

Welcome

I welcome you once again to our weekly worship. Now I'm sure each one of us approaches this first long-weekend of summer in a different way. There are those of us who look forward to this weekend so that we can finally get out into our gardens hoping, of course, that we don't experience a cold snap like last weekend. Some of us may approach this weekend with trepidation, as some restrictions are slowly lifted, not knowing if or when we should venture out to spend time with family or head out to the golf course. Everyday it seems to get a little more difficult to find our way in this confusing landscape. But as today's reading from the gospel of John assures us, it is our belief in God through Jesus Christ that can ultimately help us find our way. Let the flame of the Christ candle light that way. Come let us worship together. Let Us Pray.

Opening Prayer

Jesus, as our Lord, our leader, our guide:
point us toward God's great purpose for each one of us—
be our Way, be our Truth, be our Life.
Moving us from bondage to freedom, from despair to hope, from a
dead past to an open future. We ask this in your holy name. Amen.

This week we again welcome Devin Howard who is joined by Seattle based musician Alyssa Pack performing a song entitled "You Have Me" written by the band Gungor. Please enjoy.

Thank you, Devin and Alyssa.

Scripture Readings

Acts 7:54-60; The Stoning of Stephen

⁵⁴ When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. ⁵⁵ But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶ "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

⁵⁷ At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, ⁵⁸ dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.

⁵⁹ While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. ⁶⁰ Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' When he had said this, he died.

John 14:1-7

14 'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. ² In my Father's house there are many dwelling-places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?^[b] ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. ⁴ And you know the way to the place where I am going. ⁵ Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" ⁶ Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷ If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him."

Meditation - Things Are Not Always What They Seem

There was a British movie that came out in 1997 entitled The Full Monty, you may remember it. It's about 6 male unemployed steel workers who, trying to come up with some quick cash, form a male striptease act to perform for the female townsfolk.

Well shortly after the movie came out I found myself on a business trip driving from Toronto to Portland Maine, and on an overnight stop, on a King-sized bed in Vermont, I was treated to the Full Vermonty. And I have to tell you, it was wonderful. Delicious!!

Isn't that a great name for an ice cream flavour.

You may know of Ben and Jerry's ice cream. Well, at the time they produced a limited batch of ice cream that they called - The Full Vermonty. Where else can you have that much fun for only \$3.39, U.S.?

Things are not always the way they seem. I was talking about ice cream and you were thinking . . . Well, we haven't time to go into what you were thinking about.

There are many things in life that are not the way they seem. I'm sure you are able to think of lots of examples of this phenomenon, either now as you drift off and write your own sermon, or perhaps later as you recall some of these insights.

Kingston writer, Diane Schoemperlen, in her book, *Forms of Devotion*, observes:

We have been told often enough that seeing is believing, but the truth is we can never see things as they really are. It all depends on how you look at it.

In a strange way, our scriptures this morning are about things not being the way they seem. There is more to them, than meets the eye. Strange, because they seem to be about death

- the death of Stephen in the book of Acts - the first

Christian martyr, stoned to death by an angry mob after he had preached to them (which kind of makes me glad in some weird sort of way that we are not meeting face to face) and the death of Jesus in John's Gospel a passage that known as the Farewell Discourse of Jesus.

I'm thinking for many people in our world today, death or the fear of death is the big reality. Their experience or philosophy of life is coloured by sadness and tragedy. There is a depressing saying that I heard recently that goes "Life is a nightmare between two nothings."

Even some of our hymns give us an image of life, that is not what life is meant to be. When I was looking for some music for today's Service I initially looked at the song - Jesus calls us o'er the tumult of our life's wild restless sea - That hymn says that life is a wild restless sea, not a calm meadow as we heard last week about the Good Shepherd that tends and cares for us and all his other flocks as well.

That hymn also has a line that I never noticed in all my years of singing it - "Days of toil and hours of ease." That is not just bad poetry. It is a strong reinforcement that we have to work, work, work, and take so little time for relaxation and family life. Is that what life is all about?

Sure seems like it some days. And who over the last little while has not felt a sense of guilt when our day is not totally filled with work.

Irving Stone The author of the 1961 book *"The Agony and the Ecstasy"* the biographical story of Michelangelo puts these words into his mouth,

"Of course I would build St. Peter's. Is not life to be worked and suffered right to the end?"

Our texts, and life, especially the last few months, seem to be about death and sadness. But remember, today we are still in the season of Easter. This is the 6th Sunday where we hear the stories of hope and resurrection. In these stories we encounter the risen Christ.

Jesus goes away. – The risen Christ returns to show us and to take us along the path which he calls the way, the truth and the life. There is going away and there is coming again in these stories. There is death. But death only seems to have the last word. After death there is resurrection, new birth.

This inspires one of my favourite authors Herb O'Driscoll to write:

What we are seeing, within months of the event of Calvary and the garden tomb, is the juxtaposition of death and resurrection. Again Christ dies, this time in Stephen, and again Christ is about to rise, this time in Paul.

The brilliance, faithfulness, and vision being snuffed out in Stephen is going to rise to new life in the brilliance, faithfulness and vision of the new apostle Paul yet to be formed. That is why this scripture is so very much an Easter scripture, even though it comes to us in the images and sounds of death.

In our Gospel story, Jesus shares an intimate moment with his close friends, preparing them for his death, and assuring them that he will be with them, that God will be with them. It is wonderful passage about rooms prepared for us; about the way the truth and the life, great themes which are often used at funerals in times of people's need for comfort and direction. But, this passage is not only about death and Jesus going away.

