

LEAD ME ON

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Camrose United Church
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1 Kings 19:15-16, 19-21 - Elisha follows Elijah

Luke 9:51-62 - People pledge to follow Jesus

The problem preaching without notes is that the sermon doesn't stop growing. It's organic, and if one combines that with having Hazel [Naslund] read scripture, all of a sudden there is a whole new dimension to the sermon that emerges half way through the anthem.

These two stories from Elijah's epic story in the Old Testament, and then the stories that were told of Jesus in responding to people who were pledging to follow him, initially give us a sense of a kind of meanness. But if we listen beyond the literal story to the metaphorical depth that's in those stories, what we hear is something about the spiritual journey of life--that throughout our lives there are times when the spirit seeks to lead us on, on and ever on. And each time that we are called upon by the spirit to move on in our spiritual lives there's a letting go as well as an embracing, and that happens on all different levels--our own very individual spiritual lives, our relationships, our church, even our world. Life is a continuous journey, with the spirit calling us to move on and on and on.

I can identify with those people who pledged to follow Jesus but weren't quite ready to move on, because I really like to keep all options open in my life. I'm really fine with the idea of adding some new experiences or some new possibilities or some new alternatives, but the idea of letting go of the old ones in any kind of definitive way is a hard one for me. But Jesus says "It's as if I'm taking you into a new place to live and you're not quite ready to move. You just want to visit, you want to be tourists rather than residents in the land to which I am taking you. But no, you need to change residence, you need to live somewhere else when I call you on, and not be just tourists in eternity." So there's this deep sense of Jesus challenging, just as Elijah challenged Elisha to really let go. And what more powerful symbol of really letting go is there than Elisha saying--well it sounds cruel doesn't it--"I want to kiss my mom and dad good bye"? And yet that's a deeper symbolism of hanging on to what was there, and so Elijah sends him back to work that through, to think that through, and then Elisha realizes "Yes, I wasn't really ready to take on the cloth, the mantle, the authority of this great prophet Elijah. I was just going to experiment with it or try it out, but I can see now that I really need to let go." And what more powerful symbol of letting go is there than to slaughter the oxen, even to burn the ploughs to cook the oxen to feed the people Elisha was leaving behind. What a powerful metaphor of letting go, and so Elisha moves on, and the people who wanted to follow Jesus were challenged by him to look deep into themselves and see what it was they were clinging to, to see what was stopping them from really moving on into what Jesus was leading them.

I was away last weekend at a truly exciting worship symposium in Toronto. I want to share a few bits from that with you because it was really an experience of the church moving on in many different ways--a look at what kind of thinking is going on in our United Church about where we need to move. One element actually had nothing to do with the symposium at all; it was a book I read on the plane on the way down and back, the one that Harry's [Gaede] study group is going to consider in the fall. I know I shouldn't say "the one," Harry, as you have about four or five books, but it was the first one you mentioned to me. It was Tom Harper's new book called *The Pagan Christ*. It's very readable. The author is a journalist who can write so that real people can understand what he is saying, and I want to recommend that you get a copy, read it over the summer and join the study group in the fall. Harper is writing about biblical interpretation, and is really describing the kind of moving on and the letting go that we need to do.

I thought there's an interesting parallel with this hole in the wall. [This is an allusion to the hole recently cut into the wall behind the pulpit through which much of the music will come once the renovated organ is installed.] One of the treasures of the church is our musical heritage, and our faith is contained in that beautiful musical heritage. The church is going into an amazing array of different styles of music but you, like many congregations, have chosen to retain that classic pipe organ style of music at its best. And so we have this beautiful upgraded organ that will be gracing our sanctuary in the fall. But what a symbol to have had our organ pipes over all those years sitting behind a sixteen-inch-thick brick wall, and then to think that maybe if we just opened up that wall, the voice would emerge much clearer and fuller! I find it fascinating to hear Darryl [Dewalt, Minister of Music] talking about the language of pipe organs. He talks about the "voices" and "voicing," and even refers to the pipes "speaking." I think that word is fascinating--that the pipes speak or the ranks of the pipes speak. It's as if the word of God were contained in that music, as if the church were now realizing that in some way we've had the music hidden behind a brick wall and that part of what the spirit is calling us to do as a moving on is to open that wall.

That's what Tom Harper does in his book in talking about the Bible. He describes the sixteen-inch-thick brick wall, as it were, that has been built around the scriptures because of the literalistic, fundamentalist, historical interpretation of the Bible. Initially he sounds very critical, very undermining, maybe just as rough and brutal toward the Bible as were the air hammers on that wall in our sanctuary.

But beneath Harper's comments is an exciting description of how the scriptures come alive in a powerful and beautiful new way. Consider, for example, the scripture reading we are looking at today. On an historical, literal level, you end up on a detour trying to figure out why Jesus or Elijah would tell somebody not to go home to bury their parents before they carry on with their spiritual life. But if one interprets that on the level of metaphor, a whole new insight emerges into the dynamics of spiritual journey. So Harper says with great conviction that as we let go of that literal, historical, way of interpreting the Bible and turn toward the metaphorical and the mythological, the word of God comes alive in a more powerful and living way than we have ever experienced before. That's what's exciting about what is happening right now in the church.

