

# North Kildonan United Church

20<sup>th</sup> March 2022 ~Rev. Don Johnson

## ***“Water for Life”***

*Isaiah 55: 1-9*

*Psalm 63: 1-8*

*Luke 13: 1-9*

*Gracious God, may your Word be a lamp to our feet and a light to our path through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

It was in 1970 when Joni Mitchell released her hit song *Big Yellow Taxi*. Just to jog your memory, it begins this way:

*“They paved paradise and put up a parking lot  
With a pink hotel, a boutique, and a swinging hot spot  
Don't it always seem to go  
That you don't know what you got 'til it's gone  
They paved paradise and put up a parking lot”.*

*“You don't know what you got 'til it's gone”.* That line came to mind a few days ago when I discovered that there was a water main break on my street and my water was off. At first I worried if the line from the street to my home was broken, which has happened before, at somewhat considerable cost to repair. A check with my neighbour confirmed that the break was somewhere on the street. By the afternoon a bit of water trickled through the faucet, a trickle that was increased to a decent flow, then nothing. The knock at the door at 11:00 o'clock that night told me that a temporary water tank was on the street.

The next day was dry, except for a short time when a trickle flowed through the pipes. That has since stopped and if the repairs are not made in time I guess I'll be calling my sister-in-law to see if I can shower at her place.

*“You don't know what you got 'til it's gone”* Joni wisely sang.

I know the water line will be repaired and I'll go back to taking water for granted, but when you don't have water it sure disrupts life.

The funny coincidence with this is that the day before the water disruption, I had chosen the Isaiah passage and the psalm for this service, both of which are full of thirst and water references. Little did I know that I would be experiencing firsthand what it means to be without water.

Of course my troubles were nothing compared to what others are experiencing around the world. Day by day we are seeing the turmoil and destruction Ukraine is enduring, we grieve with them as they suffer through this totally unprovoked and senseless war, and with them we hope and pray that this conflict will come to a speedy end.

Around the world, in North America as well as the other continents, water security and water safety and water availability are serious concerns. Those concerns are the realities of daily life for some in our province, as they have to boil or bring in any water they want to drink. As we all know, water is essential to our very existence.

In our responsive reading, the psalmist speaks of the lack of water as a way of understanding our spiritual thirst. You can almost picture the psalmist putting his or her longing for God into this most basic of human experiences, thirst.

*“You are my God, I long for you from early morning.*

*My whole being desires you like a dry, worn, waterless land.*

*My soul thirsts for you.”*

For the psalmist, the presence of God in the soul is as essential as the presence of water in our life. We cannot live without water and we cannot truly live without the love of God in our spiritual life.

These past two years of pandemic restrictions, of distancing and mask wearing, of isolation and living in fear, these have been for many of us like existing in a dry, worn, waterless land. Sure we tried to be distracted with Netflix and amusing emails, we shopped in the cool of the evening when few others would be at the grocery store, we dutifully observed the health regulations and we worried about those whom we love.

And during those times in the past two years when we were able to worship in person, limited though we were by masking and distancing and no singing, still it was like water for a thirsty soul when we could come to church and be with others in offering our praise and thanks to God.

So we hope and pray that these two years of wilderness wandering, of sojourning in that dry, worn, waterless land which the virus created, that all that is finally over and done with.

It may be too soon to look back and think about the past two years, to reflect on what was positive as well as what was negative, to be grateful for friendships deepened and new friendships made, experiences of kindness and compassion that we received and that in turn we extended to others, of generosity of spirit given by us and given to us, of appreciating, perhaps for the first time, those people and groups and activities which enrich us and bless our lives.

What was it that Joni wrote: *“You don’t know what you got ‘til it’s gone”*. We may just discover that much of what we feared was gone is actually not gone, merely put away for a season or two. People say that we have been changed by this pandemic, that things will not be the same again. To some degree that may well be true, but to be honest, perhaps some things probably need to be changed, as well as some attitudes changed. Before the pandemic, for instance, it was easy to take church for granted, as something to go to if it was convenient and fit into our overall plans for the weekend.

And if not this Sunday, there's always next Sunday when we can go, isn't there? Then came the times when that choice was taken from us.

It remains to be seen how church life has been affected by the pandemic. William Willimon, a retired United Methodist bishop, talks of the effect 9/11 had on American church attendance. He said that following the airplane attacks in New York, vast numbers of Americans started going back to church. Apparently that surge in attendance lasted about six months and then the numbers gradually fell down to what they had been before 9/11. Why was this so? Bishop Willimon said it was because these people who returned to church after so many years away found the church to be the same boring, predictable institution they had left all those years before.

It remains to be seen how the church, our church and all the other churches, will evolve in the years to come. But we do know a few things for sure.

The church is made up of people, people who like each other and more importantly, through their shared love of God, people who love each other, warts and all, as they say. It's hard, if not impossible, to replace with something else the friendly interactions churchgoers have when it's time to gather for worship. Yes, the services can be recorded and with extensive financial and time investment the worship "experience" can be presented as a high tech, professional production. Able to be viewed whenever it's convenient. But the church is about community, it is about sharing and visiting and encouraging one another, it is about friends who regard others as sisters and brothers in the faith, it is a collection of pilgrims in their lifelong walk with God.

How thirsty we felt inside ourselves when we couldn't worship together, how we so wanted to see our church family, to be with our church family, to hear their news and share their joys and sorrows.

Yes, we can encounter the divine most anywhere, but us Christian folk especially encounter God in our houses of worship, those sanctuaries blessed by the prayers and tears and laughter and singing and sharing down through the years, places that we treat with respect and hold in our hearts as holy.

We would echo the words of the psalmist:

*In the sanctuary let me see how mighty are your works;  
your constant love is better than life itself, and so I will praise you.  
I will give thanks as long as I live; I raise my hands in prayer.  
My soul will feast and be filled, and I will sing and praise you.  
As I lie in bed, I remember you, O God;  
I think of you all night long, for you are my constant help.  
In the shadow of your wings I sing for joy.  
I cling to you; your hand keeps me safe.*

What was it Joni Mitchell sang all those years ago: "*You don't know what you got 'til it's gone*".

Friends, I suspect we well know what we have here at North Kildonan United Church, and we aren't letting it go. Amen.