

John Docherty, February 28, 2016

Living Ink : Leaping off the page

Today's theme is "Living ink : Leaping off the page". The focus is intended to be one that encourages us to boldly engage with life; to embrace the promises of God's covenant as expressed in the passage we read from Isaiah, and to (in the words of the Leader magazine) "leap off the page into all aspects of relations : with God, each other, and the earth".

Last week's theme was "Living ink : Finding light in dark text". The focus there was intended to be one that invites us to (again, in the words of the Leader magazine) "face these darkest pages and chapters in our lives without fear, knowing that Christ's light will shine in the dark".

Since last week was a scripture and song Sunday, without a meditation, I'm going to cheat a little today and merge these two themes together, to some extent.

I wouldn't normally do that, except that given the events over the last couple of weeks, I felt it might be appropriate to at least acknowledge what some of our members are going through, and examine what the Leader material is encouraging us to do with the scriptural texts during this Lenten period.

So ... the newly merged theme for the day is "Living ink : Finding light in the dark text then leaping off the page".

We've had plenty of dark text over the last little while : Nancy was hit by a sidewalk snowplow two weeks ago and only just got home from the hospital on Friday; Milo fractured his arm; Rebecca Rupp fractured her wrist; Maureen Hastie broke her leg in three places; Norma injured her ankle; and then yesterday we got a call from Herbert, the guy who sets up our chairs for us on Sunday mornings, to tell us that he'd slipped on the ice and hurt his back. He's now been told by the doctors to stay home for the next two weeks.

We also have the on-going darkness related to losses : the loss of Bob and Margaret's daughter Lola in January; the loss of Rodrigo's uncle last week; the loss of Dorothy's old friend Daphne last week;

and of course the health issues that so many of us are struggling with.

It's been a tough slog over the last weeks. Those of you who were at our retreat a couple of years ago might remember that during our variety show I asked you not to die while I

was functioning as pastor. Thankfully, you've all respected that, though I kind of get the feeling that some of you are trying to see how close you can come without actually crossing the line. **Stop it!**

Let me remind you of the overarching idea for this Lenten season : it is that we, as followers of Christ, are the living ink with which God chooses to write this story we call life.

But clearly, we are not the only ink being used by God. Quite apart from the billions of people on this planet who do not identify as Christians, but who are nonetheless a part of this story, there are any number of things that can come into our lives to affect the story line.

The icy rain that has fallen on the just and the unjust over the last couple of weeks is one example. Those slippery sidewalks and parking lots are slippery for everyone, not just you or me – the living ink being invited to “leap off the page”. I don't think the accidents we've seen over the last while involve the kind of leaping the editors of the Leader magazine had in mind.

But maybe they do ... maybe there *is* an opportunity here to “leap off the page” and take note of what is happening in the story. Maybe these kinds of events and these close brushes with death *do* allow us to be aware and to be appreciative of life in ways that we maybe aren't when things are going along just fine. It's perhaps a bit cliché to state that you can't fully appreciate your good fortune unless you've experienced misfortune, but it *is* true all the same.

For those of us who might be tempted to ask the question “Why me?”, I'd like to have a look at two of the scripture passages that were suggested for today. The first is found in 1 Corinthians, chapter 10, and the other is found in the Gospel of Luke, chapter 13.

The Corinthians passage reads as follows :

“I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ. Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them, and they were struck down in the wilderness.

Now these things occurred as examples for us, so that we might not desire evil as they did. Do not become idolaters as some of them did; as it is written, ‘The people sat down to eat and drink, and they rose up to play.’ We must not indulge in sexual immorality as

some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did, and were destroyed by serpents. And do not complain as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer. These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come. So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall. No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.”

Now, as I read that passage, there are a couple of things that leap off the page at *me*.

The first is that Paul is misquoting Scripture. When he speaks of “twenty-three thousand” falling in a day, he is wrong. If you look at the passage in Numbers, chapter 25, you will read that “twenty-four thousand” fell. But I'm going to leave that discrepancy for another day, and another meditation.

