

Lent 2- **Held in a longing** February 24, 2013

Texts: Genesis 15:1-12;17-18; Ps 27; Luke 13: 31-35

[Visuals: 25 page [Haynes report](#) & Called to Covenant booklet, 2 documents put out by Presbyterian Church in Canada (*these 2 links will take you to our PCC website - ed*)]

This sermon is addressed specifically to the congregation of MacNab on its AGM Sunday, but I believe it is relevant and translatable to anyone's life.

Ever since I came here last May, there has been one question asked, and answered, over and over again: "when will we form the search committee?" It hit me this week: when one question is asked over and over again, it suggests a very deep need. A church without a minister is like . . . What? A house without a roof? Exposed to the elements? Is it like trying to go through a Hamilton winter without a warm coat? Is it like being a chick without a hen?

[reference to gospel] Is it downright scary? If we could just get a minister, then things would be ok?

If it is scary for this congregation to be w/o a called minister; I cannot take away that fear. All I can do is say: this Bible of ours is chalk-full of stories of the people of God being afraid. I could preach for months on just those stories: God walks with people through fear.

*What do we do when we are afraid?*

In a letter we sent out to the congregation a week ago, we said that there is no search committee because the congregation is at a crossroads and needs to make a decision. I realize *that is scary too!!* It is scary to be at a crossroads. The congregation has been resisting this crossroads, because it can: There have been enough able-bodied people to run the church & money in the trust fund that we have been able to keep going in basically the same way we have gone, with very few "symptoms" that we are headed towards a cliff. The cliff, which is both fiscal and demographic, still feels some ways off, so we have been doing what human beings tend to do: ignore it. Surely God (or a minister!) will intervene, and save us. MacNab has been resisting the reality of the crossroads because all the options at such a crossroads look scary. Here we are with our fear again. And again I say: I can't take away the fear. *It is scary to be at a crossroads with no minister.*

*So let's talk about fear.*

Let's think for a minute what we do with our own bodies. If we happened to end up in emergency one day because of a few odd symptoms, and if a doctor did a CT scan and told us that we had a slow growing tumour growing in our body, to which we had adjusted, so it wouldn't kill us right away, and they couldn't say how long it would take, but it is pressing on things, and eventually, if we just keep ignoring it, it would . . . that would be scary. What would we do? Would we ignore the results of that scan? Or would we ask "What do I need to do?"

But what if all the options are drastic? What if all the options scare us? What if all the options mean giving up something? What if all the options mean: we will never be the same again?

Then what? What do we do? That is a very hard place to be, when all the options look scary. We feel trapped; cornered; no way out.

I want to tell you a story, about my own body, not because I think you need to hear another medical story, but because of the way I was led through fear. Session has heard the story, and they believe there are enough parallels between the decision I had to make and the decision the congregation has to make, that it might give us some clues. So, in February 2007 I ended up in Emergency because of some small, odd symptoms; almost imperceptible and always fleeting. But I was given a CT scan, which revealed a 4 cm tumour growing on a nerve in my head. It was called benign, not cancer, because it was growing so slowly, probably over a period of 10-15 years. It was pressing on the cerebellum and brain stem, but because of our body's incredible ability to adjust, there were virtually no symptoms. I was presented with treatment options: radiation or surgery.

The doctors called it Equipoise: a medical situation in which there is real uncertainty as to which treatment would be clinically preferable. The decision was completely up to me.

Anyone who has been faced with these options knows the complexity of the decision: they are 2 entirely different procedures, with radically different risks and outcomes. With surgery, I would lose the perfectly good hearing in one ear, and a huge risk of nerve damage: there was 50% chance I would have an altered face: facial droop, unable to close my eye, lopsided smile like Jean Chretien, altered speech. Radiation had a better chance of saving my hearing and my face, but radiation makes things swell: how much more room was there for swelling? (there is not endless room in the skull!) And then, there was also a 1% risk that the treatment itself would produce cancer down the road.

