

Waiting and Rebirth

Call Committee thoughts shared with the congregation ~ November 2024

Do not be alarmed. That's the first thing I have to say about today's gospel ([Mark 13:1-8](#)). And it's the same thing Jesus told the disciples. "Do not be alarmed." Do not be disturbed or troubled by all these things. Do not be frightened.

As it was a lay service today the Call Committee thought it might be a good opportunity to share with those of you here today and those joining us online some of our thinking after almost two years of being in the Call Process. When we asked to speak during the sermon time, we were not aware of the gospel reading but how interesting to us that the reading today fits perfectly with our committee conversations. I was reading from one of my favourite sermon writers, Fr Mike Marsh from the Episcopal Church. He writes, "*In today's reading, Jesus told the disciples that he's not talking about an ending but about a beginning, the birthing of new life. He's describing a movement toward wholeness, fullness, and completion.*"

Although at first it may not seem like it, today's gospel is about hope. It's about opportunities and possibilities. And I think it's exactly what we need to hear. These days when it seems as if so many things are coming apart at the seams, today's gospel overflows with good news. And yes, it's difficult and challenging but it's worth all our attention and effort.

It's a gospel about finding meaning and new life. It's a gospel about your future, my future and the church's future. And who among doesn't sometimes wonder, worry, or even become alarmed about our future and the future of the world?

The hard and challenging part of today's gospel is about separation: nation from nation, kingdom from kingdom, the widow separated from her husband and the life she once had. Jesus's words can be frightening. What if, however, they are not separations that destroy but separations that create and give birth? What if they are opening a space to create something new to come to life?

*And in the midst of that coming to new life, just like the birth process, **we have a time of waiting**, new life forming even though we can't see it. Waiting is not easy!"*

And that's sometimes how it has felt! For the last two years we have been focused on doing the work of bringing a new pastor to Mount Zion. We are following all the steps in the process and so far, God has not chosen to lead someone to this church.

So, we wondered, as your Call Committee, what it might be like to continue with that, and, at the same time, let go of our wants and needs to make room for something else. Like the waiting disciples, to gather and tell the stories of God in our midst. We wondered what would come of all that; what it would ask of all of us, what it would offer us...and what might be born.

With God as our guide, even during these times when it feels like the church is shifting and separating and everything is being thrown down, we would trust the Divine Midwife to guide us as we birth something new. To push with faith, push with hope, push with love, push with anticipation of something new.

Like the Children of Israel wandering in the desert, like Abraham and Sarah waiting for a child, like the promised coming of Jesus, waiting has always been a part of God's story.

Waiting is defined as the action of staying where one is or delaying action until a particular time or until something else happens.

During this past summer a pastor friend of mine gave me a book titled '*When the Church Stops Working*' co-authored by Andrew Root and Blair D. Bertrand.

At first you might think of the title in more negative terms, however, when you read the book it goes on to explain it's not so much about the church not working (as in there's something wrong with it), but rather it's us, as people of God, trying to come up with workable solutions to fix what we think needs fixing.

I'd like to take about 10 more minutes to give you a kind of Coles Notes about the book. I thought it was timely for us and certainly I hope it gives you some food for thought. A good conversation starter over coffee time.

The authors of the book take us back to the book of Acts, Luke's sequel to his own book and what happens after the resurrection. Apparently, the New Testament authors did not title their own books. That came a few hundred years later by the church fathers, bishops and monks. The book authors contend, rather than being named the Acts of the Apostles it should have been named the Acts of God.

Whether its the Acts of the Apostles or the Acts of God offers two very different answers about who is the primary star of the story. The common belief is that the church begins in Acts, with Pentecost. The authors offer another reasoning, that the church begins at the end of Luke and the beginning of Acts where we learn Jesus tells his disciples *to wait* for the Holy Spirit. And so, we learn they spent their time praying, recounting the stories of Jesus while he was with them and praising God.

"The church begins with the command to wait. And to wait together. For the disciples, waiting becomes a kind of being, filled with eating and storytelling, praying and remembering, all in anticipation, and as preparation for God's action. **It's no different today.**

The church, like ours now, often feels like it's in a painful standstill. We assume there is something we're supposed to do, something other than wait for the action of God. Too often we believe there is something else we should be doing than being together, eating, storytelling, praying, and remembering, rehearsing again and again the story of Jesus Christ's life and its meaning.

Yet, it's only out of this being together, this waiting, that we encounter the living God. In encountering this living God, we are called out into the world to follow this God who loves the world. (John 3:16)

As the authors of the book remind us, waiting is hard, especially for go-getter types. Even with the best of intentions the actions of a group of go getters can lead to not so good outcomes.

Peter has this go-getter tendency in him. As a good leader, a man of action, Peter confidently tells Jesus that he would never ever deny him. Jesus knows better as seen in (Luke 22:31-34). By dawn Peter denies him three times (22:54-62). In Jesus's last days the man of action, the go getter, cannot follow the action of God. We are to wait for the Holy Spirit. Peter can only be the rock the church is built on because he's been (painfully) taught to wait.

Luke tells us a story in Acts, before the arrival of the Holy Spirit. It's a story of the apostles busily acting instead of waiting. Jesus has commanded them to wait, and they do for a while. We are told that after Jesus's ascension they returned to the upper room in Jerusalem. They wait. They pray. The church is created by Jesus' command to wait as prayer, and prayer is waiting.

