

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"The Ultimate Boundary Line"
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Third Sunday in Lent

Jesus in the gospel of John talked about his life and about the goals of his life as living one day. Jesus only lived thirty three years on the earth. He said, "There are only so many hours of sunlight in one day." As life moves on and the years fly by, we too recognize our whole life as one day. And so in this one day, we need to work while there is still light to work. Our own lives are also only so long. Some of us will live an extraordinary number of years. We already have done so. Others of us we have seen dead and buried in a relatively short number of years. Why this is remains a mystery. If it were as easy as finding the pollution or the water quality or the health conditions that make it so, we probably would have already figured it out. But instead it remains a mystery. It is a fact that we only have a little while, compared to the age of the earth, that reminds us to work for that which gives life while we can.

If we consider our congregation, soon celebrating 237 years of existence, we recognize that as a community we have a longevity together which is much more than our individual contributions. Today's annual meeting is a way to talk about that work which we seek to faithfully continue, to glorify God, to honour Jesus, to practically serve the community, to love one another, to help all ages and families as best we can. We only talk about how we are doing as a congregation, considering all our ministries, only once in the year. This will be my fifth. Some of you have gone to fifty (50) or more of these. You know how God has been faithful to us. You can speak out such encouragement as the rest of us cannot. All of us can trust the Lord anew for making this place work well. We are the church. The building is the building, and it's nice to have a place to meet during the winter and the rest of the cold weather. It's our home as a church family, and we try to share as best we can with community groups and other Christian groups. We seek to trust God with the legacy of our building and property. And you make it happen. We send out letters to let you know how costs go up and new challenges arise. But today, we try to look at the whole of who we are and entertain any question, any concern, any praise or encouragement, today is the day to bring it up.

During this sermon time we try to invite you to consider what the Scriptures tell us about who we are. We listen to the Scripture writers, who themselves were directed by God to write what they wrote. Paul wrote a lot of the New Covenant in the form of letters.

He wrote the Corinthians, who were divided, who were messed up, who were rebellious to God but thought they were just exercising their freedom in their rebellion. Being a port city, they were exposed to all the newest ideas, they followed the newest trends in society, they had little or no sense of ethics, in terms of their sexuality or their worship services. They didn't get along with each other, yet they were very gifted in so many ways. So Paul talked to them about their unity in the gospel, how to use their gifts to build up each other and the church, how to love one another and how to care for each other in the midst of their differences.

He does this and more over sixteen chapters of a letter we call 1 Corinthians. But in the beginning of the letter, after he makes sure they know that he thanks God deeply for them, he only wants to direct them back to the reason for their existence as a church. He points them back to Jesus.

Why would a young man choose to die? He is not suicidal. In fact, he brings others healing and life from the dead. So why would Jesus surrender himself to the cross? Please understand that the cross was the slow torture to death punishment in the Roman era for those slaves who deserved being made into a billboard against sedition or rebellion. Everyone else who committed a capital offense would be killed by the sword quickly. This was reserved for the lowest of the lows in society. Why would Jesus submit himself to that?

Every year we take forty days to consider this in the season we call Lent. Every year we take one day, Good Friday, to particularly remember this. Why do we do so? Because the cross is the ultimate boundary line around this question of what life is.

Paul explains this to the Corinthians. They know something of the Jewish background to the Christian gospel. They know the ten commandments were the principles of law by which the Old Covenant was established, what we read in Exodus 20. They also knew that every Jew and every Gentile had broken some part of this law, and therefore everyone was guilty of breaking their side in relationship to God. God therefore being just, would eventually

condemn them for their law breaking in the ultimate court of law that we all will face in the end of our lives. We too are law breakers. We too have broken the ten commandments and rebelled against God's purposes for our lives. We too stand condemned before God based on our works, on our thoughts, on our actions.

The only way God could creatively devise a way to take us out of that position of condemnation to a position of acceptance was by going himself to live among the people. So God became human, as we celebrate at Christmas, and began to teach us a new way. That way was to accept that there would be a person, God himself in Jesus, who would take the punishment for our sins on himself once and for all, so that when we stand in the ultimate courtroom at the end of our lives, we hear the guilty verdict pronounced over Jesus for our sins and our rebellion, so that we can go free. Jesus is the scapegoat, the sacrifice for our sins that we can not get free from on our own. Jesus is the Lamb of God who gives himself freely to be the one who takes the brunt of our rebellion on himself, so that we can have relationship with God. He substitutes his righteous and pure life for ours so that God sees us through Jesus and considers us to be pure and holy while Jesus dies for our transgressions and pays our debts. He gets what we deserve and we get his righteousness as a gift before God.

Now Paul says there are two responses to this story. One is that it is foolishness. How can anyone believe this? First you have to believe in God. Then you have to believe that you can have a relationship with God. Then you have to believe that you can reject that relationship, consciously or unconsciously. Then you have to believe that you can get that relationship back uniquely through what Jesus did. Many simply will not accept one part or all parts of such a story.

