

There is a tradition in many African American/Canadian churches of call and response. During the sermon the preacher will say, "God is good." And the people respond with "All the time." To which the preacher says, "All the time." And the people respond, "God is good." This sermon incorporated that tradition.

Dying Into New Life

Rev. Catherine MacDonald

Ecclesiastes 3: 1-8

Psalms 139

Romans 8 – Selected Verses

November 16, 2008

United Memorial

Will you join me in a moment of prayer?

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight O God, our strength and our redeemer, amen.

This week is surely proof that God has a sense of humour.

How else can it be explained that in the week that my theme is dying... I had two funerals?

It's been quite a week...and my week didn't end with the funeral on Friday, but continued on with a wedding on Saturday.

Endings and beginnings...

The circle of life...

Birth and life and death and new life...

God is good... all the time...

All the time... God is good...

The church is one of the few places in our society where we talk about death.

And even then, not all of us want to.

Pick up any newspaper or magazine or watch TV for a while and we find all kinds of advertising that is geared towards staying young...

Buy this, eat this, drink this, do this and you will stay firm and unwrinkled... young...

Much of it geared towards women.

You will cheat death if you will only buy this product...

Growing old and dying is portrayed as the ultimate failure, the end... and of course dying is the end of something... but it is also the beginning of something.

God is good... all the time...

All the time... God is good...

The reading from Ecclesiastes tells us that there is a time and a season for everything... including death... that doesn't always bring comfort or healing to those who have lost a loved one, but death is part of life...

It is part of the created order... seasons of sowing and reaping and harvesting...

Just as the earth spins in its circuit around the sun and the seasons move from spring to summer to fall to winter, so do the seasons of our lives...

Both literally and metaphorically.

For we are born, we live and love and we die to this world.

Linda Yates, who is the minister at St John's United on Windsor Street, wrote something which was geared towards children, but I find it speaks to adults as well.

It is called The Story of the Three Worlds.

It speaks of how before we were born, we were inside our mothers and we were fed and cared for and we had no idea of what this world would be like. And we are surrounded by love... This is the first world.

And then we are born into this world... and in this world we eat and grow and laugh and love, work and play and if we are fortunate, we are surrounded by love... this is the second world.

And when we die, sometimes in old age, sometimes far too young, we go to the third world.

We don't know much about the third world, just as we didn't know much about this world before we were born.

We just know that it is there... And that God is waiting for us with loving arms outstretched to hold us.

And love will surround us there just as it did before we were born and while living.

God is good... all the time...

All the time... God is good...

We can count on that because that is God's promise to us.

That promise is found in Paul's letter to the church in Rome, where he writes that nothing can separate us from the love of God through Jesus Christ.

Not hardship, not sorrow, not things of this life, or things of the life to come.

NOTHING can separate us from the love of God.

As I said on Thursday at the Frank Robertson's memorial service, Paul was writing to a young church that was under persecution, with the threat of torture, imprisonment and execution very real.

And while we might not be under any sort of danger that threatens our lives, we too need the reassurance that nothing can separate us from the love of God.

Not even death.

And the psalm is beautifully poetic...

Where can I go from your spirit?

Or where can I flee from your presence?

If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.

If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.

This community has been held fast in God's hand...

This community of faith has had many seasons...

Seasons of birth and seasons of death.

Seasons of joy and seasons of sorrow.

Seasons of the excitement of building up.

And seasons of what might seem like tearing down, but is in fact, the hard work of new ways of being a community of faith taking place.

What do we need to let go of in order to be and do what God is calling us to be and do now?

What do we need to let die?

I don't have the answers... we will discover them together.

But without death, there is no new life.

God is good... all the time...

All the time... God is good...

United Memorial literally rose from the rubble and ashes of death.

Without the Halifax Explosion, we as a church wouldn't exist... not in our present form... not in our history.

And because of that death and new life that arose, I am confident in our future...

That just as God was present in the hearts and minds and lives of the people who made up the two founding churches, God is present with us now.

And that new life that came about from the destruction of two churches can be our inspiration and courage for the task that God is calling us to undertake now.

I don't pretend to know what that might be.

And I do know that sometimes the future seems scary and uncertain.

And we don't know where we are going, or how to get there, and perhaps all we want to do is cling to the past and the familiar.

You know the words that will sink the church?

"We've never done it that way before."

I am sure that those words were spoken in the discussions leading up to deciding to build one church instead of rebuilding two.

Those people, whose names live on in our memories of and are evident in various memorial dedications in this building had to let go of what was, in order to become a new creation.

Just as we have to let go of what our past has been in order to become a new creation.

I know of the tremendous attachment many of you have to this place... in all of the churches I have worked in, yours seems to be the strongest.

But is the attachment only to the physical space or it is to the memories and feelings which are connected to this place?

I suggest it is to the memories and feelings.

And we can create new memories...

Memories which are built on our past... with births and life and deaths...

Programs which are built on our past, but are relevant for today...

Ministries which are built on our past of concern for others... but address needs today.

We can cling to our past so tightly that there is no room for God to work in our present...

Or we can choose new life... even when we don't know what that means right now.

A passage from Deuteronomy 30 in which God speaks reads in part:

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity.

If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in God's ways and observing God's commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous.

But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish.

I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses.

Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying God and holding fast to God; for that means life to you and length of days.

We can cling so tightly to what was, that we squeeze out any room for what can be...

We can just die... or we can die into new life...

We can choose life...

What is it going to be?

God is good... all the time...

All the time... God is good...

Thanks be to God, amen.