

MC Canada Presentation

Wild Hope: Faith for an Unknown Season

What orients the church during this time of disorientation?

9:30am – 10:15am Saturday, July 5, 2014

Mark 4:35- 41

It has been two years since my husband and I moved to our current home and in these two years, we have spent significant time trying to grow a vegetable garden. In Spring I venture into the garden full of hope. Each year I think, “This year it will work out well!”

<PP>

Unfortunately, by the end of each summer my garden – once so full of hope – is wild and unruly. Holidays pull me away from my plot. I lose patience with pulling the never-ending tendrils of bindweed, I become discouraged by my paltry harvest and to be honest, sometimes I just plain forget to stay on top of it all. In other words, while I begin each year with tremendous hope, I am forced to surrender each year to the chaos of wild disorder. <PP>

Maybe it is because of this yearly dance between things wild and things hopeful that I find the title of our Assembly so provocative. I love this title. Wild Hope... From a gardening perspective, might there be hope even in the wild nature of my garden? Or, in Spring... could my imagination benefit from a dose of wild mixed in with my post-

winter hope for a weed free plot and an abundant harvest?

Wild Hope: Faith for an Unknown Season... Our theme speaks to me of risk, of faith in the truest sense of that word, of throwing open the boundaries of what is, in order to allow something new to emerge...<PP >

Next week it will be exactly 21 years since I officially became a mediator and consultant. Over these years, I have walked with churches of all spiritual types and from a wide range of denominations, often through times of significant trial and transformation.

Consistently, one of the messages I receive from congregations is this: Despite what any congregation might be going through internally, there is a larger and much bigger issue that we are facing collectively as a people of faith. Our culture at large is changing rapidly and, so far at least, this change is leading people away from the church at an alarming rate. In some of our sister denominations the decline is so steep and rapid, you could argue that they are in free fall. While other denominations are not doing quite as badly, let no one be smug: The change the church is facing today affects every congregation – whether the congregation is aware of it or not.

Along the way, I have heard people in the pews and even some pastors say, “Why bother?” <PP > “Why not just close the doors?” “The church has obviously got it wrong and it will never get it right. The church is far too liberal<PP >, conservative<PP >, out of

touch<PP>, consumer oriented<PP>, insular<PP>, lacking in spiritual depth<PP>... [you can fill in the blank as you wish].” For every person still attending church there are more that have left.

These are hard times for the church. <PP>

I will confess that several years ago I felt discouraged. I even wondered whether I would need to switch my professional focus in order to still have work into the future.

I am not discouraged today. I feel a kind of hope – perhaps even a wild hope – for the future of church. Let me tell you why. <pp> PAUSE

When we look back on the 16th Century Reformation <PP> we typically cast our eyes on our Anabaptist forbears, looking to them for guidance. This is well and good, but I wonder whether we should be focusing our gaze just as strongly on the Catholic Church from which we emerged. <PP> Both the 16th C Reformation and the Unknown Season we are in today were created by multiple factors. When we look closely, we see interesting parallels. For example, in both centuries, an intellectual ferment developed over several years before the church was directly impacted. Slowly, this ferment changed how people thought about their world. And in both centuries, it was a change in media that propelled these new ideas forward. The 16th C was driven by the Printing Press<PP>, the 21st C by various forms of social media. <PP>

When we consider the parallels between these two centuries we would do well to remember that today we are no longer the radical reformers. Instead, like the Catholic Church of yore, we [together with many others] are the established church from which people are leaving. In other words, our place as a denomination in this era parallels more closely the Catholic Church of the 16th C than it does the early Anabaptists. It is worth thinking about what we can learn from the Catholic experience of the Reformation. <PP>

I am certainly not suggesting we begin burning at the stake those who are leaving the church! [Although I might argue that there are multiple ways in which we sometimes exhibit analogous defensive reactions today.] What I am suggesting is that when the Catholic Church was under threat, two distinct paths emerged. <PP> One path was the defensive one which fought back hard against the emerging church of its day including our Anabaptist forbears. Most of us would agree that this path of defensiveness was abhorrent.

