

November 20th, 2022
A Sunday Service for Summerland United Church
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THEME CONVERSATION

Today is Reign of Christ Sunday in the Christian tradition. It marks the end of the liturgical season known as ordinary time and the beginning of Advent, a time of preparation as we wait for the coming mystery of Jesus' birth. We are on the threshold of the Christian New year. A couple of weeks ago I shared the wheel of the church year and showed you how the Church took the ending that is a beginning and the beginning that is ending and tied them together so we would remember that all endings have beginnings and all beginnings have endings.

The earthly reign of Jesus ends. But it is not the end. Next week we will hear the messengers of God heralding a new beginning. There will be messages of Hope, peace, joy and Love and soon there will be Angels among us.

SCRIPTURE READING Luke 23:33–43

REFLECTION

The Reign of Christ Sunday is also called Christ the King Sunday. Hymn suggestions for this service use a lot of words like Lord, King, almighty, reign and power. All words to describe Jesus, which feels a little strange to me, as I've just spent the last couple of weeks suggesting that Jesus' teachings were about dismantling the current institutions of status and hierarchy these words invoke.

Yet, we use these words with the intention of redefining what they mean. Jesus is the Lord of All, the King of Peace - bringing with him a new understanding of civilization and creation.

In scripture, Jesus is also referred to as the Good Shepherd, someone who is caring and protective of their flock. Someone who, in Jesus' time, was the poorest of the poor. In a few weeks, we will hear about other shepherds, the first people to receive the message from the angels that the Messiah has been born. This great and wondrous mystery is revealed first to those with the least amount of status, those at the very bottom of the hierarchy of ancient Rome.

A startling contrast to all that is known.

Something Jesus creates regularly during his ministry - turning over and inside out what people believe to be true. All that they know is regularly turned on its head as Jesus teaches about the Mustard Seed, The Widows Mite. As he shares the beatitudes and sits down and eats with the undesirables of society.

So one would think we'd be a lot better and dealing with change and events that are outside our comfort zones. But, let's be honest, in theory, we might be. In the abstract saying, yes to new adventures feels easy. Yet, make it the reality and we might want to back away very slowly.

As excited as I was to come to Summerland, I still am excited to be here. There were moments during the packing, the moving, and the transition that I said to my husband, and I quote, "I've changed my mind. This is all too much. Let's just stay here, where we know everything and not change." I was scared of the unknown. Scared of not knowing what I was walking into, what I was dragging my family into.

Leaving my old church filled me with sadness and grief. I didn't want to leave my place of comfort and all that I knew. But I wouldn't have been able to come here, to a place I already love so very much, if I hadn't let go. All endings have beginnings and all beginnings have endings.

We heard the story of Jesus' ending this morning. A story we know so well and one that we know is not the end.

Imagine, for a moment, being one of the disciples of Jesus, being one of the women at the foot of the cross with absolutely no idea or hope of what's going to come next. Jesus has died. He is gone from this world. It is over. The End.

What are they going to do now? What are we going to do? Our teacher has died. Our love has died. Everything we thought we knew about the world is gone. How are we going to survive this?

The disciples are so afraid of what could possibly happen next that they hide in a locked room. We can only imagine how terrifying they must have felt not knowing what the future had in store because we don't have to live in this liminal space for long.

We know that in a few short days Jesus will appear again in a vision of white robes and what was the most tragic of endings becomes a new beginning. And while we have had to let go of one understanding of who Jesus was, we take on another one.

Next week on Advent 1 we begin again, starting at the very beginning of the story, the visitation of the angel Gabriel to Zechariah and for a while, we can put from our minds the ending of the story. But every beginning has an ending. Whether we like it or not.

Change, transitions, wanted or unwanted invoke a lot of emotions - good and hard. This Sunday the Reign of Christ Sunday is the cusp, a threshold if you will. A doorway waiting for us to step through.

Here we are, a community of faith standing on the threshold of transition. The comfort and security of all that we know is behind us in a warm room. Outside the doorway is a possibility and a lot of unknowns. There is no denying being in this place, for some is uncomfortable and overwhelming. And that's okay. All the emotions a person feels during times of transition are real and valid.

And it is in times like this as we step over the threshold into the mystery of what is to be, that it is essential we remember we are not alone. We have each other, we have this strong community of faith and we have God. I am reminded of our United Church Creed which states:

We are not alone,
we live in God's world.
We believe in God:
who has created and is creating,
who has come in Jesus,
the Word made flesh,
to reconcile and make new,
who works in us and others
by the Spirit.
We trust in God.

We are called to be the Church:
to celebrate God's presence,
to live with respect in Creation,
to love and serve others,
to seek justice and resist evil,
to proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen,
our judge and our hope.
In life, in death, in life beyond death,
God is with us.
We are not alone.
Thanks be to God.

I'm going to repeat this last section - In life, in death, in life beyond death God is with us. We are not alone.

The other words that resonate with me this week are - God who has created and is creating, to reconcile and make new - words of action and movement - words that suggest a constant cycle of change within creation. I find myself thinking about this beautiful red-leafed tree outside my house. When I arrived in Summerland it was the most vibrant red I've ever seen on a tree. I loved to look at it every time I looked out my window.

Then, one day, just around Halloween I guess it got windy enough and cold enough that when I got up in the morning all those beautiful red leaves were strewn about the ground. My tree was bare and lifeless. the red leaves are covered in frozen dirty snow and will likely be a nasty mushy brown goo when the snow melts (if it ever melts). My red leaves are no more.

But you and I both know that sometime next spring creation will once again make new. Little buds will poke out on the branches of the tree and slowly tiny leaves will unfurl in the warm sunshine. I don't know what colour those leaves will be because I haven't seen the tree in springtime. It will be as if it were brand new - but this tree has been growing its leaves each year, every year for I don't know how long. It knows what to do. Just like God does.

Leaves change colour on trees because they stop producing chlorophyll, food for the tree. A lot of you have fruits so you probably know this. Then they let go of their leaves because they don't need them anymore and they need to make room for new growth next spring. Trees are pretty good teachers when it comes to learning to let go.

Our scripture passage today ends with one of the condemned hanging beside Jesus asking to be remembered when he enters his kingdom. Jesus replies, 'today you are already with me in paradise' a strange thing to say while dying on a cross. But Luke is not talking about this day of crucifixion or this ordinary time that is a moment in linear time. Rather, Luke is speaking about the day of Messianic salvation brought about by Jesus' life, death and life beyond death.

The knot in our string. The day the leaves drop from the trees with a promise of spring. The moment we choose to step over the threshold and through the doorway into the unknown and the mystery and wonder of the ever-present God in our lives.