

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario

Easter Sunday, April 21, 2019

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The Mystery of Easter

Texts: *For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, And My thoughts than your thoughts. (Isaiah 55: 7-8.)*

The Jesus of history once said "For men it is impossible, but not for God: because everything is possible for God."

As I was sitting in my living room watching the evening news. The top story was the massive fire of the Cathedral of Notre Dame De Paris. There were pictures of the famous spire falling into the nave of the church, the roof completely ablaze. There was footage of the cathedral treasures being rushed to safety; laments about the loss of priceless stained glass as the almost 900-year-old landmark structure, burned before the cameras and the people who had gathered to watch. Many of the people were in tears. This was their Cathedral where they had mourned their dead, where they had gathered on National occasions. This was a place where history had been made. It had been often a focus for stupidity by those who wanted to make a point or hurt France like the Nazis. Yet it had withstood it all.

I began to think about this and how the people felt about it as they huddled together in groups to pray and to weep. This place had been built by dedicated craftsmen who thought they were working for God and so did their very best, excelling even what they thought they were capable of. Each stone carefully cut and chiseled and morticed into place; each piece of wood carved to perfection and then set into position so well, that it had held against all manner of weather, a bloody revolution and two world wars.

When you came into the cathedral there was a sense of grandeur and a language in architecture about God's greatness, awe and majesty. It was there in the proportion and form and in the soaring arches that reached towards heaven in an uplift of the human spirit. And when the mighty pipe organ, beloved around the whole musical world for its characteristic iconic sound, when it filled that awesome space, shivers would run up and down your spine. I know. I have been there. This was a place where one could come and sit quietly in the pew and pray about some life challenge that was very difficult, a place where one felt the presence of God whether one was religious or still questing for answers.

And so, as I watched the merciless, angry, orange flames, I began to tear up. What a loss! Think of all the Easter celebrations that had been planned, for this was the week before Holy week. All of them dashed! How very, very sad. Surely the timing for this tragedy could not have been worse?

Perhaps for you this Easter day you find yourself depressed. There is some challenge that is making you sad. Perhaps for you it is the loss of a loved one, a difficult health problem, a loss of some kind. Basically, you find yourself out of hope.

I know from talking to many of you personally, that some of you have problems with The Resurrection of Jesus from the dead. To you it seems so long ago and so very unlikely. And you don't really get off on Easter because you have these nagging doubts about probability. You have a ton of questions that mar for you any excitement and hope that you might feel at this time of year. Perhaps some years ago now whatever faith you had has crashed and burned. You are a bit like Notre Dame, there is a moral skeleton of faith left, but the guts have burned

away. There is no roof now to protect your faith. So, when it rains it gets in to you. And besides you are low on hope anyway...

If we are going to experience the true Easter today, we need to go back 2000 years ago and we need a very special someone to take us there.

We need the greatest Old Testament teacher of them all, the prophet that Jesus loved... Isaiah.

Isaiah can help us hear those excited running feet, pounding along the ancient stone streets of old Jerusalem in the early morning in the dark, as Peter and John ran to the tomb. John, younger and faster, and Peter older and yet more determined... fearless. They were on a mission!

Isaiah can help us see Mary of Magdala looking anxiously about. What was the reason why the garden tomb was empty? Who had rolled the stone away? Where was the body she had come to wash and anoint with spices?

We need Isaiah to help us see her encounter a person she thought was the gardener. We need to be able to see her jaw drop in total surprise when the so-called gardener called her by her name and she recognized *the voice*... We need to be able to hear her say "Master!!!"

Why Isaiah?

According to Isaiah just what is it that holds our understanding back?

In the book of Isaiah God says these words:

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways."

Isaiah, if we permit him, can put his finger on the center of the problem before us today.

Why is Easter such a mystery to us?

Because God thinks differently from us.

There is one major, massive difference between our thought and God's thought. Our minds are limited by what we think is possible and what we think is not possible.

But consider for one brief moment what the mind of God is like. Omnipotent, omnipresent, living outside of the dimensions of past, present and future and space and time, God thinks in an entirely different way from the rest of us: Where we would see impossibilities, God sees only possibilities, for there are no limits for God. As Jesus himself said "For human beings a thing can be impossible, but not for God, because everything is possible for God."

Isaiah puts his finger then on our challenge to believe: We think like human beings, not as God thinks.

Why is this the case?

Because we are limited beings. There are parameters for us. There are things we cannot do. I, by thinking with all my might, can't add two inches to my height, unless like Arnold Schwarzenegger, I buy platform shoes! You can't leap over a tall building with a single bound. If you can come and see me after church...

But think of this, according to Jesus and His mother Mary, everything is possible for God. We simply cannot give God a problem in the universe that God cannot solve. Thus, if God exists, as we believe God must, as the best explanation for the incredible, intelligent complexity of the world; the Resurrection of Jesus from the processes of death for God is not an impossibility, but simply a practical decision as to whether to do it or not.

