

## Sermon October 23 Remnant

I had the privilege of conducting Eunice's funeral a few weeks ago. Eunice was a long-time member of St. Martin's Church and in my reflection I likened Eunice to the Biblical character of Martha. She was at the forefront of every congregational supper, bake sale, funeral lunch and decorating project. Eunice also lived Jesus' call to love by serving as a longstanding member of the Lay Pastoral Care Team, regularly visiting shut-ins and going to nursing homes.

In her role of pastoral visitor, Eunice adopted my mother as one of her 'visitees'. When Mom's health deteriorated, she moved from Regina into a private care home in Saskatoon. Mom appreciated those visits from Eunice filled as they were with good conversation, a game of Yahtzee, and some of treats from Eunice's kitchen. One thing that Eunice and my Mom had in common was attention to fashion. Mom would often comment about how well Eunice dressed. Mom also liked to dress well. While Eunice liked to shop at select stores, Mom bought most of her clothes from Zellers and Woolco. Perhaps, because her clothing was less expensive, Mom seemed to possess a limitless number of brightly patterned blouses. She had so many that the small closet at her private care home couldn't hold them all and Eunice volunteered to keep a number of blouses at her home. After Mom's death Eunice asked me what I would like done with these blouses. Partly due to grief, and partly out of disinterest, I failed to give Eunice an adequate reply. A few months later Eunice asked me over for coffee and presented me with this quilt. She had lovingly turned my Mom's blouses into remnants and, subsequently, into this quilt. It is one of my cherished possessions and I have pondered having myself wrapped in this quilt when it comes time for me to depart this earth.

Through this experience I learned what every good quilter knows, that abandoned pieces of cloth, known as remnants, can hold memories and be transformed into something of beauty. The word remnant appears no less than 82 times in the pages of scripture and holds a special place in the literature of the Hebrew Bible. In the Bible the word remnant does not refer

to a piece of cloth but to people. The remnant community was essential to the continuity of Israel and the relationship they had with their God.

The word, remnant, has been on my mind a lot these days. In one of my previous sermons, I shared with you that I think of the people of Wakaw United Church as a remnant. Early in the last century a small group of protestants, many of Hungarian origin, banded together and built Wakaw United Church. Wakaw Church never called its own minister but was often served by student ministers from St. Andrew's College. In 1977 I was one such student and was privileged to lead worship in a relatively packed church complete with organist, choir, Sunday School and trademark church lunches.

The vibrancy of that time contrasts with the little band of believers who gathered for worship a few weeks ago. We were only five people that Sunday, including myself. On a good Sunday the congregation expands to a dozen. We are but a remnant of those who envisioned and built the church. Wakaw is not alone in these changes. Churches throughout Canada and Europe, including the United Church, are quickly being reduced to remnants. There are many contributing factors. The rampant growth of secularism has ensured a separation of church and state and those who used to attend because it was culturally expected, no longer feel the need to do so. Our culture's reliance on science as the central paradigm for understanding life has also served to marginalize the intuitive and story-based understandings cherished by communities of faith. Additionally, the co-operative ethic, essential to the building of these rural churches has been replaced by an individualism more interested in personal pursuits. These and other factors have reduced once thriving churches to remnants. After weighing the costs of heating the church for one service a month, Wakaw United Church has decided to sell its building.

Yet, as already noted, the remnant has a central role in God's story, especially in the Hebrew scriptures. Allow me to offer a two-minute overview of the Old Testament. After the creation stories, the Hebrew Bible turns its attention to the numerous descendants of Abraham and Sarah who eventually become known as the people of Israel. They understand

themselves chosen by God to represent a new way of being in the world. This new way of being is established by a covenant in which God promises to bless them if they in turn show the world how to live with justice. Specifically, they understand that God requires them to exhibit love and fairness to one another, to care for widows, orphans and foreigners – the most vulnerable of their society. Of course, they are only human and their ability to uphold this covenant waxes and wanes over the centuries. There grows up in their midst a class of people known as prophets. The nation is beset by plagues, political turmoil and threats of war and the prophets suggest these challenges are the direct result of them failing to live up to their covenant to live with love and justice. The prophets suggest that their failure to keep the covenant with God results in an earth destroying flood, slavery in Egypt, invasion by hostile neighbours, the destruction of their cities and eventually the exile of large portions of the population. Despite all of these calamities the prophets recognized a tattered remnant who vaguely remembered that they were called by God and in whom the future is to be entrusted.