The second thing that jumps out at me is the fact that the disasters he is listing : twenty-three thousand dying of a plague; others destroyed by serpents; yet others destroyed by “the destroyer”; are clearly presented as cause and effect : the people did *this*, therefore such and such happened to them.

The passage from the Gospel of Luke comes a little closer to the Matthew chapter 5 passage that states “he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous”, but it still links behaviour with consequences.

Luke 13:1-9

“At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He asked them, ‘Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.’

Then he told this parable: ‘A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, “See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?” He replied, “Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig round it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.”

Again, there are a couple of things that jump off the page at me when I read this passage.

The first, and maybe the most obvious, is that we're all called to take stock of how we live our lives and how we deal with those areas of our lives that are hurtful, unhealthy, sinful. We're called to repent, to turn away from that kind of behaviour.

'Repent' is an interesting word. We tend to toss it around in religious circles far more than anywhere else, and even in religious circles it may feel a little 'dated', but if you look up its definition it can actually have quite a nicely nuanced usage.

Our dictionary at home defines it like this :

“To feel regret or sorrow on account of something done or left undone; ... to change one's conduct because of regret or dissatisfaction.”

I like that very human picture of regret for things done or left undone, and the decision to change one's conduct as a result of that regret.

The other thing that jumps off the page at me from the Luke passage is the fact that the fig tree in question is at the mercy of its environment. It's hard to lay blame in this case, and the gardener seems to feel some responsibility for stepping in and improving its lot. He offers to tend to it more carefully, fertilizing the soil, and mercifully giving it another year to benefit from the increased attention.

He is, in effect, “leaping off the page” of his own life and embracing a compassionate and life-affirming conduct with regard to the fig tree.

And that got me thinking about a wonderful book written by a Rabbi some 35 years ago. Some of you are probably familiar with Harold Kushner's book “When bad things happen to good people”. Some people mistakenly cite the title as “*Why* bad things happen to good people”, but Kushner is very clear that he is not trying to answer that question – he takes it as a given that bad things will happen to all of us from time to time (the rain *will* fall on the just and the unjust), and his purpose in writing this book is to help people deal with those difficult times as they come.

One of his basic premises is that God will not step in and alter the laws of nature to protect us from the inevitable. If we fall out of an airplane without a parachute, we will die. If we slip on the ice, our body will take a hit. How hard a hit may depend on our age, our weight, our angle of descent, our speed of travel; but we will take a hit of some kind.

I'm going to quote him at some length, because he says what he means much better than I can paraphrase him, though I'll be pulling out extracts rather than his complete text.

“... we find proof of God precisely in the fact that laws of nature do not change. God has given us a wonderful, precise, orderly world ... There is gravity: heavy objects always fall toward the earth ... There is chemistry: mixing certain elements in certain proportions always yields the same result, so a doctor can prescribe medication and know what will happen ... But the unchanging character of these laws, which makes medicine and astronomy possible, also causes problems. Gravity makes objects fall. Sometimes they fall on people and hurt them. Sometimes gravity makes people fall off mountains and out of windows. Sometimes gravity makes people slip on ice or sink under water. We could not live without gravity, but that means we have to live with the dangers it causes ... Insurance companies refer to earthquakes, hurricanes, and other natural disasters as “acts of God.” I consider that a case of using God's name in vain. I don't believe that an earthquake that kills thousands of innocent victims without reason is an act of God, It is an act of nature. Nature is morally blind, without values. It churns along, following its own laws. Not caring who or what gets in the way. But God is not morally blind, I could not worship Him if I thought He was. God stands for justice, for fairness, for compassion. For me, the earthquake is not an “act of God.” The act of God is the courage of people to rebuild their lives after the earthquake, and the rush of others to help them in whatever way they can.”

A couple of weeks ago, I asked if you would “let go of the pen” of the story of your life during Lent and simply take note of the ways you are impacting positively or negatively on the life stories of others.

This week I'm going to ask you to take that one step further and “leap off the page” of your own story. I'm going to ask you to then “leap back on to the page” of those around you who are hurting in some way. I'm going to ask you over the next few weeks until Easter to look for ways that you can be an “act of God” in the lives of those around you. I'm going to ask to to be consciously, deliberately, living ink.