In contrast, the second path is a much more delightful one, one which I would suggest we might wish to consider learning from today. This second path was the path of deep and profound spiritual renewal. Theresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Ignatius of Loyola... these were the leaders of this Catholic renewal. In their own way, each of these leaders had their own deeply transforming encounter with God's presence. And from this place

of having been transformed themselves, they encouraged those who would follow them to likewise be transformed into the likeness of Christ – a likeness marked by profound humility, courage, love and grace.

That the Catholic Church found itself struggling between these two paths should not surprise us. Whenever people of faith have found themselves under threat they have actually been forced to choose from among three choices – do we fight back, <PP> do we give up <PP> or do we discover all over again who we are meant to be as children of God? <PP>

It is interesting to me that much of what we know today as the Old Testament was written during the period of history when the children of Israel were exiled in Babylon. You know the famous Psalm: “By the rivers of Babylon, there we wept when we remembered Zion.” Like in the 16th C, the children of Israel were faced with these same three choices: Do they fight back? Do they give up altogether? Or do they discover all over again who they are meant to be as children of God? They chose the last option: In the strange and foreign land of Babylon the people began to write down their stories... And as they did, they discovered all over again who they were meant to be as children of God.

The church today is in an internal exile. <PP> No – we haven’t been kicked out of our promised land. But you could say that our promised land has been kicked out of us. The

church is no longer at the center of society; even more confusing – even if the church were at the center of society – the society in which we are living is changing at lightening speeds. Social norms, mobility, technology, how people think and behave... all of these are in a time of tremendous upheaval. It is no wonder the church is having difficulty finding its footing.

And my response to all of this is this: What an incredible opportunity and invitation this upheaval provides for us. Like our Israelite and Catholic forbears we have an opportunity to discover all over again who we are meant to be as children of God. <PP>
This is good news! It is also the only thing that will meaningfully offer us hope for the unknown season that we are in.

So how do we do this? How do we discover all over again who we are meant to be as children of God?

What we are talking about here is an invitation into significant and profound transformation, at a personal level, at a congregational level and at a denominational level. I would suggest to you that there are three spiritual rhythms that we as a church are invited to live into, in order to embark on this journey of transformation. These three rhythms are as follows: Surrender, Abiding and Incarnation <PP> and as the slide shows, these three tend to follow a journey down before they follow a journey up. In a way it is a journey into death before it is a journey into life. Let me explain.

Surrender <PP>

- a. When I was a child I loved to sit next to my beloved grandmother listening to her stories about the many challenges she had weathered in life. I had an insatiable curiosity about the life she had led. She told stories about the Russian Revolution, life under Stalin, her harrowing journey through Europe during the Second World War, homesteading in the jungles of Paraguay and finally, starting over again in Canada. While the stories were fascinating, the greatest truth that emerged for me from all of those stories was this: Exile journeys are faith journeys... <PP>

- b. Exile journeys are faith journeys because, more than in any other time in one's life, it is when we are in exile that we know beyond a shadow of a doubt that we are not in control of our destiny. And when we give up that illusion of control, we finally are able to surrender ourselves fully and wholly to the God in whom we place our trust.

- c. For us today to discover all over again who we are meant to be as children of God – especially in this time of exile – we as the church must begin walking that journey of surrender. It is a spiritual discipline to surrender (...with emphasis on the word *discipline*). Surrender is just not so easy in a culture focused on self-esteem, wealth management and pathways to success. Many of us, if we were to think about surrender at all, would probably prefer to “partner with God” than surrender to God.