"1% . . . that's nothing!" friends would say to me. But when you are a "one" out of 100,000 to get an acoustic neuroma in the first place, the number *one* doesn't sound so small anymore.

I did the medical research, listing all the pros and cons, exploring all the possible side effects of each treatment,

weighing the risks, sketching out the likely scenarios. I talked to people who had had this kind of tumour; I talked with people who had made a similar decision. This research was helpful, and absolutely necessary, but it didn't help me make a decision, because both options still scared me: lose my hearing? No! live with the 1% risk of brain cancer down the road? NO! It was like there was a ping pong game going on in my head: "No! No"! I recoiled from both.

I have a spiritual director, a Sister of St Joseph. She suggested a process of discernment that Ignatius of Loyola describes: take a set period of time imagining myself into each option as much as I could. Listen, with my heart. I took 3 days with each option. For the surgery option: I placed an earplug in my ear to replicate the hearing loss. I imagined talking with friends whose faces had "drooped." At the end of the third day, I set aside time to review what I had learned from this imagining. Procrastinating, I picked up a journal that had been left lying around. Inside, an article titled "Broken Beauty" included these words by Annie Dillard "I am a frayed and nibbled survivor in a fallen world, and I am getting along . . . I am not washed and beautiful, in charge of a shining world in which everything fits . . ." It felt as if those words were directed right at me. Those words opened up the surgery option in a new way. *They gave the fearful risk of facial droop a "meaning".*

I didn't know it, but I was following a very old, well-worn spiritual path called "lectio divina" ("holy listening"), a way of listening that goes deeper than what the stats/risk factors of medical research can provide; deeper than what our analytical, logical skill can provide. The statistics that medical research provides are necessary information, but they only scratch the surface. As human beings, we need meaning. We can handle a lot of really negative looking things, *if they only hold some meaning.*

Nevertheless, the radiation option still seemed preferable: I would save my hearing. Surely radiation made the most sense. Then a friend suggested: "Why don't you stop trying to make a decision?" I thought that was the most ridiculous idea I had ever heard: if I stopped trying, who would make the decision? But the next day, sitting listening (with both ears!) to an opera, I became aware of the ping pong game going on in my head again. I reached up and stopped the ball. I sat. Into the silence, (and this part I cannot explain) I heard a voice ask me a question: "What would you need?" I took it to mean: what qualities would you need to go through each option?

I could answer the question: To go through the surgery: I listed 4 qualities (persistence, resilience, stubbornness . . .) To get through the radiation: I listed 2 qualities (optimism & lightheartedness to live with the 1%). I looked at the 2 lists. For the surgery list: that was me. That was me as long as I could remember. For the radiation list: that was not me. While I was a hopeful person, I didn't see myself as "optimistic." I realized that a decision had just "been made", though I had done nothing. All I had done was recognize myself, trusting in the cue offered by the voice. The fear disappeared. It had to do with the sense that "the voice" that asked the question knew me, loved me, knew just the question to ask, that I could answer, that would show me the way. How gracious is that?

A palliative care nurse was astonished: Too often, people make medical decisions out of sheer fear. They don't take the time to face their fear and sit with it, and listen to it.

In the years since, I have learned more and more about what I had experienced. In doing the medical research, I had listened with my mind; in doing the imagining, I had listened with my heart; praying was the work of my soul; and then when I did nothing, when I stopped trying, just last week someone told me: "that was a surrender of your will", and that's how the voice got entry: when I surrendered your will.

That surprises me, because I have always thought of surrender of the will as an excruciating thing. But maybe it isn't like that; maybe surrender of the will is more like seeing the truth, and trusting it. Maybe it's like that story in Genesis we heard: Abram believed the Lord. Maybe it's all about trust. There is a lot to ponder here. I had entered into this decision with my mind, heart, soul and will.

Do you see how this story might help MacNab at this point?

We are faced with some decisions about the future, and all the options look scary.

