

Advent 01B 2011
November 27, 2011

Broken Hearted Waiting...
Mark 13:24

“But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken...”

“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence—“

This year, Year B in the Lectionary Cycle is what some of us preachers have come to know as the Advent of Doom and Gloom... In years A and C of the Cycle the Sunday readings have us reflecting on swords being beaten into ploughshares and Branch of Jesse and the voice of one calling in the wilderness... and lions laying down with lambs.

But this year, in Year B of the Cycle we begin this Sunday with a gospel telling of the sun being darkened, the moon not giving light and the stars falling... and it continues next week with the grass withering and the flower fading... and the week after that with people mourning in Zion... and on the fourth Sunday with the Lord asking Nathan, “Are you the one to build me a house to live in?”

Doom and gloom readings... and they seem to fit don't they – fit the mood of many of you who gather here this morning knowing that the conclusion of the ministry of Wesley Memorial United Church is marked on the calendar and that it is but one page turn from Thursday...

The sun seems not to be shining through the stained glass quite as brightly as it once did. The moon seems not to light up the walk way to the Christmas celebrations as brightly as it once did. Hanging the lights and stars on the Christmas tree does not hold as much joy as it once did...

For you, individually and as a community are in grief.

Since about the end of October I have been waking up at 3AM and I lying in bed until about 5AM mulling over the many issues and situations I am dealing with at work and in the community... And let me tell you, preparing a meditation for this morning was right up there in the first frame of the film that spun through my head each morning...

I think I had an even fuller sense of that grief on Wednesday. I came up before the storm and I met George here and we walked through the building: the food closet that served so many, the library, the quilting room where the Pastoral Care Committee used to meet – the other little echoey room where the Property Committee gathered and the Lower Chapel with the theatre seating... the youth group room... the Trites Room... and so on... there was a sadness that seemed to linger in the building...

What to say?

What to say? What word of God might I bring to a community I had come to love that was facing the end of their existence? What word could be brought to a people who feel as if they are in those times the Gospel writer describes: suffering, a darkened sun with no light from the moon, feeling as if the stars are falling from heaven...

But there is no “Son of man coming in clouds with great power and glory.” There is only me... and you... and the grief – the confusion of loss that is not yet, the angst of loss for what might have been, the pain of knowing the end is soon...

And as I pondered those many early mornings, I began to think of all the other times I was with people of this community in the dark days of shock and grief – times when we sat in homes or hospital waiting rooms knowing the end was near – or had come...

I remembered being called to the hospital for what was to be my first crisis ministry among you... to be with Judy when her beloved Doug was rushed to the emergency room, being there with her and others as they stood in shock and grief as his life slipped away.

I recalled with bittersweet fondness sitting with Marion Murray in the last days of her life, surrounded by her family... and with Dot Rogers and Arnold and family... with Jack O’Hanley and his wife and family... with Vera Duncan and John... with Abby Holdsworth, Carol and Allie’s son and infant grand-daughter... with Bill Sherrard and his wife Jessie and their grown children.... With Cully and then soon afterwards Catherine Knowles and their children and grand-children... with Roy Sellars and Winnie and their family... Verna Mabee and members of the UCW... with Berla & Glen Wright... with Fred Armour and Elizabeth and their children... with Bea Taylor...

And then with Brian Taylor as he gathered his family, expressed gratitude for their love and support and made the decision not to pursue anymore treatment....

I remember sitting with Freddy Wry’s parents and with Victoria Eaton and her daughter Margaret...

I remember the many visits to the hospital room with Gary Chapman and then to his and Audrey’s home where together we planned for a celebration of his life...

I remember sitting by the Bill Matheson’s bedside and gathering with his family in their home... with Tom MCAughey and Dot... with Ray Wetmore, Al Brace and Vicki...

And that’s just some of more than 75 individuals and families of whom I ministered to and with as we were together in grief, sitting and waiting, wondering and hoping... in sorrow knowing the end was near or had come...

Somehow – as strange as it seems to say it – it seems so right to be with you here today in this Season on Advent, in this season of waiting, this somber season of anticipation as together we again try to support one another in our grief one last time.

