

Grace Presbyterian Church, Orleans
“The Aroma of Peace”
Matthew 3: 1-12
Pastor Jonathan

December 8, 2019
Preaching for the Call
Advent II

There are those moments in life that seem to elevate you to 30,000 feet above the ground or higher. I’m not referring to various feeling or artificial highs, I’m referring to getting a higher perspective, from above the clouds. Those moments often come as surprises. God-surprises.

They come when we least suspect them. They come when someone important to us dies. It doesn’t matter if they were in palliative care, or in a long-term facility, or at home, or in an accident, an illness, old or young. It’s a shock. It reminds us how broken this life is, and this life is not the be all and end all of existence. The death of a loved takes us to a place where we don’t want to go. That we all will die. I often say at funerals that Statistics Canada tells us clearly about that. They tell us that 10 out of 10 Canadians will die. They just can’t tell us when.

And I certainly don’t have any answers why some people live well into their 90s like my mom while others don’t make it very far into their 70s, like my dad. Some theorize it has to do with how long you work, and how early you retire. And yet I have known individuals who have died within a year of their retirement, because their work was their whole life, or at least apparently so. I have also seen young men and women die of car accidents and young children die of cancer. I don’t have the answers for length of life. I just know there is more than this life to consider.

Now, Pastor Jonathan, I thought today was about “peace,” how come you’re talking so much about death...? Good question. In part, it’s because Lynn and I went to Trinity Presbyterian in Carp on Friday for the funeral of a friend’s husband. And yesterday I conducted the funeral for a Swiss woman who was not connected to Grace, but wanted to reconnect with her Swiss reformed church roots and talk to me about end of life issues. She passed away in palliative care on Thursday.

A death takes you to that place of asking what your life was truly worth, and how well you have lived it. It interrogates your sense of discipleship, that is, am I truly fully sold out to Jesus, my Lord and Saviour? Or do I just add on church and spirituality when I can? What will that person say at the front of the church or

wherever the funeral or memorial service takes place for my memory? Will it be anything like what I would have said about myself? Will it even be true?

I've conducted funerals for those whose most important things in life are golf and bridge. Now I'm not against card playing or sports, but when those are the central and most important things you can say about a person, what does that tell you about him or her?

What would like to have said about you? Be that person. And then you know you can write that down, and put it in a file for the family or friend that will be looking after your funeral arrangements. You can request it. But please remember once you request it, it is out of your control to make sure it happens. Don't threaten to haunt anybody. I always hear that as humour rather than threat. Here is one area of our lives where we know we must give up control. We have no choice. And yet, I have known those who still try to hang onto control.

The reality is you will have already gone on to your next life, your relationship to God life in full, with all kinds of new physics and a new mission, an active eternity of exploration and life without the tears, grief and the brokenness of this life. That is the peace that passes understanding. And we can have a taste of it in this life. We can.

Death brings a context to life that many try to deny out of fear. We will report in with the One who has made us and wanted our best since our conception, and even before then. He will talk with us, set us on a new journey. We will have a full sense of worship, a full sense of relationship, a full sense of life, light and truth. Nothing will be hidden.

In this life, we seem to get lost in the forest, looking at the leaves on the trees, and the bark on the trees, but we don't see what we would from a helicopter or jet about the forest...where it is leading, the power of that growth and life. So take a moment and remember the whole of your life from a high level. Take it now. What does God tell you from up above, when He lets you see it from there?

I believe we learn that the things we thought were gigantic on the ground, were not that big after all. And some of the little stuff we didn't notice was bigger than we thought... How do we know the difference? By listening to the One who knows the difference.

And one of the reasons why we put such an emphasis on reading and studying the Scriptures, the Bible, is because that is where we hear God. We hear God by listening to Him in the Scriptures. There we find life, and hope and peace and joy and love. There we find Jesus.

Many parts of the Bible push us back to finding Jesus, because he is the centre of the Revelation. He is the One that puts life back in order, makes sense out many of the pieces of the puzzle that we could never figure out just looking at the shape and colour of that puzzle piece. He brings context and content, laughter and power to a dark, stormy weather pattern.

