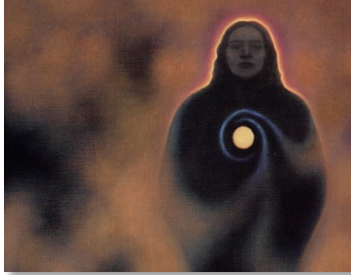


"It Is Written Inside You"

Rev. David Gregory

February 28, 2021

Lent 2



Readings

Mark 8:35-37 from the Contemporary English Version

If you want to save your life, you will destroy it. But if you give up your life for me and for the good news, you will save it. What will you gain, if you own the whole world but destroy yourself? What could you give to get back your soul?

The Journey

David Whyte

Above the mountains
the geese turn into
the light again.

painting their
black silhouettes
on an open sky.

Sometimes everything
has to be
enscribed across
the heavens

so you can find
the one line
already written
inside you.

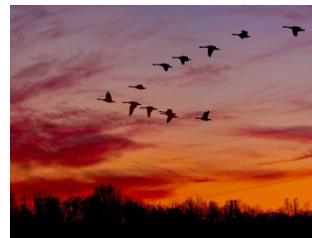
Sometimes it takes
a great sky
to find that

first, bright
and indescribable
wedge of freedom
in your own heart.

Sometimes with
the bones of the black
sticks left when the fire
has gone out

someone has written
something new
in the ashes
of your life.

You are not leaving
you are arriving.



As we continue our journey in the season of “lengthening,” and as the sun rises a little higher each day, appearing a little earlier each morning, remaining a little later each evening, this process we call springtime provides the perfect metaphor for our spiritual awakening. We know, of course that it really isn’t a matter of the sun rising and setting at all. The earth is spinning on its axis one full rotation every 24 hours. This axis tilts back and forth, creating seasonal changes as the earth itself revolves around the sun, about every 365 days. As humans, we didn’t always know that this was how it is. Ancient peoples found ways to describe this relationship with light through origin stories of a creator-God who made two separate lights and placed them in the sky, one to rule the day and the lesser to rule the night. They used languages and understandings that were available to them at the time, which lent significance to the phenomena that they observed day in, day out, year in, year out.

Every generation has found its metaphors to describe the indescribable. Each generation of humanity longs to grasp the idea of transcendence in ways that no previous one has been able to. Likewise, there is a longing for immanence, for plumbing the very depths of the human soul in ways that no one else has done before. In every generation, in every trip around the sun, in every ensuing season, we go a little deeper and a little further to places we have never known. It can feel a lot like waking up after a restful night, refreshed and ready to do it all again but in a new way.

The season of Lent *is* this awakening, and it brings us to a place of greater understanding and wisdom, every single time. The church calendar is best viewed as an evolutionary spiral, dynamic and creative, rather than a closed circle where we simply do what we’ve always done. In our lineage, it is the gospels that give us a framework for this evolution to happen. These stories of Jesus and his disciples are studies in contrast. Theirs is a counterintuitive journey where the unexpected always struggles to become the new normal.

The unexpected thing for the disciples was that in the midst of a growing insurgency against Rome, one that was gaining some momentum, Jesus was starting to predict his own demise, and it didn’t sit well with those who had left their own lives behind in order to follow him. When you’re riding this wave of energy, why would you bring it down with talk of a crucifixion? This is the moment he said to them, “If you want to save your life you have to lose it.” What in the world does that mean?

To begin to grasp the meaning of these words, we have to start with a Jesus who was masterful at the art of surrender. His strength was not in his ability to conquer his enemies. His real power was in his vulnerability. A greater love could not be found, he said, than when a person lays down his life for his friends. This sense of vulnerability can be illusive for us because it runs counter to everything we’ve been taught about strength. Some of life’s greatest discoveries and most important creations come from the ashes of something we thought was going to happen in a certain way, until it didn’t.

David Whyte's poem *The Journey* offers us another explanation. The expectation is that everything important in life is revealed across the sky for all to see. The geese flying in the open sky don't seem to invite us along, but instead point us to something that is already written inside of us, this sense of freedom within our hearts that allows new light, new energy, and new hope to dawn on us.

We're prone to look outside of ourselves for the answer to all of life's questions. If we read enough books, get enough education, or go to enough seminars, surely someone out there will have discovered the one thing I am lacking, the thing that could string all of it together for me. I need the right teacher, the right guru, the freshest new idea, and everything will fall into place. Our current reality convinces us that this is simply not true. In many ways the pandemic has burned its way into our lives and families, and in some cases we are left to stare at the ashes, wondering what became of the life we thought we knew.

A year ago we hosted a lovely event in our sanctuary on Rock Hill with renowned author and teacher John Philip Newell. In those moments, we were riding pretty high, and counting pretty heavily on the momentum generated by this event to expand our outreach in the world. If someone had said to me that evening that we would soon be living and working exclusively from our homes, that our church doors would need to remain closed and locked, and that we would need to completely reinvent what it means to be a church, I would have responded pretty much like Peter did when Jesus spoke of his impending death: Don't you say that! Why can't we just keep moving forward in all of the ways we are used to? How dare you jinx this good momentum with talk of a lockdown! Maybe six or eight weeks and then we'll be back to normal. Six or eight weeks became six or eight months, and now it's been twelve months. And though there are some encouraging signs, we realistically have quite a few more months ahead of us before we can return and begin the process of rebuilding and renewal.

Churches like ours with all the vulnerabilities of an aging population are struggling to move forward. The lockdown was a significant blow to most of the plans we had for ourselves, and it's placed us in a rather vulnerable position as a congregation. Suddenly the questions become far more existential, and we're forced to reevaluate every single thing we thought we knew. As counterintuitive as it might seem, it is this vulnerability that is making us strong. We all work harder to maintain community. We reach out more regularly to care for one another as best we can. We tackle difficult questions together from a place of deeper intimacy, knowing more of each other's lives than we previously had time for. And perhaps most important of all, we've come to a place where we know ourselves more deeply than ever before. We know that the answers to our toughest questions are not to be found in the highest heavens, but written clearly and succinctly on our very souls.

At this point, my hope and desire is that we will never be the same again, and that out of the ashes of this moment will spring everything we long to be and do. My prayer is that we will do far more than pay lip service to the Good News with which we've been entrusted. Let *us* be the Good News.