

June 18/20 - "For the Journey"

Friends, I've had a bout of writer's block this week. It hasn't worked out. Therefore I'm sharing an old sermon from 2013, slightly updated. According to my records, and memory, I haven't shared this one before, ... I hope. I recall that on the day the sermon was offered I was still hobbling around on crutches, so I was given a comfortable chair from which to lead worship.

Blessings Friends.

Dave

A sermon preached by Rev. David M. Crawford at Ralph Connor United Church, Canmore, on April 28/2013 (5th Sunday of Easter). Based on Revelation 21:1-6.

"Falling Down"

One of the fundamental lessons drummed into my head so many years ago at seminary was this - when it comes to preaching never talk about yourself too much. The invitation to preach in a church (the old phrase is "to fill the pulpit") is a privilege one ought to approach with humility, care, and a sense of responsibility to stay focused on the Bible text for the day. This act of preaching is not to be the platform for personal opinion or agendas, or the working out of the preacher's personal issues. You shouldn't talk too much about yourself.

So, having now acknowledged that homiletical duty here today, can I tell you about my broken ankle? Nothing too dramatic or exciting. It

happened Easter Sunday. I had led an Easter Service for the residents at Mineral Springs Hospital in Banff, then went to a friend's house for lunch. Upon leaving that friend's house I stepped on a chunk of ice in their driveway and in an instant - snap - I fell down hard, and awkwardly, and knew immediately I'd done some major damage. So it's been almost 4 weeks and I've got 2 more weeks till I begin walking again.

What have I learned from falling down, breaking an ankle?

1/ I've learned, in a very personal way, how quickly we can become highly dependent on others. Miho has been wonderful as my caregiver.

2/ I've learned, once again, how truly meaningful it is when others tell you they're praying for you.

3/ and finally, I've learned how our little accidents in life sometimes serve metaphorically as reminders of our need for God.

I've had a lot of time to think lately, maybe too much time. Perhaps not coincidentally in the past couple of weeks I found myself listening to a particular song and watching a particular movie, both titled, "Falling Down", but neither one referring to broken ankles!

Some of you will remember the band Tears for Fears from the 80's. I'm still a fan. One of their lesser known songs was titled "Falling Down" and these are some of the lyrics:

"Is this world spinning round
Has this ship run aground
What's that shape
What's that sound
That's just me falling down

Some of us are free
Some are bound
Some will swim
Some will drown
Some of us are saints
Some are clowns
Just like me they're falling down

Some of us are green
Some are brown
Some are lost
Some are found
Sight unseen
Sound on sound
Pray for me I'm falling down."

Clearly the song is not focused on the act of physically taking a fall - tripping, stumbling or slipping on ice. There's a deeper truth hinted at here - the reality of where our lives sometimes take us: mistakes, errors, failures, tragedies, misjudgements, unforeseen circumstances. Falling Down. Can you remember a time when you "fell"?

In the 1993 movie "Falling Down", Michael Douglas plays a man who has snapped! Trapped in congested L.A. traffic, the sun blistering down on his non-air-conditioned car, recently fired from his job, divorced, middle-aged, he loses it. He just gets out of his car, leaving it in traffic, and starts walking - his life falling apart as he walks. He commits a minor crime at a convenience store but then, as he walks on, increases the level of his personal protest against life's unfairness even as he increases the severity of his crime spree. The story doesn't end well but along the way we, the audience, are led to feel some sympathy for this sad character. The unfairnesses his breakdown exposes, the injustices his collapse brings to the fore, in some sense we know, we can understand. Michael Douglas' character falls down, completely, criminally, irretrievably, but we too know what it's like to fall down.

Of course that's not the end of the story, nor the sermon. For we also know, don't we, how to rise up again? As those blessed with the gift of Christian faith, there is much more to life than the reality, the inevitability of falling down, isn't there?

Our lesson from Revelation is actually one of the more widely known sections of the book. Often it is heard at funerals. What we have here is a vision recounted, an apocalyptic vision of God's consummation of all things. A new heaven, a new earth, a holy city, and a voice of authority proclaiming a comforting, powerful message:

*"See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them; they will be his
peoples, and God himself will be with them."*

The home of God is among mortals! No matter your opinion of Revelation or its relevance for our times, and I'm sure opinions are diverse, this ancient vision echoes one of the key tenets of Christian faith, doesn't it? What we know to be revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The home of God is among us mortals!