- d. Surrendering to God is not something we can simply do intellectually. Nor does surrender to God simply ask of us to reaffirm the old truths on which we tend to hang our hats. Surrender is a full body experience. To surrender to God is to surrender our minds, our hearts and our wills. <pp> It is to live fully into the words of Jesus when he tells us to love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength. While we can do this individually, for this unknown season, we are also being asked to do this collectively as a people of faith.
- e. When we surrender our mind, we ask God to help us to see <pp>, to really see ourselves with fresh and honest eyes. It is no surprise to me that the first step for those following the 12-step program of Alcoholics Anonymous is to admit that one is an alcoholic. To surrender our mind is to become aware – truly aware – of our current reality, and rather than fight this reality, to simply accept the potentially hard and troubling truth of this reality.
- f. To surrender our heart is to ask God to help us to hear <pp> – to really hear with fresh ears how those around us have experienced us personally and collectively as the church.
- g. To surrender our will is to ask God to help us to simply be <pp> – to be fully dependent on God for our future rather than insisting on controlling that future ourselves.

- h. In my experience, it is the surrender of the will that is the hardest to actually do.

Most of us can imagine what it might mean to surrender our hearts and minds.

Where most of us stop our journey of surrender, however, is at exactly this point – the surrender of the will. This is hard to do individually. It is even harder to do this collectively as a congregation or denomination.

- i. Asking God to help us to *be* involves letting go of our attachments to how things have always been or how we want them to be. Let me provide you with an analogy. Last year, I was at a conference where the speaker described surrender as follows: Imagine there is a young couple about to be married and about a week before the wedding, the man says to his fiancé. “I’m really sorry, but there is something I should have told you a long time ago. This is awkward but here goes... I have 10 girlfriends and I don’t want to let go of any of them. BUT I still want to marry you.” Of course the woman is quite upset. (Ok, she is furious!) She explains that this is not acceptable. So the man replies, “Ok, how about I give up 7 and keep 3?” So it is on our faith journey. So many of us would love to experience a profound relationship – a connection with God’s presence; yet so many of us – all of us really – hang onto attachments that keep us from genuinely coming fully naked into God’s presence. Those attachments could be many things: It could be our need for control; it could be our need for easy answers; it could be our memory of old wounds; it could be our sense of being better than others when it comes to knowing how to follow the words of Jesus. In truth, even our spirituality can become an attachment if we find

ourselves worshipping our spirituality rather than really coming vulnerably and naked into the presence of God. Surrendering is so hard to do we experience it as a kind of a death. It is why Jesus said that we must lose our lives in order to find them. It is why the curve is drawn as going down before it comes up. <pp>

- j. While surrendering the will is hard individually, it is even more difficult collectively as congregations. We become attached to our building, our programs, our self image (whether good or bad), our theology, who sits where and whether or not the choir wears robes... This causes me to wonder: When our inner space is crowded with our attachments – whatever they might be – how can God plant wild hope within us? <pp>

Abiding in Christ <pp>

- a. As we fully surrender ourselves to God, as we move down this curve, we are invited to do something that is radically counter-cultural. We are invited to wait. <pp> 😊
When was the last time you were frustrated because your computer was slower than it should be or every traffic light was red or you ended up in the grocery line that took the longest? The spiritual discipline of waiting is so foreign to us we hardly recognize its potency. It is a powerful discipline. This is not an empty waiting – quite the opposite, this is more like a pregnant waiting, an anticipation that as we wait, God will speak. Or said differently... as we nurture that waiting space we will begin to become aware. <pp> We will notice and discover that God is already

among us, waiting to be heard.

- b. I remember as a girl and as a young woman being baffled by the assumption throughout Scripture that God speaks and yet virtually nowhere in my years of Sunday School or theological study did I learn any form of prayer or discernment regarding how one might actually nurture some type of inner spirit that would be capable of hearing the voice of God.

