

St Andrew's Hespeler Presbyterian Church April 16, 2023

A Sermon delivered by Rev Cathy Stewart

Trusting in the Breath (Incarnation & Congregational Renewal)

Text: John 20: 19-31

The sermon began with a 4-minute video clip about the impact of re-introducing wolves into Yellowstone National Park, which initiated a trophic cascade in the ecosystem. The re-introduction of the wolf slowly changed everything, including the course of the rivers, and the physical geography.

https://www.google.com/search?q=yellowstone+trophic+cascade+video&rlz=1C1GCEA_enCA999CA1004&oq=trophic+cascade+video&aqs=chrome.1.69i57j0i22i30l2j0i390i650l3.7823j0j15&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8#fpstate=ive&vld=cid:86a39a80,vid:ysa50BhXz-Q

What is true in a park/ecosystem can be equally true in a human ecosystem: a few people can make a difference; one small change can start a "cascade" of changes which may not appear to be momentous at first but slowly starts to change the whole system.

Two questions we want to hold are: What might be a "wolf" at St Andrew's? (What might be a small change that could start a cascade?) Is the wolf "to come" or is the wolf already here?

When the Reference Group talked about this back in March, we watched the wolf video, and then our conversation started to meander, thinking about what the wolf might be, and what kinds of changes have been happening over the last few months.

The group noticed a few things:

- Just before covid, Session decided to remove a few pews at the back of the sanctuary, which has created little more space for people to stay and mingle. What effect has that had for you, to have a little more space to linger? Could this be a wolf?
- When we did the Focus Group conversations in January, it was just one hour, but some lingered over those conversations; there was good participation, and some comments were offered in those groups which led to some changes in worship. One change that arose from the Focus Groups was the shift in the season of Lent from the traditional Presbyterian “Prayer of Confession” near the beginning of the service to the “Laying down our burdens”. [A note about this morning’s version of that: I have been a Presbyterian all my life, and I have NEVER heard a Minister say: “Now I just want you all to relax . . . “ 😊] The Focus Groups facilitated some new listening, which has led to some changes.

Maybe the “trophic cascade” has already started here; maybe it started as far back as pre-covid but had to go on pause for a bit. Maybe some experimenting has begun, and what St Andrew’s needs now is the freedom to keep going, to keep trying things, which means freedom **to fail**, freedom to fall down and get up again.

I don’t know if I have told you the “monk” story. It is a very old story. Once there was a group of monks, living in community. A passer-by asked one of them: “What do you do in there, anyway?” The monk replied: “We fall down, and we get up again. We fall down, and we get up again. We fall down, and we get up again, by the grace of God.”

Let us turn to the John 20 story: If ever there was a story that give us freedom to fall down and get up again, it is the story of the earliest disciples. What is described

about them in John 20 fits with everything we have heard about them already: they are scared out of their wits; they are not some magnificent example of bravery. Peter has denied knowing Jesus three times; they all ran away at the crucifixion; post resurrection Thomas does not believe. They have locked themselves in a room in Jerusalem, and Jesus comes to them. The first thing he says is “Peace”. Peace means “I know you. I know all your fears; your failings; and I say PEACE.” Jesus says PEACE to us too: St Andrew’s’ Hespeler Congregation: PEACE! I know your fears and failings, and I say PEACE. Secondly, He *breathes on them*. What is that about? The Gospel is pointing us back to Genesis 1 and the creation story when God breathed into some dirt and it became a living being, an “earthling”. This John 20 story is a version of the Pentecost story we will hear in a few weeks, when there is a great wind, and tongues of fire that rest upon the disciples. The message of these texts is: God breathes into us; each one of us, at the moment of our birth, and then with each breath we take ever after. Each breath we take is the breath of God, IN US. The gospels give us many promises of God’s Spirit in us, but I suspect that most days we don’t really believe it: IN US? We don’t “feel” any thing. Perhaps we think there is nothing particularly special about the breaths we take (it is just a mixture of O2 and CO2, after all).

Let’s try something on here: Let’s say that the removal of the pews might be a kind of WOLF introduced, that is allowing for some other little changes. IF SO, then that wolf began its work pre-covid, at a Session meeting. If that is so, then Session’s own good wisdom actually is the “mode” by which the Spirit is at work; nothing particularly miraculous or momentous; just a decision that made some good sense, in a direction that might lead to something good. Could that very small decision,

made by some very ordinary Session elders, actually be the work of God at St Andrew's? Maybe we think of God's work as "up there/out there" but what if it can be IN HERE? In us? In each decision we make, each conversation that leads us to try something. Each Session meeting, each conversation here in this sanctuary at coffee can be part of God's work. IN HERE: that is what we call INCARNATION: THE Word made flesh, our flesh. Remember John 14: 20, 23 "You in me and I in you . . . I have come to make my home with you."

