

St. Davids-Queenston UC, Pentecost, May 31,2020

### Invitation to Worship

Loving God of Community, we are not all in the church building today, but we are indeed the body of Christ in your suffering world. We know that our vocation is to be the light of the Christ whose body we are. Give us the courage to be the church in new ways and to keep our minds on what matters, which is to keep loving the world which you have called good. Buildings crumble; the church year passes; but your church endures from generation to generation. Make this for us a day of thanksgiving for your presence, your protection and your promise of hope. Let us worship God.

### Message: A Holy Presence.

Many of you will know that I was a teacher before I answered the call to ministry. That seems like a hundred years ago at times. Sometimes however, I think I am still a teacher. In many ways the church is a lot like school. Think of all the settings in which education takes place in the church; bible studies, small group studies, prayer groups, UCW, the Sunday morning lecture.

Of course, studying religion isn't everybody's cup of tea. Religion can be confusing, so many odd sounding archaic words and strange ideas; sanctification, justification, atonement, hermeneutics. Who uses words like that?

There are also many opinions and points of view, how do you know which is right and which is wrong?

And then there is the Bible; few people walk into a bookstore and say, “please give me a book that is about 2000 years old, written by hundreds of different authors, all of whom lived in a different culture than my own and spoke languages different than my own. I’m going to the beach for a week and I want a good read while I sun on the sand.”? Ancient, strange, difficult to comprehend, no wonder, many who picked it up to read, quickly cast it aside and moved on to a more congenial read.

People are ticked when it is suggested that they need to study, dig, read and reflect if they are to be good Christians. Religion is something of the heart they say, not a head trip. It’s a soul trip. Jesus didn’t come to organize a theological seminar; he simply called people to discipleship. He didn’t give a theological Lecture, he told simple, every day stories. You don’t have to have a PhD to understand Jesus. That’s the trouble with clergy types, always trying to complicate things; complexify the simple, heartfelt, straightforward religion of Jesus.

That’s what they say. And there is more than a bit of truth in what They say, but only a bit.

Trouble is, from what I’ve observed as a minister, this talk about simple faith and trust, religion of the heart rather than head, tends to be the first victim when life gets tough. It’s not the preachers with their stodgy, incomprehensible sermons

that make Christianity difficult to figure out, it's life! Its life laid bare next to claims of faith, that create an intellectual muddle.

Some years ago, during the war in Afghanistan, there was a terrible earthquake that killed thousands. After all those people had been through; years of Taliban rule and a devastating war, now an earthquake.

"See, " a TV commentator said, "they are being punished by God for their sins. This is divine retribution." What rubbish! Is he going to apply that logic when his friend dies of cancer? I sincerely hope not! "Haven't these people suffered enough?" asked another; a better question.

"Something like this, pouring more pain into such a troubled land, makes me really question the goodness and righteousness of God. "Well, yes it does.

Yet another says, "it's not a matter of right and wrong. It's not even a matter of God, it's just rotten luck. Earthquakes happen sometimes here sometimes there. Don't make so much out of it. "Tell that to the people of Nepal. It happens there a lot more than it happens here.

But do you see? Suddenly everyone becomes a theologian. Anytime Life makes us ask why, or for we Christians, why God, you are on the way to wrestling with the deepest dilemmas of life. And how do you do that? I've already alluded to the complexity of religious matters and haven't we agreed that the Bible is a tough book to read, let alone understand?

How in the world do people, without advanced theological degrees, ignorant of biblical Hebrew or Greek, people like us, hope to think that they can think through such matters on their own? But — — — think through these matters we will. As I said, life has a way of making us theologians whether we want to be or not.

And are we left alone to struggle with these issues, these dilemmas?

Dilemma we have. I expect some of you have memories of perhaps, what was the greatest dilemma of your life, WW2. I was born just as it ended. So, for anyone my age or younger, we have never really faced such a global dilemma. And even for you veterans of war, this pandemic is a unique and stupefying situation. We've never had to isolate ourselves from others or wear masks or forgo hugs from children and grandchildren. On top of that came the tragedies of Nova Scotia. Can't really help, but ask, can you? What's going on? What do I share with God about all this? How do I hold on?

When I lose a loved one and can't say goodbye, can't even comfort the grieving, how do I hold on?

Our reading for today is that wonderful story of Pentecost, with that miracle of understanding foreign tongues of people from all over the known world of their time. A list anyone struggles to read, even clergy. It is of, course the story of the birth of the church. Here were a ragtag group of Jesus groupies, not

theologians, just ordinary folk who had chosen to follow this charismatic leader. They had a new life, a new purpose. Not that they completely understood it, because they were ordinary folk. Now, their leader was gone. They had seen the risen Lord and believed in their renewed call, but how to proceed? How did they hang on?

