

2021 10 31 – Everything New

Revelation 21:1-61

John 11:32-44 (The Inclusive Bible)

Jesus had heard that his good friend, Lazarus, was dead. When he heard this, Jesus immediately decided to go and be with Lazarus' sisters, Mary and Martha. Today's scripture begins with a tearful Mary saying to Jesus, "If you had been here, Lazarus never would have died." Jesus is deeply moved and allows his own grief to be seen as he begins to weep with Mary and the mourners that have gathered around them.

Jesus wept. This is one of the few times in the gospel that Jesus expresses his emotions. I appreciate this passage because it helps us to understand his humanity. Jesus loved and lost, just like us. Jesus went through hard times and suffered, just like us. Jesus was impacted by the pain of others, just like us.

Since I came back from sabbatical in mid-August, I have officiated at ten funerals, nearly all of them graveside services. Some were for people who had died earlier in this pandemic, some were offered to families whose grief was very fresh. Funerals are actually one of the most meaningful parts of my ministry. I love the opportunity to hear the story of someone's life and to help a grieving family craft a service that is both a celebration and an opportunity to mourn. But I have to admit that ten funerals in ten weeks has been a little overwhelming. Officiating does take an emotional toll even when I have never met the person who died.

Grief is hard and, in the midst of this pandemic, it seems that grief has become a part of daily living. So much has been lost. Not only loved ones, but also jobs, businesses, family gatherings, hugs, and even handshakes. This sense of loss is prevalent in our families, our communities and in our church. Here at First United we have mourned the loss of

- the use of our church building;
- in-person worship;
- congregational singing;
- the passing of the peace;
- coffee time, potluck lunches;
- Loose Change Suppers and even our Fowl Supper.

We have tried hard to stay connected via Zoom, phone calls, letters and emails. In September we started in-person worship again, but many of us are still missing. When we are unable to gather as a community there is a deep sense of loss and, despite all our attempts to stay connected, I know that many are also feeling a sense of disconnection. The longer this pandemic goes on, the harder it will be to keep that sense of community. Our Stewardship Committee has seen the negative impact on our financial statements and have named what we are experiencing as “pandemic fatigue.”

In the midst of his grief, Jesus asks to be taken to Lazarus’ tomb and, as they approach the cave where the body has been laid, Jesus tells them to take away the stone that covers the opening. Martha, always the practical sister, expresses her concern that, after four days in the tomb, the body will have started to decay

and the stench will be hard to take. Jesus, assures her that all be well, he prays to God and then loudly says, "Lazarus, come out!" And Lazarus comes out of the tomb.

This is a story of new life after death, a story of rebirth, in the Gospel of John, it is used as a foreshadowing of Jesus' own resurrection. It has been designated as part of the lectionary for All Saints Day because it reminds us that those who have gone before, those who have died in months and years past, have also received the promise of everlasting life. It reminds us that the souls of our ancestors in the faith, the souls of the ancestors in our own family trees, are now closer to a God that is the Essence of Love.

But this resurrection promise is not just for those who have died. It is also a promise of new life for those of us who remain on this earth. It is a reminder that whenever something is lost, whenever some key part of our life disappears or dies, whenever we have to let go of people or things that we care for, there is always the promise and the possibility of something new. As we sang earlier today, "there's a dawn in every darkness, bringing hope to you and me." (VU #703

In the Bulb There is a Flower by Natalie Sleeth,)

Even as this pandemic continues, we are experiencing signs of new life. Most of us are fully vaccinated and some have even received a booster shot, so we are gradually returning to in-person worship, and we have seen new faces here in our sanctuary. If there's anything that signals new life, it's the birth of a baby.

This fall I have already officiated at two baptisms and there are at least two more

planned in the next month. Thanks to livestreaming we have had people joining our worship services from Edmonton, Ireland and even Australia.

When Lazarus comes out of his tomb, he is bound with linen strips and his face is wrapped in a cloth. So Jesus tells the crowd to, "Untie him and let him go free." Like Lazarus we are also in a tomb, a tomb called COVID-19. Like Lazarus, we are also bound hand and foot with restrictions to keep us safe. And, like Lazarus our faces are covered with masks of cloth or paper. When this pandemic is over we will also be untied and let free.

What's not clear is what we will look like, what our church, our community and our world will be like. Obviously, after at least two years of living in this pandemic tomb, we will have changed. I don't know what Lazarus looked like, how he had changed after four days in the tomb. But I do know that after two years of grief and mourning, after two years of fear and uncertainty, after two years of restrictions and isolation, we will be different.

In Revelation we heard a description of a time of complete renewal:

- a time when God's presence will be felt by all,
- a time when "death, mourning, crying and pain will be no more;"
- a time where God will say, "Look! I'm making everything new!"

I don't believe that the end of the pandemic will be quite that dramatic, but I do believe that we are about to enter a time full of new possibilities.

As we look to the future, we need to ask ourselves, 'How have we changed? What have we learned? How does the ministry of First United Church need to shift in order to meet our needs and the changing needs of our community and our world? One of the realities that we have been living with is a deficit budget and so this new time that we are entering is also about discovering new ways of being that are both faithful to our mission & ministry and also sustainable into the future.

Change is not new to this faith community. In the last one hundred years our church has lived through: world wars, church union, the Depression, a catastrophic fire, the amalgamation of Knox and Metropolitan United, expansion to Grace United, and two major building projects. Many of our members have joined us after the closure of their home churches in places like Waldeck, Rush Lake, Neidpath, Burnham, Stewart Valley and most recently Grace United.

Everything new? Probably not. But there will be things that we will need to let go of and there will be new ideas that we will need to embrace. On this Stewardship Sunday let us be reminded of the faith and courage of those who have gone before and let us be inspired and encouraged by the promise of life even after death. I want to end with the words of Anne Morrow Lindbergh, aviator and author, who wrote:

Only in growth, reform, and change,
paradoxically enough,
is true security to be found.

Let it be so. Amen.