forever. They fell in step along with Jesus, walking beside him. What did they talk about? Did they throw a hundred questions at him in the first hour? Then that first day turned into a week, then a month. The followers would grow in number and diversity, until it could be said they were a community of followers. They became used to the pattern of no planned outcomes, only open-ended days. But always at the center was Jesus. In the midst of them. Holding them, making their way sure. A presence they learned to trust, and with confidence they followed, as if he were a light that could dispel all gloom and uncertainty.

The writer of Psalm 27 has developed a similar trust in God. Verse 3 reads, “Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war rise up against me, yet I will be confident.” Walter Brueggemann writes of this verse, “What counts is the kind of unshakeable conviction expressed as “confident” in vs. 3, in which the speaker knows about the alternatives but reckons none as finally serious. Life is completely staked on the reliability of God.”¹ The last lines of the psalm are about deep trust. “I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!” The main verbs jump out at me, “Wait, be strong, take courage, wait.” Brueggemann explains that the Hebrew root of ‘wait’ also implies ‘hope’, adding, “It is a voice in the disorientation that is fully confident of new life to be given.”²

A voice in the midst of disorientation. In the midst of disorientation. Isaiah was standing in the midst of feuding countries and an exiled people who longed to return to their homeland. And Isaiah speaks with confidence in the midst of disorientation, telling the people that God is still present, God is present even in the midst of the gloom. God is a light that will lead us. Isaiah announces that God will lead the people “more deeply into the life of the world.”³ In Isaiah 49:6, “I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms*, 153.

² *Ibid.*, 154.

³ *Feasting on the Word, Pastoral Perspective*, 270.

Likewise, God has plans for us that will take us out from our comfort zone and draw us out into the world, a call that involves getting up and out of the comfortable pew. Fifty-five years ago, Pierre Berton wrote the 1965 classic, *The Comfortable Pew*, in which he called upon the church to be more relevant to its local context. Berton observed a disconnect between the church and the world around it. He wrote, “If the Church insists on concerning itself (as it has sometimes in the past concerned itself) wholly with the hereafter, then the Church is quite likely to go out of business before the twenty-first century dawns. The Church must get with the world, or it will surely perish.”⁴

The disciples, Simon, Peter, Andrew and others, moved forward into each day, trusting in Jesus. His message of ‘Come and follow’ would attract people at every stop of the way. His message was offered through healing and love. His message was offered through examples that said to anyone who was set apart because of their identity, here is my hand, come and follow me and I will show you the way.

A change was happening. At the opening of our Matthew passage, a commentary notes, “At the head of the passage, the reader sees that the onset of Jesus’ proclamation comes directly on the heels of the interruption of John’s public activity. In Verse 12, Matthew indicates that John has been arrested. The reason for his arrest is not provided, but it is safe to assume that it is in connection with his proclamation and baptizing activity.”⁵ John the Baptist’ ministry was effectively over. He was imprisoned by the authorities and his ministry ended. Jesus realizes that something has to move. Something needs to change. As he walks to the Sea of Galilee, he knows it is a now or never moment. It is time to begin to call his followers. It is time to begin his ministry.

And Jesus changes the strategy⁶. Instead of the people coming to him, which John the Baptist had done, he goes to the people. He invites them by name. He goes into their local context. His message of love and healing is where the people need it now.⁷ The way in which Jesus altered the strategy of sharing his faith and message asks us – which of our strategies might need to be altered? To what does Jesus call us, both individually and as a church?

It is indeed a time of disorientation, as we live in a culture where church does not hold the same position as it once did. Jesus was building community, one by one, as he walked from town to town. Sometimes we lose track of the hard work this took, to connect, to build community.

⁴ Pierre Berton, *The Comfortable Pew*, 41.

⁵ Feasting on the Word, Exegetical Perspective, 285.

⁶ Living Ministry Presence FB Live Worship, Sunday, January 19, 2020, 10:00 pm.

⁷ Ibid.

Jesus leads us through the stories of his ministry, where over and over, he reaches out his hand to those on the fringe, those who are rejected, those who the dominant power labels as ‘other.’ This world all too easily rejects voices it does not consider important, who are considered to be ‘other’. We have a tendency to exclude. This is *not* community building.

This past week, in Davos, Switzerland, at the World Economic Forum, there was an international panel discussion shared by leading young activists on climate warming event. Canadian Autumn Peltier represented Canada. Greta Thunberg of Sweden was there. And 23 year old Vanessa Nakate from Uganda represented Africa. On Friday, a media photo was released by the Associated Press of the young climate activists. You see four white young women. There was a fifth in the picture but she was cut out. African Vanessa Nakate was cut out of the picture. I watched Vanessa’s twitter video statement, and I felt the pain she experienced when she realized she had been erased.

She said, “You didn’t just erase a photo. You erased a continent.” The founder of the Rise Up Movement added: “We don’t deserve this. Africa is the least emitter of carbons, but we are the most affected by the climate crisis... You erasing our voices won’t change anything. You erasing our stories won’t change anything.” The Associated Press has since replaced the cropped photo with its original.⁸

Is *this* how you build community?

The prophet Isaiah stood in the middle of a time where structure and identity were turned upside down. Simon and Andrew walked away from the order of work and family, into disorder and newness. Disorientation breaks up complacency. Disorientation leads to an emerging sense of direction.

Church consultant Susan Beaumont observes that rising out of disorientation is an emergence of new life. She urges a church to embrace what is emerging and to stand with each other during their confusion. She advises, “Herein lies the struggle. Emergence is not a controlled process that can be led by an authority figure. It is a self-organizing process that feeds on experimentation, risk-taking, and learning from failure. It is messy and anxiety producing.

Emergence doesn’t happen through the clearly articulated vision of a leader, followed by the careful execution of goals and action plans. Emergence is a fundamentally leaderless activity. It cannot be orchestrated or managed.”⁹ In the center of the disorientation, in the center of emergence, is our salvation.

Jesus, the light of the world, stands in the center.

Jesus reaches out his hand to us and says,

⁸ <https://www.msn.com/en-ca/news/world/ugandan-climate-activist-hits-out-at-racist-media-after-being-cropped-out-of-picture-with-white-peers/ar-BBZjGKF?ocid=spartandhp>

⁹ Susan Beaumont, *How to Lead When You Don’t Know Where You’re Going*, 135.

Come and follow me.

Drop what you think is important,
and journey to something larger than yourselves.

For I am in your midst,

and I will lead you.

Come, and follow me. Thanks be to God. Amen.