

Job 42:1-6, 10-17

Psalm 34:1-8, (19-22)

Hebrews 7:23-28

Mark 10:46-52

## “The Last Sermon”

It was a generation ago, that I was at the Hillcrest Drive in Theatre in the back seat of a '57 Chev. I don't remember who I was with, I don't remember the name of the movie, I don't remember the title song. But I do remember the last scene of the movie. A man, a women, sitting on a beach, the sun is going down and as a summation of all that had happened between them these lines from T.S. Elliot are spoken.

We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.

I might say that moment was the beginning of my spiritual journey, but it was much earlier than that. I recall being six years old. My brother and I were jumping up and down on our beds, turning the lights on and off and repeating the lines we had heard at Sunday School—“let there be light.” We were gods! At least till my father came in and was deeply offended by the blasphemous behaviour of his two sons.

If my grandson did the same I would have simply noted that he was doing ‘Godly Play’ and ask him: “I wonder, what is the most important part of this story?”

Or perhaps the beginning of my spiritual journey was when I was twelve years old and decided at Christmas that this Bethlehem virgin birth story wasn't quite right and I would write out what really happened. So I got out the old Underwood typewriter and began. Half a day and half a page later I gave up making myself a promise that I would take typing when I got to Junior High.

When my Roman Catholic grandson comes to wonder about such issues at the advent of puberty I will repeat our United Church mantra “Let's not take it literally, but let us seriously look at this story and I would read from Luke, the King James Version:

“And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour. For he hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden: for, behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed. For he that is mighty hath done to me great things; and holy is his name. And his mercy is on them that fear him from generation to generation. He hath shewed strength with his arm; he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their

hearts. He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree. He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich he hath sent empty away. He hath holpen his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy; As he spake to our fathers, to Abraham, and to his seed for ever.” (Luke 1:47–55 KJV)

Then I would ask him to get the rosary I bought for him from the Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth, and say the prayer he already knows by heart, “Hail Mary, full of grace. Our Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death.”

At the age of 21, I was attending a Roman Catholic University, taking a typing class at 8:30 every morning (got up to 87 words a minute), going to Mass everyday at 4:30 in the afternoon (had many of the prayers memorized), life was starting to make sense.

Then I went to a play put on by the Drama Group at the university. It was Archibald MacLeish's play “J.B.” the story of Job with a twist. Set in a modern circus. Two vendors, Mr. Zuss who sells balloons and Nickles who sells popcorn, begin the play-within-a-play by assuming the roles of God and Satan, respectively. They watch J.B., a wealthy banker, describe his prosperity as a just reward for his faithfulness to God. Scorning, Nickles challenges Zuss that J.B. will curse God if his life is ruined. The vendors observe as J.B.'s children and property are destroyed in horrible accidents and the former millionaire takes to the streets. J.B. is visited by three Comforters (representing History, Science, and Religion) who offer contradicting explanations for his plight. He declines to believe any of them, instead calls out to God to show him the just cause for his punishment. When finally confronted by the circus vendors, J.B. refuses to accept Nickles' urging toward suicide to spite God or Zuss' offer of his old life in exchange for quiet obedience to religion.

In the play's final scene, J.B. is reunited with Sarah, and only with her does he find the courage to begin life anew. “You wanted justice, didn't you?” Sarah smiles. “There isn't

*Continued on page 2*

*Continued from page 1*

any. There's the world." And when they turn to the dimmed shambles of their home, and J.B. remarks, "It's too dark to see," he speaks not just of their home but of the world, a spiritually darkened world in which "The wit won't burn and the wet soul smoulders." But Sarah's closing reply is one that expresses, in spite of everything, a flicker of hope: 'Blow on the coal of the heart. The candles in churches are out. The lights have gone out in the sky. Blow on the coal of the heart and we'll see by and by ...'

In J.B., MacLeish suggests that the world, however unjust it is, will never be completely darkened as long as we can preserve in our hearts the light of compassion and love.

My work for the church began with a year on the Thomas Crosby V. This was the United Church Mission vessel that had 54 points of call that stretched from the northern tip of Vancouver Island—Port Hardy to the southern tip of Alaska—Stewart. It was a floating church, a full time crew of six, complete with a chapel equipped with an electronic organ. It burned 15 gallons of diesel an hour—so in today's money that is \$68 an hour.

At the time I wondered about this. We were travelling in total luxury compared to Thomas Crosby, the Methodist minister, who travelled in a canoe. But one day we stopped at a BC Tel station on Keith Island, it was staffed by a single person who had a wife who only spoke Japanese. I will never forget the smile on her face when we came ashore. And I thought, all the money in the world can't buy a smile like that, it is of God — a pure gift.

My first church was in Terrace. Those were great days in the church—a thriving Sunday School and everything. We built and paid cash for a new education wing on the church. My goal in those days was to climb the ladder. Within a few years I became the chair of the Presbytery, was on the Conference Executive and a member of the national Worship and Liturgy Committee. In 1981 I bought my first computer that promised ultimate power—I would be like Job before the fall.

My next congregation in Burnaby was like all churches, a wonderful group of people, but suddenly the General Council meeting of 1988 concerning the "Ordination of Homosexual Persons" consumed our life. At that time my mother used to raise sheep and would bring a lamb on Good Shepherd Sunday (two weeks after Easter) and she gave me this wonderful sweatshirt that had a shepherd standing in the midst of a flock of sheep with the caption "Knee Deep in Sheep."

So at the height of the antagonism in the church, I would wear this shirt, and explain to people that a flock of sheep is different than a congregation. First, sheep are always warm and cuddly, second if you lead they will follow and third, sheep only shit on the ground. Those were difficult days.

My third congregation was in Kelowna. The church was now in need of comfort, we had hurt each other horribly and ministries like 'healing touch' were in the forefront. Along with being a recent widower, I too, no longer was concerned with climbing the ladder, but only wondered if healing would come. If I had led a totally righteous life, I could have compared myself with Job—so that never happened. The church, the United Church of Canada, was like a wounded child that simply needed to be comforted.

My final congregation is the one gathered here this morning. What a journey we have had in the past four years and four months. Thank you, thank you, thank you. You have given me hope for this church of ours. You have proven that we can let go of past dreams of glory and receive a new call from God that is more faithful than we have ever dreamed.

The end of the book of Job that we heard today is not the original. It is simply an addition by a scribe who believed that every story should end like a Disney movie—'and they all lived happily ever after.' The story ends with the realization that for everyone of us—it is not about us. It is about God whom we will never understand even though we must try. It is about love that we can never control, but must let it control us. It is about not knowing where the journey will take us, but knowing that Jesus will guide us.

"With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this Calling

We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.  
Through the unknown, unremembered gate  
When the last of earth left to discover  
Is that which was the beginning;  
At the source of the longest river  
The voice of the hidden waterfall  
And the children in the apple-tree  
Not known, because not looked for  
But heard, half-heard, in the stillness  
Between two waves of the sea.  
Quick now, here, now, always—  
A condition of complete simplicity  
(Costing not less than everything)  
And all shall be well and  
All manner of thing shall be well  
When the tongues of flames are in-folded  
Into the crowned knot of fire  
And the fire and the rose are one." (*T.S. Elliot*)