

North Kildonan United Church

14th March 2021 ~Rev. Don Johnson

“God So Loves the World”

Numbers 21: 4-9

Psalm 107: 1-3, 17-22

John 3: 14-21

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

The geese are back! At least some of the geese are back, as I saw and heard earlier this week in Assiniboine Park. There were perhaps a dozen or so of them, slowly wandering on the frozen yet basically snow free ground, every so often trumpeting their goose music into the air, boldly proclaiming that they were back in town.

There's something reassuring about the geese returning. After how long a flight, travelling over so many hundreds of kilometres, flying from their warm comfortable climes to their currently chilly summer home, the return of the geese are a wonderful sign and symbol that a new season is dawning. The winter is winding down and the promise of spring is heard in their song.

In a different land and at a different time, in the Song of Solomon we hear similar echoes of the coming of spring:

'Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away; for now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtle-dove is heard in our land. The fig tree puts forth its figs, and the vines are in blossom; they give forth fragrance. Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.' (Song of Solomon 2: 10-13).

Geese in Canada, turtle-doves in the Middle East, each in their own way proclaim the hope which is spring.

Of course, as these geese discovered, and as we well know, the fullness of spring is not yet with us. There will still be cold days, snow days, teasing tastes of warm weather followed by icy blasts of winter. But the promise of spring is here, not yet in full blossom, but in the increasing warmth of the sun, in the gentle breezes that are no longer frosty, in the retreating snow and melting ice. Soon, but not yet, the grass will begin to grow, the now solid rivers will transform into flowing streams and the trees will begin to bud. Not quite yet, but soon.

For a year now the whole world has been gripped by the winter of the COVID pandemic. Each of us bears our own scars of this pandemic year, this seemingly unending winter of distancing and isolation, masks and precautions, fear and pain. You don't need me to chronicle the struggle of these past twelve months, other than to say that it has been a tremendous and at times horrendous struggle for so many of us.

But in the midst of this pandemic there have been countless examples of kindness, encouragement and help. I think for instance of the tremendous work our pastoral care committee has put into caring for our congregation. Marvelle and her committee have been tireless in reaching out to our people, comforting and encouraging those struggling with illness and pain, all the while extending the love of God through their friendly and faithful phone calls and words of hope. We are so blessed by the care and compassion our pastoral care committee and our congregation extends to each other, care and compassion that has made this journey through the pandemic more bearable.

With the advent of the vaccines, with the widespread adherence to health orders, and through the cooperation of ordinary citizens showing genuine concern for friends and strangers, it seems like the winter of COVID is melting away into the spring of renewed hope. We are not out of the woods yet, but hope feels more real now, more tangible, more promising. We still need to wear our masks and keep a respectable, safe distance, and we still are not allowed to sing in church, but we look forward to the day when our choir loft will be filled with choristers, coffee will be offered after church and limits on attendance will be a distant memory. Not quite yet, but soon.

So we hope, with all our heart, for that day to come true. As people of God, we have faith that a new day is always dawning, trusting that God is reaching out to us in divine love and compassion, guiding and urging us onwards.

If we can see them, the signs of hope and new life are there. The geese in the park, trumpeting out their joy that their long journey has safely ended. The progress of vaccines and of medical advances offers the promise of freedom and reconnection with those we love. Not quite yet, but soon.

In today's reading from Numbers we encounter a clear sign of new life. The people of Israel are wandering in the wilderness. As they walk day by day, yet feeling they are not making any progress, they begin to complain. We heard similar complaints from the same people in our Old Testament readings last fall. "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food."

Perhaps in a bid to get their attention, to let them know there are worse things than bad food, the Lord sets poisonous snakes on the people.

These serpents begin to kill the people, who realize what their complaints have literally unleashed, and they make confession to Moses: "*We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us.*" So Moses prayed for the people."

The text continues: "*The Lord said to Moses, 'Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.'* So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live." It is a bit of a strange story but it does acknowledge that often healing and light come by first living through pain and darkness. And it affirmed to the people that the one who could take their life, that is, the serpent,

was not as powerful as the Lord, the one who gives and restores life. So to look at the bronze serpent was to trust in God, the life-giver.

Perhaps this passage by Eugene March might help us understand this reading: *"Faith in the Bible is regularly understood as trust rather than belief. Moses did not challenge the people to believe in some doctrine about God. The aim of Moses was for the people to move forward trusting that God would keep the divine commitment to lead the people to a new land."*

In John's gospel we find the reference to Moses lifting up this bronze serpent, linking that saving act with the crucifixion and ultimate resurrection of Jesus. Though the Son of Man would suffer and die on the cross, which is what being lifted up means, we understand Jesus's death as the ultimate sign of God's sacrificial love for all, for the world.

Craig Kocher sums it up this way.

"The path to redemption is coated in suffering. The cure for a snake is a snake. The cure for human life is one man's life. The cure for death is death. Lift up your eyes to the cross, and trust in the light of God's redeeming grace."

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

So this day, and every day, we celebrate and trust that God so loved and still loves the world, and we know this love in Jesus Christ.

And so we can say with the Psalmist: *"O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures for ever."*

Thanks be to God. Amen.