A doctor could come along and tell us what to do. I could tell you, or your Interim moderator could tell you, or Session, or Presbytery.

Or we could go over to Johnson Hall and take a vote at the AGM after the service, but that would be a poor decision, because it would be rooted in fear.

*Is it possible for a whole congregation to face the fearful options, and walk through a process of listening together? What would we need in order to do so?*

If it is any comfort, there are many many congregations at exactly this crossroads. This report [wave 25 pp Haynes report] just put out by PCC says that within 10 years, 1/3 of our existing congregations in PCC will close, and this other booklet [Called to covenant] says that most congregations will do so because they will simply cling to the status quo; they will not risk this [empty hands gesture]. They will not risk emptying their hands of all they have

known, and waiting, in silence. They will not surrender their wills to an unknown future, even if they say with their lips that they know God loves them.

Isn't it amazing how the gospel reading for today, *which I did not choose*, (it is being read all round the world today) speaks? It took me a long time to see it. Jesus longs after the people of Jerusalem: "Oh Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how I have longed to gather you to my breast, like a hen gathers her chicks." He recognizes that they have a will, and their will chooses *not* to surrender to God: "but you would not."

*And he will not force them.*

That choice they make: it will not be taken away from them. He respects their freedom to choose.

As for MacNab: we can do the research, we can do all our listening, but I suspect there will be nothing but fear unless we submit our wills to Jesus who longs after us.

There can be no newness unless in some way we choose to open our wills to God and let ourselves be caught and held in that ferocious longing that wills only our good.

Do you know what I mean?

The people of God is one long history of "not being willing".

It is hard to trust.

It is the hardest, scariest thing in all the world.

If it weren't hard and scary, there would be no story worth talking about.

If it weren't hard and scary, there would be nothing called "faith."

But yet I just said it was not excruciating; there is a paradox here that I can't explain. There is grace: when we surrender our wills, in faith, we are given the gift of becoming our true self

We will still go through forms of death, (and eventually everyone in this room will die) but there will be life even in that. That is, after all, the church's central story: that through death comes resurrection. Death is not the final word.

Even in death, we can become our true selves; because that's what God always longs for us.

Is MacNab willing to risk becoming its true self, whatever that may be, wherever that may lead, held in the grace-filled longing of a God who do no other than love?

Let us pray together using the words included on the card you have been given (and I might add that I did not write this prayer; it comes from PCUSA Worship book; I "found" it, and cling to it).

Eternal God

you call us to ventures

of which we cannot see the ending,

by paths as yet untrodden,

through perils unknown.

Give us faith to go out with courage,

not knowing where we go,

but only that your hand is leading us

and your love supporting us;

through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

*This sermon was offered to the congregation of MacNab St Presbyterian Church, Hamilton, Ontario by (Rev) Cathy Stewart*

Footnote:

i Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: Harper Collins, 1974).

Haynes Report

[http://www.presbyterian.ca/qeosynod/2013/Haynes\\_report.pdf](http://www.presbyterian.ca/qeosynod/2013/Haynes_report.pdf)

Called to Covenant – Part I

[https://www.google.com/url?q=http://presbyterian.ca/%3Fwpdmdl%3D270%26&sa=U&ei=gw0-UfuzH8rkyAGxv4DoDw&ved=0CAcQFjAA&client=internal-uds-cse&usg=AFQjCNEYBery-U0gh\\_YnmJLMih2RT\\_WDKw](https://www.google.com/url?q=http://presbyterian.ca/%3Fwpdmdl%3D270%26&sa=U&ei=gw0-UfuzH8rkyAGxv4DoDw&ved=0CAcQFjAA&client=internal-uds-cse&usg=AFQjCNEYBery-U0gh_YnmJLMih2RT_WDKw)

Part II

<https://www.google.com/url?q=http://presbyterian.ca/%3Fwpdmdl%3D271%26&sa=U&ei=M-Y8UeHtOo->

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