



Richmond Hill Reflections

“Waiting for Renewal” (Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft)

March 29, 2020; Fifth Sunday in Lent

Reading: John 11 (selected verses); “Restoration” by David Taylor

Waiting. Not many people enjoy it. I prefer it to be short in duration, which made this week’s news that we may be self-isolating a lot longer than most anticipated an unwanted piece of information. The longer this goes on the antsier I get. It’s a pretty human response, yet in our gospel, when Jesus learns his friend is deathly ill, rather than rush to him he waits two days. How can he? And how can it be because he loves Lazarus? If we approached this story literally, we’d be forgiven for thinking Jesus is a bad friend. But we read John looking for symbolism. What is John telling us about Jesus? And telling us about waiting? After all Jesus isn’t the only one doing so. It’s a waiting time for Lazarus, his sisters Mary and Martha, the community.

The key is in what comes next, especially as Jesus declares: “I am the resurrection and the life”. The story reminds us how we share risen life in him. This isn’t a future heaven but a resurrection-shaped life right now. I realize it sounds a bit esoteric but it has the potential to help make sense of what we’re going through. Consider what else happens. We read how Jesus was disturbed, and also how when he saw the sisters and the people mourning, he wept. In the English we assume he was caught up in the emotion of it all. But when read in Greek we see he isn’t reacting the same as the crowd. Jesus weeps; the rest are keening. They’re wailing for Lazarus but more to the point they’re wailing for themselves. It’s understandable but there’s a shadow. Keening isn’t just personally cathartic. It is intended to whip up a crowd so they can project their grief outward. Last week I shared how there is scapegoating regarding the virus. Imagine someone dies of COVID-19 and their family and friends wanting to lay blame for the death go to a Chinese business and smash the windows and realizing that wasn’t enough to satisfy their pain start beating up anyone of Asian descent. This is the context of the story. When we read that Jesus is troubled, he isn’t sad. He’s angry.

He is angry because the crowd give death the power, but he came to bring life. Remember that Jesus’ own death is on the horizon, not just in John’s gospel but for us as we look to Holy Week and Easter. The fact that right after this the authorities plot to have him killed shows how beholden to death we can be. We use its threat to control others. When wronged, we wish it on them. Our fear of it in part drives our consumer culture. Instead Jesus focuses on life. He lives it to the full. He’s not worried about death. He doesn’t give it power, striving to avoid it. Instead he immerses himself in life despite the inevitability of death. When Lazarus comes out of the tomb, Jesus tells the people to unbind him. Jesus offers us the way to be unbound from death’s hold on our minds, our hearts, our communities, our culture. He calls us to unbind each other by creating communities where life can flourish for all.

When we apply this to what we are going through we can approach it one of two ways. We can treat it like the mourners and let fear define what we do or embrace it from Jesus’ perspective as a time of creativity and connection. Now don’t get me wrong. I don’t mean ignore protocols. We need physical distancing. We need to do everything public health officials tell us to. That’s being responsible. And it’s wanting life for everyone, especially the most vulnerable. But the narrative of death is at play too. Like when trolls disrupt Zoom calls with racist and sexist language. Or as people price gouge. Or

when some claim a protracted shutdown is more harmful in the long run. As I said, I believe it's our underlying fear of mortality that pushes our constant need to grow the economy.

Alternatively this time can be about living life fully. We do this by looking after our mental and physical health, limiting how much news we watch, exercising, eating well, taking time for each other. We all need to take a break occasionally so why not take it together: ride a bike with your kids, make supper with your spouse, read a book together and discuss it, or play board games as a family? When we look back at this, we can look at it as a time of fear, or when we connected with each other. Which means if being in close quarters is having a detrimental impact, then we can sit down and have a family meeting, air concerns, and if it is more serious, seek outside help. For some though, isolation is much more dire, stuck in close quarters with an abusive partner. With domestic violence on the rise we also can do our part to keep people safe. If we know someone's at risk we can't ignore it. We need to reach out. This waiting time needs to be a time when life flourishes for everyone.

As we make life our focus, I pray it will have a lasting impact. Now by this I don't mean how the environment is getting a break. When we go back to "normal", chances are ramping up the economy again will put us back where we were. But the speed by which we've responded shows we can pull together. This proves we have it in us to fight climate change. What if we practiced all we learned? Perhaps all this working from home can translate into more telecommuting, more video-conferencing rather than flying around the world, downsizing of offices so we can curtail sprawl? It's about our human environment too. Have you noticed how as we give a wide berth to each other when out for a walk we make a point to say hello? We're connecting as a congregation too with video coffee breaks, lots of emails and the good old telephone. And it's not just us. How many of you have heard from distant friends unexpectedly? This waiting time has the potential to reshape us if we let it.

Friends, this is a stormy time but storms bring much needed rain. Let's hear "Restoration" again:

dim light of cloudy storm
strong winds swept
drumming sounds of rain
dancing boughs of trees
blossoms beaten down
waves of raindrops
surge past in air
against an earthen shore
upon the sodden floor
rain falls in inky skies
just like tears
in dark and sorrowed eyes
heartfelt winters warmth
melting over life
restoring what was quietly lost
in the heat that dried
the waters from the land
where life watched
in growing sunlit times.

Amen.