I came a few weeks ago to the pancake breakfast – billed as “Wesley’s Last Pancake Breakfast” – and sharing in conversation with so many of you as I visited and cleared and set tables... a wise person who wishes to remain anonymous asked that whatever I say today, that I not call it a celebration – so I won’t – because its not.

These last events and services are no more a celebration than is a funeral... yes, an attempt to express gratitude for the life of community and ministry that has been... but overshadowing that gratitude is the grief – so much so that these days are far from a celebration...

Not unlike those 75+ families I sat with and whose funerals of loved ones that I officiated in as part of my ministry among you... the grief, the pain of loss, the relief that its finally done, the angst over what might have been, what could have been, the sadness over words said and words that would never be said is so very real –

And at this moment and in the moments to come all we can do is to do as we did when we gathered in hospital rooms and funeral homes, in this Church and around gravesides... all we can do is let the feelings be and reach out to one another and in our togetherness trust that the Divine will move among us and within us...

All we can do is name the darkness that we feel, talk about how the stars have fallen for us and trust in the mystery of God’s love that draws us to one another.

There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven: a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot...

We hear these words from the Book of Ecclesiastes at countless funerals and they help us to make sense of the experience of death – death we say is part of life. We are organic beings. We live and we die. We have a lifespan.

Is the same not true of organizations? At the very root of the word organization is organic: “of or relating to an organism, a living entity...” this Church, this faith community has been a living entity since the first ninety-nine members from Central Methodist Church made the journey up St. George Street in 1891.

It continued as a living entity as it grew and required the abolishing of pew fees to fit the growing crowds, and grew some more after Church Union in 1925 – so much so that a new and larger building was built in 1926 and dedicated in 1928... this community grew and spread and flourished and served faithfully... and the mortgage for the Church building was burned in 1949... no small feat during the war years.

Wesley continued to grow... and as is required by all families who grow it went into debt again – for the purpose of education and built the Christian Education Wing to accommodate the ever growing Sunday School, CGIT groups and Young People Groups that

called Wesley home... and in the midst of that building project purchased a new Manse in the West End that we were blessed to call home during our time here...

And in its growing, in its service and ministry to the community, in its praise and worship of God, this place, this people has supported families, nurtured young people, facilitated calls to ministry and service, offered hospitality to strangers, comforted the grieving and welcomed refugees... you have lived. You have lived fully.

In your ending, there is no failure.

Yes, there is grief – grief over the loss, grief over the ending, grief over what might have been. But do not think for a minute that you have failed – neither as individuals nor as a community. You have been faithful. At every turn you have sought to serve and love – and God asks of us no more than that.

The Gospel passage moves through the apocalyptic images of winds from the ends of the earth and the branches and a fig tree, warning us that this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place... “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.”

Did you hear that? Heaven and earth will pass away. If heaven and earth can end, can pass away, why are we so bold to think that a Church community cannot come to an end? The only thing the writer says that will not pass away is the Word... the Logos... the Spirit of God... that same Spirit that dwells among us and within us even today.

Our task this morning and in the weeks to come is no different than the task that fell upon us each time we gathered to bid farewell to one of the members of this community... each time to gathered here with a casket or urn at the front of the Church... and then gathered in the hall for sandwiches and sweets... and that is to care for each other –

To care in the telling of stories in the naming of shared experience. To care by allowing and encouraging each to feel what they are feeling – knowing there is no right or wrong way to feel. To care by laughing together and weeping together...

To care by acknowledging the fullness of the life that has been yours together and giving thanks for all that has been done, all that has been shared, all that has been offered to the glory and service of God...

To care by proclaiming the mystery of our faith that God is here, God is there, God is everywhere and any where two or more people gather... and that the power of God – the power of love is stronger than death...

To care by taking the Spirit, the Logos, the Word that has been nurtured within and among this community and the individuals of this community to other faith communities after January 8th – so that the essence of the Wesley Memorial spirit be shared and allowed to continue to flourish and grow...

And in time... through our caring, though we know not when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at dawn... in time the grief will ease and disappear... but the memories... that gratitude will remain with us always.

In closing... thank you for the friendship, for the community, and for the opportunity to serve. In time, perhaps these words will be your prayer as you remember Wesley Memorial...