

Sermon on the Anointing at Bethany, April 3, 2022

Our family has a woodlot down Digby Neck, close to the cottage. One of the things I like to do on our holidays is go into the woods and make paths. The woodlot is a fairly narrow strip of land, about 6 phone poles wide, going from the highway over a fairly steep hill, and down to the Bay of Fundy shore. It's about a half hour walk to the shore if the trails are good. And I like to keep them good. I've been doing it for years.

At first I would go by myself, or with our dog, David the Golden Retriever. I would take hand tools and trim branches, move fallen logs, move the debris off the trails, and make them easily walkable, while David ran around chasing leaves or napped. I actually built a path along the right hand property line, over 3 summers, with a bit of help from various family members. And several cross paths so you could do different length loops. I loved being out there in the woods by myself, enjoying the buzzing of insects (except the deer flies), the singing of birds, the rustle of leaves and, on a still day, even the song of the seals on the shore, or sometimes a whale blowing. And at the end of the day I can walk easily back on the path that I took hours to clear. A sense of satisfaction.

Now, Charles usually comes with me and we have a chain saw for the big logs. I still cut and lop the others with hand tools, but some things are just too big. It's kind of nice out there. We bring our lunches and picnic along the path. The problem is, we usually want to go just a little bit further. We're starting to get a bit tired, but we think, oh, just another couple logs to clear, then we'll stop. So we do that, and then we have to go back. Uphill. And we get tired.

You know how it is. You start out full of energy and step out quickly and almost bounce along the trail. We start work and we're full of energy, sawing and lopping and heaving. And then we get a bit tired and have lunch and then we're ready to go again. And then we work a little too long and the path back is a bit of a slog. Last year we were half way back and I was just so tired. Slow plodding where I'd almost danced over the path on the way down. Eventually we decided to stop and rest. Well, actually, I said, "I need to sit down a while unless you want to carry me back." I still had some tea from lunch and Charles pulled out a granola bar and we shared it. One of those nice gooey ones. We sat down for a quarter of an hour and shared our food and I drank my tea. And we were ready to go again.

Our readings today are an interesting mix. But all of them brought paths to mind. Isaiah tells the people that God will make a new path in the wilderness, and also rivers of water where it had been desert. The prophet is talking to the people in exile in Babylon and saying that God will bring them back to Zion. God will create a path in the wilderness for them to return, a safe path, with water and food. It's a lovely image. It reminds me of making that trail along where there was no trail. We used a compass and lots of flagging tape to try to establish the way along the overgrown wire cattle fence. Which you couldn't see half the time. Took hours of pushing through branches, getting scratched by bushes, clambering over logs or pushing around them, trying to find the way when there was no path. That's what God says he'll do for the children of Israel. But with the path it's so easy.

God will make a way through the wilderness for us. God will create the safe path for us to walk on, the smooth path, with rivers of refreshing water. Well flagged so we don't get lost. Whatever wilderness we're in. Maybe the wilderness of Covid. Maybe personal griefs or uncertainty. And he puts up markers on that path so we don't get lost, like my trail tape. That's the law of the Lord. Mostly loving God and each other.

The psalmist sings, "When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, it was like a dream come true. We were filled with laughter and joy." The path to this place has been hard, full of weeping, like those who go out weeping carrying the seed to sow - maybe their last seed and what they might otherwise have been eating - but then at harvest they come back shouldering their sheaves and singing songs of joy.

When the Lord restores the fortunes of Zion (or the church), it's like a dream come true. All the work, all the anxiety, all the toil has been rewarded and we don't know if we're awake or dreaming, it seems so good.

St. Paul, in his letter to the Philippians (my favourite one of his letters), says that his life goal is to know Jesus. Union with Jesus. At first he tried to have union with God by his own efforts, keeping the law scrupulously, even persecuting the church to get Brownie points with God. And he said it didn't work. You can't pull yourself up to heaven by your own bootstraps. In the end, he realised it was all a gift, a gift given to us by Jesus Christ. It is in Christ, when we rest in Christ, that we can find righteousness growing within us, by the grace of God.