Of course that has nothing to do with the symposium I attended, although it has everything to do with it because throughout all that we were doing in the symposium that

whole field of thought is there, and it is permeating what we're doing in worship and in preaching and in the life of the church.

I also attended a workshop on drama in worship, and one on preaching. You know that Mary Ann and I have done some dramatic things, not so much earlier, but in the last year or so we've done two or three pieces that we've really enjoyed and I think the congregation has appreciated somewhat. Using drama in worship is a really emerging field. We had a resource person, a playwright from Winnipeg named Scott Douglas, who has written a lot of liturgical material that has been used at General Council meetings and elsewhere. He talked not about ideas and resources but about the principles, the philosophy, of drama and especially drama in worship. He spoke of how one takes the word, the spirit, the sense of the sacred, and portrays it moving through some part of life. Drama can be anything, any kind of story about people living their lives. Douglas talked about how there is an element of surprise and an element of recognition that takes the ordinariness of life experiences and not merely describes them in words but also portrays them in drama. In this way one gets the whole feel of the characters and real people, so ordinary and so familiar, and yet recognizes the sacred and how the spirit moves in any of ten thousand ways through ordinary life.

In this way we move the word of God from the dust of history into the real experience of our daily lives, and so the whole experience of worship, preaching, and drama becomes a training ground for people to recognize the sacred in the ordinary everyday experiences of their lives. And that is so close to the heart of Christianity which is uniquely and essentially that incarnation, that spirit-come-into-flesh, into the everydayness of life. We don't, therefore, experience the sacred, the holy, only in the sanctuary. We walk out that door and go through every hour of every day of our lives through the week, noticing and recognizing and feeling and sensing the spirit working through our lives. And that's what the biblical stories themselves are. They are stories of ordinary life where God moves in some kind of profound way such that as we listen to them over and over again, and live into them, and feel our way into them, we become more and more able to recognize the sacred in our ordinary, everyday lives.

The next step is to be able to share the sacred, to express it, to find our voice like the organ in our chancel being "revoiced," to find our voice as the people of God here in 2004 in Camrose. This means to discover the ability to express our faith, not just by mumbling to each other within the walls of the church, but by having a voice as a church in our community. We hear that as a deeper and deeper longing on the part of the people of God today, not only in the United Church but also in many other denominations, who feel more and more cut off and isolated and ignored by the world and just aching for a way to enable the Church--we as individuals and as a community of faith--to have a voice in our community and in our world. We are aching to have a way of sharing our wonderfully rich heritage, just like the wonderful rich heritage of beautiful music that we have in the church. It is like finding the way to open up that thick wall behind the pulpit in order to let the voice of the organ be heard in the world.

In the workshop on preaching Ed Searcy talked about his view of testimony as one of the key elements in preaching for him in all of worship. For him, "testimony" is people saying how God has been in their lives, sharing any of the ten thousand different ways that we experience the sacred--healing, leading, challenging, supporting, uniting us in our

lives--and people proclaiming that not just as information, not just as sentimental little stories, but as something that they say as if their lives depended upon it. That's what the word "testimony" means. It's not just information-sharing or chatting; testimony is saying something for which you lay your life on the line. So the question then is "What is it?" What is it you hear? This turns around on us as preachers because that's what we were doing in the symposium. We were asking "What is our responsibility?" It turns around on us and asks, "What are you saying from your pulpit for which you can lay your life on the line?" And so the challenge is to open ourselves to the congregation and ask, "What are you hearing from the pulpit that has that kind of conviction?" And the next step is for the congregation to ask itself, "What is it that we have to share within our own hearts, with our family, with the people we meet, together as a faith community in our community. What is it when we walk out of here on Sunday morning that we have in our hearts, what is it that we have to share, and upon which we would be willing to stake our lives?"

That's "testimony," that's where the spirit is leading us, that's what we're sensing in a symposium like the one I attended. It's the spirit leading the church to reclaim that voice of testimony, to identify where the spirit is calling us to lay our lives on the line, to let go of whatever we must in order to let the church let God's word have a voice in the world through us. And it requires a letting go. It always requires something that we need to let go. It's not just an add-on, it's not just "Yes, my life is really good and comfortable, and it would be nice to do that, too." It's the sort of thing that "laying one's life on the line" means letting go of something in our lives, something that we have hung onto, something that has been foundational for us. It is something we can now look at it and say "No, that's a passing thing, not an eternal thing. I'm going to let that go, trade that in for something eternal, for something that is deeper, for something that is spirit-led in my life.

I remember a story I heard a long time ago about a spiritual master with his disciples. One disciple was a new keener who said to the master, "I want my salvation so badly, so badly, that I would give up anything. I'll let go of anything in my whole life for the sake of my salvation." The master looked at him and said, "Well, you can have that if you are willing to let go of anything." The disciple said "Yes, I am willing to let go of anything. What do I have to give up?" The master looked at him and said, "There's only one thing you have to let go in order to be saved, and that's your belief that you're not saved."

We never know what it is that we're going to have to let go for the sake of our faith, but in a way the purpose of the spiritual journey is to teach us how to let go, and how to keep on letting go, of everything that is of passing importance in order to embrace all that is eternal. In so doing we shall be ready when the time comes for our precious Lord, who has led us through all those turns and changes and transitions of our lives, to lead us on and call us to let go of this earthly life for the sake of the life beyond.

Transcribed by Sue and By Reesor