- c. Often, when I work with congregations I ask them how they are listening for God's leading in order to draw on this leading to assist them in whatever situation they are in. Sadly, some congregations genuinely do not understand the question I am asking. I am pleased to say that when I work with Mennonite churches and ask this same question, they at least understand the question. Very few, however, have developed personal or congregational practices in this regard. In other words, while our congregations know this is important, the absence of language regarding how to do this – how to discern the Spirit of God – leaves us adrift at sea. We don't know where to start.

- d. How do we engage in this discipline? This involves a deep and genuine prayerful listening. <pp> I simply know no other way. In the world of spiritual disciplines, this is known as Christian meditation or contemplative prayer. But really this form of prayer needs no fancy title. It is simply the act of praying where we spend more

time in silence, waiting and listening, than we do in talking.

- e. It is not an easy form of prayer. In our attempts to be silent before God we are so often confronted with all that is within us that refuses to be silenced – whether that be to-do lists or old wounds that won't be healed. It is also true that we may not hear God speak while we are being silent. Instead, the time that we spend in silence with God becomes our training ground – it readies our soul so that we are able to listen for God's voice 24/7 <pp> ...whether we are in the grocery store, in traffic, alone and in silence or in conversation with a good friend.

- f. There is a rather famous story told about the Christian teacher of prayer, Thomas Keating. He had been teaching a group of nuns how to be inwardly silent while they prayed. After a ten-minute experiment in this regard, an old nun raised her hand and confessed, "I am terrible at this. My mind wandered 1000 times." Keating replied to her: "Aren't you lucky. That means you were given 1000 opportunities to return to God." The point is not to do this perfectly – to be truthful, in the world of listening prayer all of us are beginners (even the experts refer to themselves as seasoned beginners). The point is to return again and again with open ears to the heart of God knowing that it is in this space that we are being transformed.<pp>

- g. That we should be asked to take time simply to be with God, to listen for how God should speak should come as no surprise to us. Jesus, after all, went regularly into

the wilderness to pray. The most remarkable of those visits into the wilderness was, of course, his first recorded visit – the one where he fasted 40 days and 40 nights. We know that as the time when he was tempted by the devil. In those 40 days he engaged the key themes – the demons – by which any leader would be tempted: To work wonders, to be powerful, to control one’s destiny... Jesus went into the wilderness with a clear sense that he was called. But in those 40 days, as he faced his demons, he emerged from the wilderness ready to actually engage that call.

- h. **<pp>**What would it be like for each of us individually to follow Jesus into that wilderness? **<pp>**What would it be like for the church to enter the wilderness together and in that wilderness, like Jesus, to wrestle with its demons and to listen for God’s leading?

- i. Like Jesus, we are called to take time away, to spend time with God. But the hard news is that when we do – like Jesus, we will not only encounter God, we will also encounter our demons – our attachments – those things that tempt us to be someone or something other than who we are called to be. Traditionally the word for attachments was actually *sin*. I find myself drawn to the word *attachments* for the simple reason that the word *sin* no longer speaks to many of us. The word *attachments* also forces us to take a hard look at those things that we call good which are not good or those things that we call bad but which are not bad. The truth is that we can be quite delusional about the attachments that keep us from

fully surrendering to God's leading.

j. Similarly, another word for *Abiding in Christ* is actually conversion. <pp> I believe the concept of conversion has been terribly misused by the church. Conversion is not in fact a one-time event. Nor is it not an intellectual assent to far away truths in the hopes of life eternal. Conversion is a life long journey of returning *again and again* into the heart of God in order to be powerfully and continually transformed into ever-greater understanding of who each of us has been called to be as a child of God. To make matters more complex, this life long journey of conversion is not only an individual exercise, it is the same journey that we are being called to walk together as a people of faith.

k. About 20 years ago, I attended a Women Doing Theology conference, hosted by what was then Canadian Mennonite Bible College. One of the participants of the event made a comment that I found so profound, I have turned it over in my mind, oh, about 1000 times. What the speaker said was this: "*When people ask me whether I have been born again I say to them, 'Yes, I have spent time in the womb of the divine and I was born, not a child but a woman.'*" <pp>

l. "Yes, I have spent time in the womb of the divine..."

i. When did you last spend time in the womb of the divine? <pp>

ii. How were you transformed in that space? <pp>

iii. What calling was given to you as you emerged from that warm and

protective place? <pp>

- iv. And I wonder...<pp> When was your congregation last in the womb of the divine? How was it transformed in that space? What calling was given to your church as it emerged from that womb?