St. Paul says he desires nothing more than to be one with Christ. One with him in his resurrection and even one with him in his death and passion, if that will bring him closer to Jesus. Is that our goal, too: union with God in Christ? It's interesting that Paul isn't concerned about how he gets there: through joy and happiness or through suffering with Christ and Christ's people. None of that matters to Paul. All that matters is the joy of loving union with God. When we follow Jesus, we are not guaranteed a bed of roses. But we do find a much deeper joy than any bed of roses can give us.

And St. Paul forgets what has gone before and keeps pressing on to achieve that goal. He never loses sight of it. It's easy in life to forget what we're doing and get sidetracked. We've all experienced this in little ways when we get up to go into the kitchen and get something and then once we're there we forget what we were going for. Or me following a side path for half an hour and discovering it doesn't go anywhere and maybe getting a bit lost so it's hard to get back to the main path.

But we can do it in bigger ways, too. Like when we want our kids to do something in particular and we nag them about it and punish them and get grouchy and downright mean sometimes and forget the bigger goal of having a good relationship. We forget that part and it becomes about winning, but we end up losing bigtime. It's good to keep our main goals in mind - and actually to figure out what our main goals are - and Paul's main goal was union with Christ. And he forgot about all the smaller things in pressing forward to achieve that.

Then we have Jesus. Jesus has arrived at Jerusalem. Well, Bethany is just outside the city. This has been his goal and he knows that this will be show down time. He knows he must go up against all the powers that be, Jewish and Roman, and present to them the Kingdom of God, the reign of the God of love on earth. And he knows they won't like it. And he knows that he has to be an example of that and not wipe them out with an army and not use violence and coercion, and, in the end, be willing to die. And if you want to think about a hard path, about going out weeping sowing seeds, and pressing on regardless, well, this is a good example of it.

And when Jesus gets to Bethany, he goes to stay with his friends, Martha, Mary and Lazarus. They have a few friends over, besides Jesus and the disciples, and a nice, relaxing evening is planned. Because, next morning, off they go for the triumphal entry into Jerusalem and the stresses of that week begin. But right now, Jesus is resting, taking a break, recharging. Like us stopping to have tea before continuing on.

And Mary takes some precious ointment of nard and anoints Jesus' feet, and wipes them with her hair. An offering of pure love and devotion. What can she do for him at this time of stress? Not much. So she offers what she has, her love, ointment for his feet. Judas objects and says it should rather have been given to the poor, a very utilitarian view of it. But Mary didn't take a utilitarian, practical view. It wasn't a cost benefit analysis for her, but an offering of love. And Jesus backs her up. He appreciates this and says she is helping prepare him for his burial. Giving him a little boost and moral support before he goes to die. And she is to be honoured for it wherever the gospel is told.

You know, it is those little offerings of love that do keep us going. It was Charles bringing out a granola bar he'd saved from lunch and sharing it with me that kept me going on that path. It's a friend coming over and sharing a cup of tea at a critical moment that keeps us going when we're feeling we can't go another day, facing whatever it is we're facing. Bringing someone flowers. These little gifts of love are so important to us.

You know, sometimes we're dancing through life and sometimes life is a slog. Whichever it is, there are some things that are always true. God has marked out the path we need to walk and that path is love. Loving God, loving one another. When we do that, whatever else may come, we won't go astray. We may get tired and need to take a break, as Charles and I did, as Jesus did. We may need a little rest and refreshment before we go on. There's a lovely story in Kings about Elijah, fleeing from Queen Jezebel into the desert. And God sends an angel to him with some cake and water and tells him to take a nap after. And then he sends more cake and water, and then Elijah has the strength to carry on and encounters God on Mt. Horeb. Sometimes we need a nap and some cake and water. Or tea.

And we need companions. Life's journeys are always so much easier with the care and companionship of friends. St. Paul had his friends and travelling companions. Jesus went to his friends in Bethany and accepted their ministrations. We sometimes need the help and encouragement of friends, too. That's what the church is about, to help each other along the path of life to our goal of full union with Jesus, both here and now, and hereafter. When we do that, it is like a dream come true, as we go singing along the road of Life.