In the Church we often say 'every Sunday is a little Easter'. There is always hope, there is always life, indeed new life in all its manifestations, because of Easter's promise, Easter's proclamation, celebrated in some shape or form each sabbath day. On Good Friday it seems that all is lost, hopeless. On Easter everything is miraculously, lovingly reversed - new life bursts through the darkness, hope rises, grace becomes amazing, and we begin to understand what it means for this God of ours to be incarnate, or as one scholar has stated, "incarnational. The point is - we begin to understand what it means for God to choose to dwell among us.

The Creator is not some distant, uninterested deity or force residing in some other realm. Rather, as Jesus reveals, as all of the New Testament and most of the Old echoes, the One who launched our universe with a Bang, who is beyond time and space, who is transcendent, is also wondrously, incredibly, miraculously, in love with the creation, with us!! What this means, of course, is that we're most definitely not alone in this life when we fall down. There is a strength, a power, a presence in our midst that will not abandon us. This strength and power, this God, abides with us, enabling and empowering our resilience, our hope, and our ability to rise again from our falls.

Yet I often wonder if we really take this amazing gift, this good news, seriously? Do we worship this God as the Living, ever-present, sustaining God revealed in Scripture? He is there for us, if we will just incline our hearts and minds in His direction.

“See, I am making all things new”, proclaims the voice from Revelation’s vision, and what is held up there as a future hope, by faith, becomes a very present hope for our daily lives. For the promise holds true even now. In our lives He is making all things new!

The tomb is empty. The home, the heart of God, is among mortals.

When you fall, where do you find strength to get up again? When your life stumbles, how do you carry on, with hope, with peace, with confidence?

One of my favorite contemporary Christian authors is Anne Lamott. Two of her books you may be familiar with: Travelling Mercies and Grace Eventually. In Travelling Mercies she tells of her own experience of coming to faith from a life of continued stumbles and falls. I think her story echoes the promise of our Revelation text, and of Easter, and I’d like to finish with it:

“After a while, as I lay there, I became aware of someone with me, hunkered down in the corner, and I just assumed it was my father, whose presence I had felt over the years when I was frightened and alone. The feeling was so strong that I actually turned on the light for a moment to make sure no one was there --of course, there wasn’t. But after a while, in the dark again, I knew beyond any doubt that it was Jesus. I felt him as surely as I feel my dog lying nearby as I write this.”

“And I was appalled... I thought about what everyone would think of me if I became a Christian, and it seemed an utterly impossible thing that simply could not be allowed to happen. I turned to the wall and said out loud, “I’d rather die.”

“I felt Him just sitting there on His haunches in the corner of my sleeping loft, watching me with patience and love, and I squinched my eyes shut, but that didn’t help because that’s not what I was seeing Him with. Finally I fell asleep, and in the morning He was gone.”

“This experience spooked me badly, but I thought it was just an apparition, born of fear and self-loathing and booze and loss of blood. But then everywhere I went, I had the feeling that a little cat was following me, wanting me to reach down and pick it up, wanting me to open the door and let it in. But I knew what would happen: you let a cat in one time, give it a little milk, and then it stays forever... ”

“And one week later, when I went back to church, I was so hungover that I couldn't stand up for the songs, and this time I stayed for the sermon, which I just thought was so ridiculous, like someone trying to convince me of the existence of extraterrestrials.

“But I stayed the last song was so deep and raw and pure that I could not escape. It was as if the people were singing in between the notes, weeping and joyful at the same time, and I felt like their voices or Something was rocking me in its bosom, holding me like a scared kid, and I opened up to that feeling -- and it washed over me.”

“I began to cry and left before the benediction, and I raced home and felt the little cat running at my heels, and I walked down the dock past dozens of potted flowers, under a sky as blue as one of God's own dreams, and I opened the door to my houseboat, and I stood there a minute, and then I hung my head and said... 'I quit.'

“I took a long deep breath and said out loud, 'All right. You can come in.’”

The Lord is near, my friends, God's home is among us mortals.

Thanks be to God! Amen.