- m. Being in the womb of the divine is not simply a place of safety and protection. It is a place of transformation and rebirth. It is a place we return to again and again. And when we emerge, we emerge not as children but instead, as increasingly mature persons, increasingly able to reflect to the world the image of God in which we are created....

- n. Let us imagine for a moment that we as a people of faith together spent regular time in the womb of the divine. How might that change us? How might we discover who we are called to be as children of God all over again?

- o. Of course, despite being in the womb together, it might still happen that we hear God's voice differently from one another. Furthermore, many of us can surely point to examples of individuals and churches that have misused this very thing – they have used their self-declared access to God's voice to harm those around them... to try to kick from God's womb those with whom they do not wish to share that space.

- p. How *do* we discern from among the voices that tell us that they have heard God speak, especially when we have heard God differently from one another? <pp> The

temptations of Jesus in the wilderness are remarkable in part because the tempter used very God-like language and images. It would have been easy for Jesus to mess this up had he not discerned well. As I have journeyed with people learning to listen for God's leading collectively, I have noticed the following qualities that seem to allow us to discern God's voice while giving space in the womb of the divine for others with whom we disagree.

- v. **<pp>** Are we holding our truth with humility? (Paul says, after all, that we only see in a mirror dimly...)
- vi. **<pp>** Are we listening for the truth in voices that differ from ours? (We are all made in the image of God...)
- vii. **<pp>** Is a sense of synergy emerging? (We seem to be stuck with each other so we have to figure this out together...)
- viii. **<pp>** Are we experiencing a sense of peace about the direction we are moving (and just a hint of fear)?
- ix. **<pp>** Are we surprised? Does it nurture a sense of wild hope within us?

Incarnation

- a. And finally the last of the spiritual rhythms on this curve. **<pp>** Incarnation. To incarnate is to make flesh. While we associate this spiritual discipline with Jesus, it is a discipline that applies to each one of us as well. How are we embodying, how are we living into, how are we translating into our lives our experience of encountering God as we have abided in God's presence? **<pp>**

- b. This is the million-dollar question... because the world in which we live desperately needs people who have been transformed in this way.
- c. Several years ago, I heard an idea attributed to Ted Hunter: After WWII the world was stunned and fell into a deafening silence. Billy Graham spoke into that silence and helped the world find meaning again. Today the world is loud – deafeningly loud. It is not unlike being caught in the middle of a great windstorm. For people caught up in that vortex of noise the rates of loneliness, suicide and mental illness are climbing rapidly. *The longing in our society for hope, connection, meaning and purpose is growing at a feverish pace.* <pp>
- d. According to Hunter, if after the Second World War, the role of the church was to speak into the world’s silence, the role of the church in our society today is to embody God’s presence in a manner that brings stillness to the world’s noise. <pp>
Transforming stillness. <pp> Meaningful stillness. <pp> Listening stillness. <pp>
Waiting stillness. <pp> Healing stillness. <pp> Stillness that gives space, rest, safety and hope – even wild hope. <pp> Stillness that is infused with compassion and grace. <pp> Stillness that invites us – church and non church alike – to discover all over again what it means to be children of God, to be made in the image of God.
<pp>

Pause

(Mark 4:35- 41, excerpted) And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat... A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was almost being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" `<pp>` Then the wind ceased, and there was calm, deep calm.

Peace. Be still.

Be still.

AMEN.