In the mythic story of the flood, Noah and his family and two of every creature were loaded into the ark, a remnant saved for a future with God. Despite successive waves of invasion in which the people of Israel were taken as slaves to foreign lands there was always a remnant who yearned for their homeland and remembered the ways of God.

In this morning's lesson we read of the most stark remnant of all – a valley of dry bones. There is both history and metaphor in this ancient story. In 597 BCE King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon invaded Israel and deported many to serve in his kingdom. Ten years later he returned to destroy the remainder of Jerusalem and capture the last of its leaders. For decades the Israelites lived in grief and lamentation crying out to their God. And to a desperate people this story is told.

A prophet named Ezekiel is taken to a valley filled with human bones, presumably the remains of those lost in the invasion. This is the only remnant left and God asks Ezekiel, "Can these bones yet live?" Ezekiel

hedges and responds, “God, only you know.” So, God tells Ezekiel to prophesy, a prophesy which is later transformed into a well know spiritual.

Toe bone connected to the foot bone  
 Thigh bone connected to the hip bone  
 Back bone connected to the head bone  
 Hear the word of the Lord.

Dem bones Dem bones will rise again.  
 Hear the word of the Lord.

To these re-sinewed bones Ezekiel is told to further prophesy that the breath of God will enliven the bones. In short, Israel's exile to Babylon is not the end. The dry bones of defeat and humiliation will be transformed into the people of God once again.

The Hebrew Bible holds the remnant in high regard. The remnant is not simply the leftovers it is the place where God's breath is still animating possibility and life. The used blouses left over from my mother's life were transformed into precious memories and a thing of beauty. Maybe it's time for those of us left within Christian communities to recognize our role as the remnant. Maybe it's time for us to relinquish the idea that we are merely what is left, and to embrace our place as God's precious remnant. Maybe it's time for us to recognize that we hold the precious memory of God's spirit in our midst. Maybe it's time for us to open ourselves to transformation.

As I pondered remnant I thought of our Indigenous neighbours. Although coming from a different spiritual tradition, the remnant left after the ravages of colonialism are creating a new, proud and beautiful life. Even when their rituals were banned, sweetgrass still lifted prayers to the Creator; even as children were carried off to residential schools, Elders kept the stories that some day would be told again. As in the Biblical story of dry bones, what seemed dead has found new life. Indigenous persons are among the fastest growing segment of the Canadian population; their voices are being heard alongside those of the dominant culture; their universities, their health centres and their governments are rising out of the ashes.

Remnant was not simply the theme of an old spiritual, but the dream of Afro-American slaves who imagined a time when they too would find their place in this new land; when they would elect a president like themselves.

We can lament the sale of church buildings or live in fear of diminishing church budgets. We can resign ourselves to becoming a valley of dry bones. Or, we can imagine ourselves as the remnant, as those still called into a covenant with the Creator, as those called to discern and live with justice, as those called to be a light to others.

There is already a remnant within the remnant that has begun to ferment. There is within this remnant a remnant choosing to walk alongside of refugees who imagine a new life. There is within this remnant, a remnant who gathered in front of the wonder hub last Sunday to ensure that the voice of transgendered people were not drowned out. Last night I attended an event at Grosvenor Park Church whose remnant signed off on a \$350,000 loan to transform their sanctuary into a performing arts centre where differently abled people are facilitated to perform. From the opening hoop dance to the wheelchair ballet to the bipoc poet God's justice was on display in this venue. A remnant who remembered their call from God. A remnant within the remnant of United Churches. There is talk at Wakaw that after the building sells, our remnant might still gather in the legion hall once a month to hear God's word and explore how to be God's people in that place.

In the midst of shrinking numbers and shrinking budgets we can be enslaved by fear, reduce staff and turn away from risk or we can embrace our role as remnant, not knowing where it will lead but trusting that the God who called us is still seeking to breathe new life into us. We had retired clergy friends visiting us from Winnipeg this weekend. The church they attend is but a remnant of its once downtown glory but it remembers God's call and has chosen to invite its neighbourhood – comprised of many displaced people – to eat at their table and to shelter from winter storms in their church hall. Food and shelter for the widows and orphans is at the centre of their life together.

What would it mean for McClure to cast aside worries brought on by post-Covid budgets and instead use its remnant status to imagine a new vision for this church? The grand visions of the past have been realized here, now the remnant is challenged to re-envision the future.

The challenge is before us and every United Church is to discover the courage to live as God's remnant people or simply to exist as dry bones. Might we hear Ezekiel prophesy again:

Dem bones, dem bones going to rise again.  
Hear the name of the Lord.

Amen.