The church, at its core, is a people who wait, and pray, pray and wait, all through the stories of the bible. But then, maybe like many of us we get antsy. Peter starts getting twitchy. He starts feeling a little like all of us in rush hour traffic when we can't get to where we're going, and we start looking for other routes.

He wants to get somewhere to do something, and all this waiting doesn't seem to be going anywhere. To cope with the agitation, Peter decides it's time for some *church administration*. Peter tells the group gathered that they need a replacement. With Judas Iscariot dead, they need a new apostle. It's time to do a staff hire. They are commanded to wait, but what better way to wait than to do something! Peter chooses. They nominate two people and cast lots to determine which one. It lands on Matthias. He's the new apostle. We never hear about him again... nada.

They were supposed to wait not administrate. Like a pregnant woman in her last trimester, when waiting his hardest, we feel compelled to organize. This casting of lots, rolling the dice, is the Acts of the Apostles, not the Acts of God. They don't get in trouble with God, but their action doesn't lead anywhere. It was kind of useless, a distraction, unnecessary to the larger goal of the church. It's the act of the apostles that chooses Matthias. No hate directed toward Matthias, but he's chosen before the Spirit arrives, and he quickly disappears from Luke sequel of the acts of God.

In Acts 9, with no apostles present, we're told of God's own action of choosing. God elects the 12th, not by rolling dice but through an interrupting encounter with words and visions. On the road to Damascus, a zealot named Saul is knocked to the ground and addressed by Jesus. The rest of Luke's sequel is about this Saul, renamed Paul. The

one chosen by the Spirit not by the disciples casting of lots, is at the centre of Luke's Acts of God. The acts of the apostles choose Matthias; The act of God elects Paul. The dice chose Matthias; The living, resurrected Jesus chooses Paul.

In the book of Acts Paul goes out into the world to start churches in homes, to wait for God, to retell their own stories of encountering the living Jesus Christ.

The church is essential, but only as it realizes and confesses that it is not the star of its own story. The church can be faithful only when its focus is NOT on its own actions but on the acts of God.

The story the church is living out is not primarily about the church at all! The church lives for the bigger story. The church is called to rehearse and remember, again and again, the stories of God's acts and Jesus's continued life in the very places, the very cities – whether Galatia, Ephesus, Toronto or Burnaby, Surrey or New Westminster – where the church is waiting right now.

Paul starts churches not for the sake of churches, not to stave off decline or accelerate growth, but for the sake of forming communities that serve the world by witnessing to God's acts in the world.

As I considered what this book had to say the authors point out that Bonhoeffer reminds us in his writing, *“that by focusing on the acts of God – that alone is how we will know God. We will know this God by waiting and watching for God's action in the world. By reading and telling stories of God's acting in the Bible.”*

God reveals Godself by way of Sarah, a woman with a barren womb (Gen 17:15-16), Moses, a stuttering prophet (Exod.4:10-11), and Mary a poor, pregnant-but-virgin teenager (Luke 1:26-38). Ultimately God reveals Godself in the crucified Jesus. And when this God does reveal Godself in our waiting, God is revealed in backward hidden ways that demand eyes of faith.

That's the end of our Coles Notes summary of ***When the Church Stops Working***, a really good read for those who are interested in learning more.

As we wait on God for what God wants for the ministry of MZ the Call Committee is offering opportunities to hear your God stories. Jesus' whole ministry focused on storytelling whether with his disciples or with the crowds who followed him. We recognize we have done this before in our church but congregations change, and new stories can be told.

All of us are unique in our own way because of our stories. Our community of faith is born out of the way each of us, in this time and place, has encountered God's action in the world around us. How we witness and encounter the living God in the world.

We want to create a space where all people can share stories of God's presence and absence, spaces for people to speak of the ways they see God moving in the world, of stories where they felt called to minister or be ministered to. To tell of those times when

they cared for a hurting coworker or drove a friend to chemo appointments or any of the other myriads of ways in which we see and hear each other and the world in all our pain and glory.

We want to create time and space for people to hear and encounter each other in possibly unexpected ways. In people's stories and each other we might see glimpses of God and hear whispers of the Spirit.

In turn that makes us want to serve others and, in turn, be served. In the end, what we know and hope for is that we will provide spaces for people to encounter God. And when we share deep experiences of God, we pass that on.

These times will be opportunity to build up the body of Christ, grow stronger relationships with each other, while at the same time growing in our own understanding of how God is moving through the people and ministry of Mount Zion.

In closing and going back to our gospel reading about challenges and opportunities during times of significant change in our lives and the church, **Jesus is never more compassionate than he is during these times. He speaks with such tenderness and reassurance. As we wait and wonder and sometimes are fearful Jesus says, "Do not be alarmed." "This must take place." "This is but the beginning of the birth pangs." It's as if he's saying, "Don't worry. This is normal. You're going to be ok. I'm the Midwife who will get you through this time of not knowing, wondering and waiting." So, as we wait, we invite you to trust something God-centred is continuing to be formed among us, in us and for us.**

We will not be alarmed! No matter what may be happening in the world around us. We will pray, we will sing God's praises, and we will tell the stories of God at work in us and around us. And we will trust that together, with God as our Midwife, we will join in birthing new life here at Mount Zion.