For God sees only possibilities.

For a human being thinking about resurrection, it is impossible. How could we reverse the decay that always sets in following death?

To think of the resurrection as resuscitation, or Jesus having swooned on the cross and recovered from the blood loss later, or that there was no physical resurrection only a spiritual one as some progressive theologians insist, that is perhaps the best we can do as humans, within the parameters of our thought.

But that is the problem isn't it? It is our thought.

BUT!

How can we go about limiting what any other thinking Agent in the universe might do, such as God?

I remember once reading a scientific document that was arguing that cause and effect reigned supreme in the natural world. Miracle was not a possibility for that writer. For instance, it could be argued that a stone on a glacial field, had got there by a long series of causes and effects under natural law. The earth cooled, rocks formed, glaciers scoured the rocks and carried them huge distances away from the original mountain of which they were a part. When the glaciers melted the small rock was left in a field of glacial till. Natural law reigned supreme in continuous locked steps of cause and effect. And a miracle which was an interruption of the laws of cause and effect was just not possible.

But consider this; if a man walked along the glacial till and, on a whim, picked up the stone and hurled it somewhere perhaps as much as one hundred feet away, how would we explain that through cause and effect alone? No natural laws were broken when the rock was hurled, but as to why it landed where it landed had everything to do with a decision made in an intelligent brain- a whim- a thought, created a whole new string of possibilities for that stone.

Are we to assume that we are alone in the universe or is there another Greater One who can roll stones away?

If we think differently from God, because we think in limits of what is possible and what is not possible, is that the end of the story? Are we locked into our limited thinking?

I don't think so...

Scripture also says that we are all made in the image of God. We may not think like God, because of the practical limits, but when we partner with God, we discover that the parameters of what is possible enlarge.

So, the Easter message is this: we are most like God when we too see only possibilities.

Alan Cohen writes: "Our true challenge is to meet our mind on the field of our awakening and conquer our fears with love. As long as we allow fear to hold power over us, everything we see is a potential danger. Once we choose love as our guide there is nothing that can remove our good. We must relinquish our hold on the limitations we perceive and lift our vision to a broader dimension. It is said that "the winds of grace are blowing all the time. We have only to raise our sails."

Are we grieving today?

Cohen says: "There is no sorrow beyond God's ability to transform into a blessing and nothing we cannot do when we walk with the one whose touch delivers miracles."

When I was living in Sacramento, I came across this true story.

Dallas Hextall's life began with heartbreak for his parents. Born in 2006 in Sacramento he was unable to feed from his mother. He was constantly crying and rarely opened his eyes. He had

trouble balancing himself. At the age of 8 months Dallas was diagnosed with cerebral palsy. There is no known cure for cerebral palsy.

At 18 months, Dallas had very limited motor skills. He could not crawl, clap or sit up and he only communicated through screaming, brought on by pain and frustration. His parents said “It just seemed like a fog was over him, like he just really wasn’t there. There was kind of like a glaze over him.”

During the pregnancy, Cynthia Hextall had read up on the Internet about the benefits of preserving the umbilical cord. She was thinking about possible heart disease and that Dallas would be her only child. What stopped her, until the final two weeks before delivery, was the cost of \$2,000 for preserving the cord blood, rich in stem cells. But she did eventually decide to keep the blood from the umbilical cord.

After Dallas was diagnosed, his possibility thinking parents, travelled to Duke university where doctors were using cord blood as a part of a clinical trial to treat a small number of children with cerebral palsy.

There Dallas’ own stem cells were infused back into his blood stream, a procedure that took less than an hour. Would the procedure work? Let us remember that cerebral palsy has no known cure. There was no possibility.

Or was there?

The Hextells flew back to Sacramento. They didn’t have to wait long. Just five days after the procedure, Dallas said his first word; “Momma.” That was quickly followed by learning to wave and laughter. Dallas’ dad Derek said “That is the best feeling in the world to hear your little kid laugh. He has never laughed before!”

Three months after the treatment, the little boy who formerly didn’t have the muscle control to crawl, was now scooting all over the place.

Derek Hextall said “We think the transfusion has a real part to do with it because it was such a drastic change within five days of the procedure taking place.”

“Before he went to Duke, we were trying to teach him how to use a walker,” Cynthia Hextall said “Now, he walks with no assistance at all.” But this story does not end here.

When Chloe Levine’s mom was told that her little darling Chloe had cerebral palsy and that there was no cure, she said “Something inside me died that day.”

She wept and prayed asking God for help with no expectation of an answer.

But then came an email that she believes was a divine intervention. As a mother she too had preserved cord blood thinking that her child might need it down the road. The email said that there was this Sacramento boy who had improved rapidly after a cord blood infusion at Duke University.