Comes now, the Pentecost event, the birth of the church, a new direction.

And of course, they are not to be alone as they proceed. There is this word from the prophets.

In the last days, God says, I will pour out my spirit on every kind of people. When the time comes, I will pour out my spirit. And whoever calls out for help to me, God, will be saved. Before Jesus ascended, he told the disciples much the same. He didn't say, "I'm going to leave and I want you to remember everything that I taught you. Each morning get up and go over the words of my sermon on the mount, so you don't forget it" knowing it by heart will solve all your problems.

He doesn't say to John, "now you get busy and write a book and call it the gospel of John. That way everyone will have my words just like I spoke them to you. Any time someone has trouble or difficulty knowing what to do in a situation, they can open that book, turn to a verse and just like that the problem will be solved."

No, what he tells them is that he won't leave them alone. He is leaving them with a Paraclete, the original Greek, meaning counsellor, comforter, instructor and friend. In other words, the Holy Spirit.

It will be a presence, like a teacher, a guide, that will point the way. And that is the same promise that comes to us these seven weeks after Easter. There are lots of good things this Spirit will provide for us, but the greatest is that this friend, the Spirit will remind us.

I can't think of more necessary time to be reminded, than right now. In the midst of pandemic we missed the great reminder of the Easter celebration with the wonderful stirring hymns, the moving cantata by the choir and that reassuring message of resurrection hope that is Easter.

Some of the best education is that of reminding. A great deal of education is not stuffing our brains with things we previously didn't know, but reminding us of what we already knew. Have you ever sat in a classroom or presentation and thought "hey, I know that." Or "well that's a new way of putting it. But when we say, "I got it ". What we mean is, now I remember. Plato thought that we are all born with great ideas implanted in our souls. The teacher is the midwife who helps give birth to those ideas, to enable us to recall what we know, to remember.

You have experienced I expect the work of the Holy Spirit in your lives. There are those moments, wonderful moments,

when you are listening to a passage of scripture, perhaps a passage you've heard a dozen times before and suddenly something in the text jumps out at you, shakes you, and grabs you as never before. You say to yourself, I've heard that passage many times, but I never heard that before! "

Maybe what we mean is, now I remember as if in seeing for the first time. "That's the Holy Spirit, the reminder, the friend, walking beside you. Or you're going through a rough time in your life. For days you've been in dark, deserted places and you don't know which way to turn.

Someone you live with says I have some bad news to share with you. Questions fill your mind as the sky darkens and the earth shakes.

From your pain you ask, "Where are you God? God do you care about me?"

That is why we worship on Sundays. We gather, even now though apart, to be reminded by the Holy Spirit that we are not alone; that God has sent a counsellor, a friend, a comforter to walk this journey with us.

And lastly, I think this passage reminds us that when the disciples were lost, directionless, wondering where they went from that point, the Spirit came upon them and they were unified and the church was born. The Spirit reminds us today, this Pentecost, that it will move us in a new direction. That we

will be the church in a new way. We will gather, though apart. We will sing our hymns in our own living rooms, even if we aren't great singers and we will hold each other in prayer. Here is an encouraging word:

Just to be clear, the Church has not been closed, so it doesn't need to be reopened.

We have simply stopped worshipping in our buildings for a time to protect the health and well-being of our people and our communities.

The Church does not require a building in order to be the Church.

What is required is love, compassion, and the presence of God.

And the people said.....

Prayer

Ever creating God, be with us as the pall of this Covid-19 falls upon this fragile earth. We hold in our hearts all who are suffering in our country from sea to sea to sea. We pray for the whole world.

Our common anxiety is making us one undivided human family. We pray for world leaders as they chart these unknown waters. Strengthen them to walk into the light of a new, healing day for the whole planet. Help us to cross our broken lands and be for each other bridges back to wholeness. Lift the cares to which we cling.



Descend on us, O God, as on that day of Pentecost. Come Holy Spirit, among us. Show us how to find blessing and rest. Come Holy Spirit, abide with us in comfort, hope and courage.

We lift up before you the concerns of our church family, for those who are dealing with ongoing illness, for those who wait to hear reports on loved ones who are have serious health issues.

And now in a moment of silence we offer our own prayers.

We lift these prayers to you O God in the name of the one who taught us to pray, our father...