

**Sermon**  
**Kirk of St James**  
**Sunday January 26, 2025**  
**Rev. Amanda Henderson-Bolton**

While home over Christmas the weather was ideal for hiking around mom's property. My parents have lived on the same land since they were married. Over the years I have gotten to know the know the fields and the woods around it quite well. Where the brook meanders, and where the wild apple trees grow, and along a certain tree line where Dad always picked rhubarb when it was in season. Overall, it feels like not a whole lot changes from year to year, and yet it does. Beavers built a damn and it affected the flow of the brook. Some old stands of trees blew over in hurricane Fiona, and new young apple trees took root in a back field, and when I went looking for our skating pond I discovered it had grown in. Still the changes were not hugely disruptive overall, and the borders and boundaries were recognizable.

That is true of my childhood home, and our country in general. I once met a couple in Europe who said they held up to six different passports over their lives but they had lived in the same house the entire time. It was just how the borders changed over time. While living in the same house they experienced different currencies, languages and governments, which is hard to believe. In Canada we don't expect things like that to change, our borders and boundaries are clear and while invisible also feel immovable.

So much of life is broken down into borders and boundaries. Like a country we carefully draw the narrative of our own lives; our jobs, families, friends, where we live, everything follows within the borders we have drawn. I am not sure if your life is anything like mine, but it often follows a natural course week to week dictated by routine, and Saturday morning I wake up wondering where the week has gone. Does that ever happen to you? Life is so busy and there is so much to do it is easy to lose track of time and autopilot turns on as we do our daily tasks.

Like anything else in our lives, our faith is something that can get caught up in routine, and the boundaries we both consciously and unconsciously keep. It can easily become

something we do on Sunday, and then let it lie fallow throughout the week. We forget how powerful and life changing faith can be. One of my all-time favourite quotes by Annie Dillard is, "Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke?... It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake some day and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return." Annie Dillard reminds us of the power, and life changing reality that being in relationship with God can bring about.

In Nehemiah today we come face to face with a community and a nation in distress. Both "Ezra and Nehemiah preside over a community in severe conflict, dispute, and fragmentation. The book tells about returnees from exile in Babylon, led by Ezra and Nehemiah among others, who attempt to rebuild Jerusalem and restore Judah as a worshipping community. The future of the people is in serious doubt. Enemies attack from outside, but even more disruptively internal disagreements threaten to undermine the communities' future. The people form factions about who is in and who is out, who should govern, how the temple can be rebuilt, how Jerusalem can be reestablished in safety and peace." I suspect when they set out to rebuild they never once imagined that their own differing opinions could be the thing that undoes them.

The account in Nehemiah today is important, as it marks a moment where the community—and it stresses this multiple times—all the community came together to listen to the word of God. Worship is something that God's people do together. We are the body of Christ, and we all have a part to play that is integral to the overall wellbeing of the body. All are welcomed and included in this invitation—no one sits outside of this welcome.

The whole of the congregation was gathered together to hear the words of the Lord proclaimed, and they are deeply affected by it. They bow down, they weep, and they rejoice. One author said there is a difference when God is not only the object of our worship, but also the subject of our worship--when we encounter the living and Holy God. In many ways it

seems a subtle distinction, what is the difference between God being the object of our worship versus the subject? One of the best examples that I have come across can be found in C.S Lewis' book *The Screwtape Letters*. I have mentioned this book before, because it is such a fascinating read. It is about a senior demon, teaching his nephew a junior demon how to lead people away from their faith. In one of the scenes the senior demon is telling the junior that one of the best tricks when it comes to leading Christians away from their faith is to subtly change their attention. As the senior demon wrote "I have known cases where what the patient (Christian) called his "God" was actually located up and to the left at the corner of the bedroom ceiling, or inside his own head, or in a crucifix on the wall. But whatever the nature of the composite object, you must keep him praying to it--to the thing that he has made, not to the Person who made him."

It is easy so easy to shift from subject to object. To pray or worship in ways that moves ours lips and not our hearts. It can be easier to put on a straw hat and come to church not expecting anything, than to come expecting to be tipped upside down, and have our realities shaken. Perhaps surprisingly that is not a criticism, because so much of our lives are lived in daily routine. While there are countless mountain top moments in the New Testament where people are healed and lives are changed, the reality is the disciples spent far more time simply moving from town to town, eating, sleeping, and taking care of daily life. While the Israelites experienced some incredible moments while travelling to the Promised Land, they spent most of their time just putting one foot in front of the other on their way there. Jesus spent the first 30 years of his life building furniture. So it is not surprising, that like anything else in our life, faith can come to be routine, and not a constant mountaintop experience.

One striking example of how worship can move from routine to the unexpected happened this past week during the service at the National Cathedral in Washington. Episcopal Bishop, Rev. Mariann Edgar Budde upended the boat when she made a plea for mercy for the most vulnerable. The reaction was immediate. It ranged from funny, with one meme I saw saying, "What was it she said that got everyone upset?" "To which another replied, "Be kind to one another." And the final frame said, "Oh, yeah. That'll do it." To the more serious in nature for

example, “If your Christianity causes you to be offended by someone asking the most powerful person in the country to be merciful to the powerless, then you have profoundly misunderstood the teachings of Jesus Christ.” It was an Annie Dillard moment for certain, people came in straw hats, and ended up swept up in something powerful.

One of the things that has since stuck with me is that what she preached is what all of us should be preaching on a Sunday morning. This is what the gospel message is—to love your neighbour as yourself. Our cross out front with winter clothes was a direct result of knowing there were unhoused persons—the most vulnerable among us—who needed warmth and this was a way they could get direct access to warm, dry items. We collect groceries and send them over to the foodbank at the university because we know students need the extra help. This week we met with leadership in the community working to create comfort centres for the most vulnerable in our community to protect them in extreme weather. Our church is a part of that conversation because this is who we are. We take the call to love our neighbour seriously—it not just something nice that we do—it is part of our identity as a community called by God and formed by God.

We continue this work, through the mountain tops and valleys, through the extra-ordinary and even more often through the ordinary. As we do so it is good to remember the advice of one author who said "God gives us no other day than today to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed, and new beginnings to all who have failed." This is the day the Lord has made; this is the day that we have to live, to love, and to carry out God's work in the world. While some days it feels like a straw hat kind of day, we also live with the expectation of continually coming face to face with the Messiah in life changing and altering ways. My prayer for all of us, myself included, is that we have crash helmet moments where we meet Christ face and face and our lives can never be the same, and during the in-between moments, the perseverance to continue carrying out the mission that Christ has left us with hearts broken up in love and empathy.