Chloe’s parents took her there and within a few days Chloe said ‘coco’ a name they had been trying without success to teach her. Soon instead of dragging herself across the floor with only one leg pumping, Chloe began to crawl. Today Chloe plays soccer. There was no need to tell the coach that Chloe had cerebral palsy. She is normal. Her mother with a tear in her eye says that she is the strongest little girl she knows in every way! *

What are the possibilities of stem cells? We don’t know yet but they are totally amazing.

Here is the point: If we had the attitude of limited thinking, we would not have walked on the moon and Dallas and Chloe would not be getting better.

There is something so right about thinking in possibilities! When we do so, things seem to go better. When we don’t, our world closes in and so often darkness comes. Why is that? Is it

something about how the world is made? Does possibility thinking perhaps reach into the very nature of God?

I have a question for you.

If God did raise Jesus from death, why would the God of all possibilities ever choose to do this? In other words what does the Resurrection of the Jesus of History mean for us?

I think first of all that the resurrection had a message for the killers of Jesus. It was “No you don’t. Not this time. Not to this man. His teachings are too important for the world, his life too wonderful to be trashed by your cruelty. You will not have the last word!”

And so, God intervened in history. The cause and effect were interrupted. There was an out of the blue intervention. This particular stone was not to lie on the top of some glacial till. No, it was to be rolled away by a direct intervention in history which sent shock waves around the world, one of which formed New St. James.

But there was a lot more going on because although the Resurrection said something about injustice, it said more: that we could be free from the fear of death, that all of us will be looked after when we die, that the loved one who we lost we will encounter again. The resurrection is the destiny of human beings at the end of history set in the middle of history like the ending of a novel’s last chapter put in the middle of the book so that we could understand the book of life and death.

The resurrection gives to us:

- freedom from fear;
- freedom to stretch the human project into possibilities rather than limitations;
- freedom to learn that love is stronger than death;
- freedom to believe that injustice suffered by us will not have the last word.
- freedom to believe that life is to be embraced with all its possibilities, even in the face of loss, tragedy and death itself.

Can we hear those running feet pounding down those ancient streets? Can we see Mary, through her tears, overcome with sudden joy?

What are you facing this day that is really hard? What is it that you can’t get past?

You say to me “Surely the timing of the Notre Dame disaster could not have been worse just before Holy week?”

They say that timing is everything.

Notre Dame, before the fire, was literally falling apart. The famous gargoyles were headless and cracked and there was not enough money to restore the fabric as it gradually crumbled. And the government was indifferent.

But after the fire Over 100,00 donors have become possibility thinkers giving small amounts from their hearts as well as some very rich who have donated large amounts.

Over 1 billion dollars has already been raised so far to restore Notre Dame. Thanks to the heroic work of the firefighters the magnificent Pipe organ and many treasures have been saved for future generations.

Macron thinks the restoration might be complete in 5 years. But Macron has enemies in the yellow jacket movement who have seized upon the donations from the very rich as evidence that they are not paying their fair share of taxes. They want to use Notre Dame to goad the rich.

Well, they say timing is everything.

The exposure for the yellow jackets that the Notre Dame fire has delivered, is in their view, good timing for their cause.

But if you care about heritage, architectural, cultural preservation, and the spirituality of the cathedral for future generations, the timing of the fire was good for the preservation of the cathedral, which was losing the battle against time and against the government's indifference.

On a personal note, do you think that you have been forgotten by God and that your challenge has been overlooked, that the timing for your particular challenge that you face could not have been worse?

Isaiah says: "How can you say your destiny is hidden from God and your rights have been ignored? Do you not know that God gives strength to the powerless?"

Those who hope in God renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings as eagles they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and never tire!"

But you say to me David what about the timing just before Holy week? You haven't addressed that. Surely that was unfortunate?

As I was sitting in front of my television, watching the flames at Notre Dame, a catholic theologian was interviewed. The interviewer said "Father, this has occurred just before Holy Week. Surely this must be very hard for your faith, to have this happen at this time?"

The theologian paused before he answered and then said. "Holy Week is about The Resurrection and the message of resurrection is this: No matter how bad things are. No matter what the difficulties we face, there is always Hope."

When Handel wrote the Messiah in 3 weeks, he felt so inspired that he could not stop until he had finished it- an incredible tour de force.

Did you know that the Hallelujah chorus was written for the Easter theme?

Why? Because the Easter faith teaches us that despite appearances to the contrary, "The Lord God omnipotent reigneth!"

I think that if we can believe that when all things are considered, that there is a purpose for life, and that ultimately we are all in the hands of a loving God; if we can believe, despite appearances to the contrary, that behind the scenes God reigns; if we can believe, that each one of us can ask, that our lives be Divinely Guided and Protected; if we can do that, that belief can give us hope where there is no hope. In fact, as the Catholic theologian said, there is, no matter what happens, always hope. That belief can change your life positively in every dimension.

That is my personal faith and I hope yours too!

Happy Easter! 😊

Video of Cloe levine <https://vimeo.com/41769647>