I believe the phrase "I will come again and take you to myself is not ultimately a word for the end of time or for our funeral. It is a word for now. Easter is now. Resurrection, rebirth are for today.

When I was in school we studied a book by Sara Maitland, called *A Big-Enough God: a feminist's search for a Joyful Theology*. Near the end, she is discussing death and resurrection, life and risk. She writes:

I have been reading recently about butterflies, which has taught me about the extraordinarily courageous adventure of the caterpillar.

Like a lot of kids I 'did' caterpillars in primary school. We fed the poor things until they were bloated, then we watched them build themselves their cocoons: and were encouraged to draw cute pictures of the sweet little caterpillar in there busily at work growing wings and lengthening its little stubs into antennae, ready to pop out.

This was a damn lie. Truly horrendous events occur inside a cocoon. First there is a total disintegration. Everything that was the caterpillar breaks down into chaotic matter, into a primal ooze, an amorphous smear. Only once the caterpillar has consented to that annihilation can the butterfly be constructed. The caterpillar has to risk all, for the emergence of its own beauty. That is why the butterfly used to be symbol of the resurrection: you have to die, you have to be destroyed first, even if you're God.

Pretty powerful stuff that we signed up for in our baptism and confirmation. Even if you are God, you have to die, you have to be destroyed first. But who wants to take that much of a risk? Who of us can go there, by ourselves?

Instead we often settle for less. With our tails between our legs we spend our days chasing after a life that is worth so much less, chasing goals and rewards that are so unsatisfying; rather than working with God's help toward that goal which really reflects our own beauty, personality – our own unique contribution to the world.

You and I know what those things are that attract us or distract us. They seem to be so real. But they only seem to be, and in the end they are not what we want at all, are they?

The late Pastor Fred Craddock had the most imaginative way in telling a story of anyone I have ever read.

I would probably have more success in my ministerial preaching if I would have thought of using his technique were he learns to talk with the family dog. In this wonderful story he helps us examine what we are chasing after, what seems to be real to us, but are not always what

they seem:He writes:

I've never been to the greyhound races, but I have seen them on TV. They have these beautiful, big old dogs - I say beautiful, they're really ugly - big old dogs, and they run that mechanical rabbit around the ring, and these dogs just run, exhausting themselves chasing it. When those dogs get to where they can't race, the owners put a little ad in the paper, and if anybody wants one for a pet, they can have it, otherwise they are going to be destroyed.

I have a niece in Arizona who can't stand that ad. She goes and gets them. Big old dogs in the house; she loves them.

I was in a home not long ago where they'd adopted a dog that had been a racer. It was a big old greyhound, spotted hound, lying there in the den. One of the kids in the family, just a toddler, was pulling on its tail, and a little older kid had his head over on that old dog's stomach, used it for a pillow.

That dog just seemed so happy, and I said to the dog, "Uh, are you still racing any?" "No. no, no, I don't race anymore."

I said, "Do you miss the glitter and excitement of the track?" He said, "No. No."

I said, "Well, what's the matter? You got too old?"

"No. No. I still had some race in me."

"Well, did you not win?"

He said, "I won over a million dollars for my owner."

"Then what was it, bad treatment?"

"Oh, no, they treated us royally when we were racing."

I said, "Then what? Did you get crippled?"

He said, "No, no, no."

I said, "Then what?"

And he said, "I quit."

"You quit?"

Yeah, that's what he said, "I quit."

I said, "Why did you quit?"

And he said, "I discovered that what I was chasing was not really a rabbit. And I quit."

He looked at me and said, "All that running, running, running, running, and what I was chasing, was not even real."

In a world where things are not always what they appear to be, may we be able to discern Christ's way to experience what is truly real in this world and the next. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

God of the way, the truth and the life,
You set our feet upon the road where faith is found.
Our lives are a journey and you are our guide.
Keep us safe on this way.

Journeying God, we long for sanctuary in a world of ceaseless
change where things are not always what they seem.
We long for peace in an age of anxiety ;
We long for rest in an age of endless work.
You set our feet upon the road where faith is found.
Keep us safe on this way.

Wandering God, your restless love roams our fragile planet,
Seeking the suffering, lost and lonely ones;
who see only shadows, who feel only fear.
You set our feet upon the road where faith is found.
Help us reach out in love and compassion.
Keep us safe on this way

Comforting God, with the same passion you displayed when healing
the blind and curing the sick;
on this nurse's week we recognize them who carry on your passion in
caring for the afflicted. We now raise to you those who have taken up
this calling and we thank them for their commitment..
Keep them safe on this way.

Yearning God, you have touched us with this desire for your kingdom
and set it deep within our hearts. Grant us courage, wisdom, and
serenity so that we may be part of the coming of your kingdom. You
set our feet up on the road where faith is found. Let us not waiver or
faint. Keep us safe on this way as we share together the words you
gave all your disciples to pray together, saying "Our Father..."

Benediction

Jesus said,

"I am the way and the truth and the life."

Go forth to be life and truth.

Go forth to point to the Way,

for family, friend, and stranger,

for all are neighbours in Christ Jesus.

And know that Christ goes with you. Amen.

I leave you now with a contemporary rendition of one of my favourite hymns "Be Thou My Vision". Blessings to you and your loved ones. Until we meet again.