These are those who are perishing. These are those who think they know better than a God who would do such a thing, a God who would stoop to the lowest, most difficult exercise of life, i.e. how he would die a horrible human death in order to bring life to countless numbers of those who would receive such. It is a non sequitor to those logicians of the day. It makes no logical sense.

In fact, Paul says that his own Jewish people would only receive signs, that is, miracles. But when Jesus did such, often on a Sabbath day, they would

reject him and the signs. So even his miracles would not persuade everyone. In fact, to this day, they are being refuted or rejected by many.

The Greeks, Paul says, are looking for wisdom. They could certainly understand a god becoming a man, for this was in their own literature. But then for the god to be humiliated to death, in a way that is shameful even for a slave. This was unacceptable, and even out of the question for a novel writer or a spinner of tales. The cross was so disgusting to the educated and the writers of the day, that most would not lower themselves to even talk about it. So to have the King of the Jews on the cross would be the ultimate superlative of contradiction. Many reject this.

But to those who lowered themselves to say “yes” to this humble Messiah, to those who follow the logic of sacrifice and of helping the unhelpable, it is the power of God at work in our lives.

We are all on spiritual paths. All of us. The atheist is on a spiritual path, the agnostic is on a spiritual path, the uncommitted is on a spiritual path, the religious of all stripes are on spiritual paths. Being human, having a spirit within us, makes all individuals on a spiritual path. It is inevitable even for those who say they have no spirit, no life beyond this life. Because reality trumps opinion in the end, my opinion as well.

Paul knew that the only hope for the Corinthians was their agreement around the gospel, the good news that Jesus does for us what we cannot do for ourselves at the cross. This is the dividing line of the perishing and those who are being saved from their rebellion. It is the same today here.

We are coming up to the one hundredth anniversary of the Titanic. You have heard many stories from that disaster. Perhaps you have heard of John Harper. If not, let me close with his story. It was the night of April 14, 1912. The RMS Titanic sailed swiftly on the bitterly cold ocean waters somewhat near here heading unknowingly into the pages of history. On board this luxurious ocean liner were many rich and famous people. At the time of the ship's launch, it was the world's largest man-made moveable object. At 11:40 p.m. on that fateful night, an iceberg scraped the ship's starboard side, showering the decks with ice and ripping open six watertight compartments. The sea poured in.

On board the ship that night was John Harper and his much-beloved six-year-old daughter Nana. According to documented reports, as soon as it was apparent that the ship was going to sink, John Harper immediately took his daughter to a lifeboat. It is reasonable to assume that this widowed preacher could have easily gotten on board this boat to safety; however, it never seems to have crossed his mind. He bent down and kissed his precious little girl; looking into her eyes he told her that she would see him again someday. The flares going off in the dark sky above reflected the tears on his face as he turned and headed towards the crowd of desperate humanity on the sinking ocean liner.

As the rear of the huge ship began to lurch upwards, it was reported that Harper was seen making his way up the deck yelling, "Women, children and unsaved into the lifeboats!" It was only minutes later that the Titanic began to rumble deep within. Most people thought it was an explosion; actually the gargantuan ship was literally breaking in half. At this point, many people jumped off the decks and into the icy, dark waters below. John Harper was one of these people.

That night 1528 people went into the frigid waters. John Harper was seen swimming frantically to people in the water leading them to Jesus before the hypothermia became fatal. Mr. Harper swam up to one young man who had climbed up on a piece of debris. Rev. Harper asked him between breaths, "Are you saved?" The young man replied that he was not.

Harper then tried to lead him to Christ only to have the young man who was near shock, reply no. John Harper then took off his life jacket and threw it to the man and said, "Here then, you need this more than I do..." and swam away to other people. A few minutes later Harper swam back to the young man and succeeded in leading him to salvation. Of the 1528 people that went into the water that night, only a few were rescued by the lifeboats. One of them was this young man on the debris.

Four years later, at a survivors meeting, this young man stood up and in tears recounted how that after John Harper had led him to Christ. Mr. Harper had tried to swim back to help other people, yet because of the intense cold, had grown too weak to swim. His last words before going under in the frigid waters were, "Believe on the Name of the Lord Jesus and you will be saved." Does Hollywood remember this man? No. Oh well, no matter. This servant of God did what he had to do. While other people were trying to buy

their way onto the lifeboats and selfishly trying to save their own lives, John Harper gave up his life so that others could be saved.*

Today is the day, now is the moment to say “yes” to Jesus, and give your life to him, to turn away from your rebellion and ask him to save you. If you have already done so, give thanks now. If you have already done so, pass on the good news as John Harper did. All we can do is pass on the life we have received.

Let us pray.

*See Moody Adams, *The Titanic's Last Hero*, re-published by Moody Press, January 2012.