

Called By a New Name

Sermon for Epiphany 2 - 16 January 2022

The Book of Isaiah is the longest book of the Bible, containing 66 Chapters. In today's reading we hear of Zion and Jerusalem. Jerusalem has long been considered the Holy City for observers of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Zion has been used as a placeholder for Jerusalem and also refers to the Mount of Zion, a hill located just outside the walled city of Jerusalem.

There are many examples of people in the Bible receiving new names – Abram and Sarai become Abraham and Sarah. Jacob, after wrestling with a divine being, becomes known as Israel, Naomi changes her name to Marah and Saul the persecutor becomes Paul the Apostle.

It would be safe to say that 2022 has been a very difficult year and it's not even a month old. I took last week off to rest and refresh after the busy-ness and stress of the Christmas season. Pivoting from blended Worship to Online for Christmas Worship was upsetting and then there's the everyday task list that needs to get done before each Worship.

I did have a couple of days where I did next to nothing. I napped, I read, I cuddled with Sir Vincent, when he was in a mood to cuddle and I drank lots and lots of tea. I had great plans and realised none of them.

While I was "off work" I learned of the death of a colleague in Nelson. Jeff was only 3 years older than me and was found dead in his home by his dog-walker. His death hit me hard because we had so much in common. Most especially, we both have family that lives a distance away. Mine is in Ontario, his is in New York State.

I also had a message to return where I learned that one of my mentors had died. Margaret was someone I met at Seminary. She was a life-long learner and even though she was retired from nursing and education, she continued to study theology because it interested her. Margaret was one of my lay-presenters at both my Diaconal ordination and my Priesting.

My Mam's best friend Barb died on the 13th of December and her memorial service was at the end of December. Mam is taking her friend's death very hard. As am I. There has been a lot of reminiscing taking place.

Jack Buchanan died on the 31st of December after a battle with Alzheimer's disease. Barb also died from Alzheimer's disease.

So much loss...so much loss.

Last week I also learned of the death of a young woman, only 31 years old. She died by suicide and leaves behind two daughters, ages 7 and 4. Her older brother died a little over a year ago, also by suicide. He leaves behind a 6-year old son.

I also learned of the death of Shirley Morris. I have not yet been able to touch base with her family, as I have not had the emotional bandwidth to do so, with Cayla's memorial service only yesterday.

On a more positive note, I received my COVID booster shot on Friday. The nurse suggested I rest and take it easy for a few days. I smiled and said I'd try – but knowing I wouldn't be able to take it easy...at least not emotionally and spiritually.

What do you say to a family who has been so wracked with grief that they can barely stand up? Having never given birth, how can I relate to the death of a child? To two children?

Three things I have learned in my 14 years of Ordained Ministry:

One - Addiction almost always results from trauma.

Two - Mental Illness is still considered taboo.

Three - We are a death-denying society. Complete strangers will speak with one another about sex, yet family members don't know what their loved ones wishes are after they die.

And yet, as I look at the reading from Isaiah I find comfort. The reading is a message from God to the people of Jerusalem. That although they have been tested, they were and are strong enough to withstand the storms that

blew, yet did not push them over. They resisted the fire which threatened to destroy them, yet instead they were refined by the fire and made stronger.

So it is for us all.

Struggling with mental illness is difficult.

Sometimes it feels overwhelming and all I want to do is stay in my comfortable, warm bed.

Sometimes that is what I do.

Sometimes I'm able to sleep and other times I simply cannot.

So I get up, take my medication (if I haven't already done so), write in my journal, make a cup of tea, say my prayers and start again. Some days contain many naps, and others contain none. Yet still I persist.

There has been so much loss in this valley and so much loss in my life. Over the past month the loss has felt catastrophic and I'm beginning to feel that my rope is fraying.

And yet, and yet, I know there is always hope. Isaiah writes, "The nations shall see your vindication, and all the kings your glory; and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will give". (Isaiah 62.2, NRSV)

Many reports say the pandemic is coming to an end. We may soon hear the word endemic, which means an infection which is present in a community, causing neither death nor significant illness in the community. We will always live with a variant of COVID, it will always be with us, but may not always flare up into an outbreak.