We find Jesus in all the Gospels. There are many ways of portraying Him in the Gospels: His healing ministry, His care for those who are hurting, beat up, wounded, abused, heavy laden. He spends time with the outcasts and those that others will not even try to care for. He spends time with sex trade workers, street people, organized crime individuals and religious leaders of all kinds. He speaks to heads of government, and whoever will listen. He tells stories to make sense out of this broken life. He draws people to God.

And we also find in the Gospels another character who has a unique role. He was given the name John, although no one in his family had had that name. His father didn't even believe he could have a child, and told an angel to his face to get lost, more or less. John's father Zechariah lost his voice for a season, until that child was born. The boy's mother, Elizabeth, was full of hope and wonder that she was able to get pregnant "beyond the usual time of being able to get pregnant."

The boy grew up as many boys grow up. He had a strict diet and was raised with a vow to not take strong drink or grape products. He was a bit odd, perhaps, as we hear him begin his ministry. His fashion sense was in line with the prophets, of which he was one, the last great prophet of the older covenant pointing to the Messiah, the Deliverer. He wore camel skins, and usually is portrayed as not caring very much about his hair or beard. He ate local food, organic, locusts and honey. He was not an attractive man, yet crowds were attracted to him.

Just as some stand up comedians do today, he mocked some of the people who came to him. He call them snakes, because he was making reference to the fact that some snakes just shed the very thin skin on the outside of their bodies to change. But John was looking for a much deeper change than only skin deep. He was looking for people to be vulnerable about their broken lives.

He was looking for people who wanted to change in God's direction. Dr. Luke was the only Gospel writer (Luke 3:10ff) to record that tax collectors (the despised collaborators with the military invasion government) and soldiers would ask what they should do to show they were serious about their faith in God. And John told them and others: share what you have, even if you only have two of one thing, share it, and tax collectors were challenged to not accept graft or bribes, and soldiers were told to be content with their pay and not falsely accuse or bully.

John also warned people to not be too proud of their family heritage, or ethnic origin. He noted that God could easily make any family from the rocks on the side of the river. He challenged people to show their trust in God, not just with their words, but also with their actions. John was doing a good job, preparing the way for Jesus. He died as a young man because he challenged the government of the day.

He also baptized, which means he poured water on or dunked people in the river. Where there was not much water, it was not dependent on going under, it was simply a sign of washing off the old life and welcoming the new. Because he practiced this water ceremony, they called him the Baptizer, not Baptist. The Baptists came along about 1700 years later. And that's another history lesson.

He was essentially the final prophet who was a pointer to Jesus. (show this physically) He was a sheep dog showing sheep to the Shepherd, nosing them in Jesus' direction. He was a pointer.

And that's what I am. And that's what you are. And like the Gospel of John records about John the Baptizer saying, "Jesus must increase, I must decrease." (John 3:30) So we must say this, in the time and season that we are in. Without Jesus' direction, teaching, mission, love, compassion, what do we have left? Not much, if anything.

A church without Jesus is not really a church, but a social organization that may do good things, but not Kingdom things. So I keep pointing back to Jesus.

It doesn't mean I have all the answers for all the questions before us. I don't know what to tell you about what our denomination is going through. I don't know how to care for each and everyone of you in the way that Jesus cares for you.

I don't know what the future holds for any of us, life or death, health or wealth, pre-eminence or preposterous. I do know the One who holds the future.

And there is where we go for peace. There is no magic answer for world peace in this life. There is a mission from the Author of Life to find peace, inward peace, the peace that passes understanding with Jesus.

As it says in the Upper Room in John 14, just after Jesus promises the presence of the Holy Spirit in every believer, He says, “I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.” The future here in this world is uncertain. We can be certain of that. The future in Jesus’ arms can be well supplied with peace, an inward harmony, not dependent on the storms and brokenness of this life which is all-pervasive.

Jesus is the way, the truth, the life. He is our Guide from this life to the next. He is not only that, but our Teacher and Master right now.

No matter what you are facing in your life right now, trust Jesus with your life. Trust Him with this church. Trust Him with your future, and every detail of your life. Give Him the chance anew today to manage and transform your life in His direction. You won’t regret your decision.

Let us pray.