Let us consider a few stories.

This is a story a friend tells: "Several years ago, as I was putting my then-11-year old son, to bed, we talked about how God came to earth in Jesus on December 25. I told him then that God also came to the earth on March 2. He replied: *No way – that's my sister's birthday*. Then, I told him that God also came on August 31. Again, he couldn't believe it. He said: *No kidding – that's my brother's birthday*. When I told my son that God also came on August 18 – his own birthday – he was on to me and groaned. But I wasn't just trying to be cute. We know that in Genesis, God is said to have breathed into each person, that we are each made in the image of God and that the breath of God is what gives us life. If this is true, then the day on which each of us was born is also a celebration of the coming of God into this world."

I invite us to just sit with this truth for a moment: *We, here, are also the incarnation of God.*

<Pause>

And this is where your congregation comes in. None of us is expected to incarnate the image of God alone. We are called to do this together, as communities of faith. What does it mean for each of us personally to en flesh the life breath of God?

What does it mean to be so aware of God's presence that we are able to trust and discern how to be and how to act in our corner of the world? What does it mean for the church to be the church?

These are big questions, but they also get practical – because the answers to each of these questions have something to say about how we listen to one another, how we engage one another in discernment, and how you listen for how you are called as a congregation and how you continue to breathe God's presence into the world. What does it mean for you to incarnate the image of God, to envision the future to which you are being called?

We want to engage this conversation after worship today.

One question that has been raised over the last few weeks was: we are trying to imagine the future, but we are afraid. Well, that is not too surprising. The early disciples were afraid to be disciples too. And they did manage to move through that fear.

What took away that fear? According to the bible story, it was the experience of Pentecost that turned these scared disciples into bold proclaimers. At Pentecost, Peter begins to preach, very bravely and with great authority, to the gathered crowd in Jerusalem. So, we might say, about our fear, "I guess we just have to ask for some kind of "Pentecost experience"; I guess we have to take our fears to God, and maybe God can still our hearts and give us courage.

Fear is a hard one. Let's talk about it, because it relates to incarnation.

Back in January or February (after worship) I told you my own story about being wracked with fear about two possible medical options to treat a tumour in my head, and how fear was taken away. I didn't do much, I just stopped the ping pong

game in my head (surgery or radiation?) and became still for a few seconds, and in that silence a voice asked me a question: “What would you need?”, and I realized I had the personal qualities necessary to do the surgery; I already had what I needed. Somehow that moment took away my fear.

I reflected for a very long time about that moment of the voice, and the question, wondering how those 4 words could possibly take away fear. Eventually I concluded that the key to the dissolving of my fear was my sense that THE VOICE KNEW ME. The voice knew exactly what I needed, asking me a question that I could answer. The voice actually led me to what I knew about myself, and essentially asked me to trust in myself; not myself “alone” but myself as beloved; the beloved Cathy who was worth being addressed with a question she could answer and beloved Cathy encouraged to trust in the truth of how she was made (I knew I would handle surgery better than radiation). Essentially the voice was saying: “Trust in what you know about yourself; Trust in who God has made you to be.” [Note not included in sermon on delivery: There is more to this story, obviously, and more to the spiritual path that led to this moment, which likely needs some exploration in order to understand fully. The silence was a form of “surrender” which is important in an encounter with God.]

John Calvin apparently says: There is no deep knowing of God without a deep knowing of oneself; and know deep knowing of oneself without a deep knowing of God. In other words, God made us and said “Good!” We might ask: how can that be? Are there not chasms (of sin, for instance) that separate us from God? Here is the big question: WHAT IF the truth of loving incarnation is stronger than the truth of our limitations as human beings? WHAT IF God wants us to be

FULLY OURSELVES, this unique combination of strengths, and weaknesses, fears and courage.

What if you, as the congregation of St Andrew's is being asked to trust in your belovedness? Trust in exactly who you are? Which is realistic sense of who you are, and who you are not. **What if** the wolf is already here, inviting you to know each other, setting you free to trust in who you are together?

Maybe you are being asked to trust that smaller is ok. A "smaller" St Andrew's might be exactly what is needed at this point in time when the church as a whole (North America) is undergoing gigantic shifts. The next question might be: if smaller is ok, what do we need to let go/hold on to?

My prayer for you today is this: May you find yourselves deeply aware of the presence of God alive in yourselves as individuals, and in this congregation. May you trust that God knows you each individually and you as a congregation, knows what you need, and dwells here already, like a coach is inviting you to trust in who you are, who God has made you to be, and is giving you power to take whatever next step you feel drawn to take. May you delight in the great mystery of the incarnation, the mystery of love that is God, who dares to make a home inside of you: Inside of you individually, inside of you as a congregation and already "doing a new thing" creating the course of the river that is your path.

Amen.