We will soon be turning our attention to the Annual General Meetings for Christ Church Anglican and Fernie Knox United Churches. There are decisions to be made, plans to be planned, worship to be worshipped.

The feedback received from the Questionnaire about Shared Ministry was overwhelmingly positive which gives us a wonderful base on which to grow. Thank you to the 28 people who responded. Thank you for your candour and your honesty.

I suspect we will learn to live with blended Worship, pivoting to “online worship only” from time to time. This will be who we are and what we do.

We need to be like Isaiah and give who we are a new name – create a new reality of who we are. No longer can we look back longingly for a return to the “good old days” because frankly, those days were not as good as we remember, and we simply cannot go back again.

I have seen remarkable things happen in our time of pandemic worship. A new Church family has formed from around the world. A new worshipping community, some of whom we may never meet face to face – and yet, somehow, we have become The Church.

The lines between Anglican and United Church worship are blurring. The understanding of who we are as followers of Jesus is growing. We are learning that we are far more resilient than we ever imagined. Thanks to technology, we can attend Worship, Conferences, Meetings and even have dinner with people in completely different cities and countries.

Technology has given us the ability to do things I never dreamed possible when I graduated from Seminary in 2007.

Losing the trappings of High Church Eucharist has been difficult and yet it has allowed me to focus on what is most important in my faith. Much to my astonishment, I am more committed to my faith now, then ever before.

It matters much less to me that my vestments reflect the liturgical seasons, although I LOVE it when they do, and matters more that my theology is clear. My theology used to be very complicated and complex and now it is quite simple. My theology is identical to Michael Curry's.

At one time I could wrap myself in knots, worrying about doctrine, and heresy and all the powers and principalities of what it is to be a follower of Jesus. Now I have become more attuned with the biggest picture - that of love. The Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, Michael Curry says, of his theology, “If it is not about love, then it is not about God”. Me too!

One of the “celebrity” deaths that hit me hardest, and there have been many in the past month, was that of Archbishop Desmond Tutu. He was and remains a hero of mine, someone at whose knee I would love to have listened and learned.

I still cannot believe he's dead. I'm reading The Book of Joy which he co-authored with the Dalai Lama, and once I finish that I'm going to read The Book of Forgiving which he co-authored with his daughter Mpho Andrea Tutu van Furth. One Sunday I'll preach a sermon solely on Archbishop Tutu and his evolving theology. Today is not that day.

Today is a day where I will be gentle with myself. I have two phone calls I must make after Worship. I am going for a walk with a good friend this afternoon. I have a Zoom date tonight with two of my best friends. Then, I will make a healthy dinner and go to bed early.

And soon I will begin making plans for some time away after Easter. Not only time off, but time away.

And so my dearly beloveds, I see you. I hear you. I know you are tired...perhaps even weary. I know you want everything to go back to how it was before. And yet, it cannot. It should not. We can only go forward. Embracing all we have learned. Letting go of all that which did not serve us.

Our single-mindedness that our way was the only way. Our selfishness in the belief that we are always right. Our shortcoming in saying things we should not say, and not saying things we should say. Forgetting to tell those around us how we feel. Agreeing to do something, not because we want to, but because we feel we have to, and then feeling resentful.

We are human beings. We are fallible. And from time to time we are going to get it wrong. But that's okay because we have been promised by God that we are stronger than we realise. We are all God's beloved children.

I want the last words today, to be those of Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

"We are made for goodness. We are made for love. We are made for friendliness. We are made for togetherness. We are made for all of the beautiful things that you and I know.

We are made to tell the world that there are no outsiders. All are welcome: black, white, red, yellow, rich, poor, educated, not educated, male, female, gay, straight, all, all, all. We all belong to this family, this human family, God's family."

— Archbishop Desmond Tutu 1931-2021

Let all God's children say, Amen.

The Reverend Andrea L. Brennan, Incumbent
Elk Valley Ecumenical Shared Ministry
Fernie Knox United Church & Christ Church Anglican
Fernie, BC V0B 1M2