

Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa
September 23, 2018 – Elizabeth Bryce

Readings: Job 38:1-7
Mark 9: 33-37

Sermon: Reboot

This week was one of those rare weeks when I got my sermon written early. Tuesday afternoon – practically an all-time record. And it was one of those funny, tongue-in-cheek, almost but not quite political sermons that I love to preach. And half of it was a video of other ministers doing my preaching for me – so you’ve got to love that!

And then the court stayed the ruling about Toronto’s City Council, so that the phrase “notwithstanding” wasn’t on the tip of everybody’s tongue. And I thought maybe - should I re-write my sermon?

And then we had a tornado, and power outages, and people were losing homes and pets and cherished belongings ... And I thought I really have to re-write that sermon.

And then I got the news on Saturday morning that Marcia had died. For those who didn’t know her, Marcia is a very significant part of the tapestry here at Rideau Park – and I don’t use the past tense, because she IS still significant. She was woven in and throughout so much of our ministry. It is hard to imagine life without her.

She was Chair of Council, but so much more. Chair of Council is a role she took on at a time when no one else wanted the job, for very good reasons. But Marcia also knew it was a time where it needed to be done well – so she did it herself. And she did it beautifully. Marcia was called to lead us, because she already had the respect of the congregation, and people trusted her. They trusted her in the difficult time, and it gave all of us time to heal.

So on Saturday afternoon, I looked at my somewhat funny, tongue in cheek, sort of political sermon, and I pressed delete – And I sat down to re-write the message for us to dwell in today.

And I don’t know what message is more appropriate than what we have already heard in our baptism liturgy this morning. At baptism we celebrate new life – this week the welcoming of two young children into an ancient tradition and community of faith. And we raise up in particular the teaching of Jesus that reminds us how significant these little people are. It’s not just because they are cute . It’s not just because they make us feel an amazing burst of hope for the future -... It’s not just because we can add them to the tally of members and make our numbers look really good.

What we celebrate at baptism is an age old story. It is a story fulfilled in the Christian faith story, a story of life that is born and blessed, that grows and changes, that survives good times and bad, and then is finally released ... like water from a gentle rain ... back into the cycle of living and dying and rising to new life.

And it's just coincidence that the lectionary, our schedule of bible readings, serves up the gospel story about the disciples arguing today, and Jesus helping them to see what is really important.

On this one day in particular, from the gospel of Mark, we are reminded that followers of Jesus are not always perfect.

On this day Jesus was really frustrated by his disciples. Because they were so very happy and ready to follow him, believing he was leading them to a new kingdom or empire. And the best thing was – God was going to do all the heavy lifting! And once the new kingdom was ushered in, Jesus' closest disciples figured they would don those mantles of power and live the good life. They believed that they were going to find themselves on the right and left hand of the political throne. Finally! People would listen to them. Because Jesus was going to reign, and they would reign beside him.

The only thing left to figure out was who would be his closest, most trusted advisors. Who would be the greatest? Jesus heard their arguing, and he said to them: "Not so fast."

He didn't criticize them or fire them or belittle them. Instead Jesus brought a young child into their midst. Right away this tells us a few things about Jesus. First of all, it reminds us that Jesus' circle of learners was not just the 12 adult men whom tradition has named disciples. Rather, it was a community of men and women, children and seniors, educated and peasant, fully abled and differently abled, all of whom worked by his side to support the mission he embodied.

And more importantly, Jesus actually chose **a child** to represent the threshold and the promise of God's kingdom. The child - who was the most unimportant person in their society. And Jesus turned all their expectations upside down, about what it meant to enter a new kingdom, or to have a place in that kingdom, or what might be expected of them to participate in God's kingdom.

Well, it must have been like being hit by a tornado.

Jesus had a way of knocking his sidekicks out of their complacency, and into a whole new way of thinking.

And some of it meant going back to the old ways, the really old ways of their ancestors, who survived flood and exile and war and plague. And saying over and over again in the whirlwind – "but God is with us... God has not abandoned us. God will help us find our way to new life." Some of it meant going back to their roots and knowing that it could be done – it had been done – it will be done again.

And some of it meant opening their hearts and minds to something completely new. To learn how to take comfort, even when one is uncomfortable. When the world is a whole new place, because someone new has arrived and changed all the family dynamics, or someone we love is missing, and we are not quite ready to imagine the world without them.

And that is when the ancient story of our baptism brings us back to faith: we are plunged to the watery depths of our tears and brokenness, but then we rise to new life.

The disciples lived through this cycle of living and dying and rising again **every time** Jesus told them a parable, **every time** he unexpectedly welcomed a child, or a disabled person, or a woman or a tax collector. He always taught the people around him that God was so much bigger than all their social conventions and all their political assumptions.

Jesus taught them that God's empire would always be like a baptism. He taught them that they might be caught off-balance at the beginning, but he trusted them to rise again. With faith, compassion and creativity, they would find their feet again. And when they accepted God's help they would find themselves on the path to new life. Ultimately, the 12 disciples, and all the others in that circle around Jesus – ultimately they faced the worst thing they could imagine. Not just Jesus' death, but a terrible death. Not just a terrible death, but fear that they too would be persecuted and die.

But somehow they survived. They were propped up by the all the things that Jesus loved, by the memories of their friends, by the taste of salt, or a lamp burning in the darkness, or by a child in their midst. Jesus didn't leave them much of a road map – but he left them an experience of God's grace embodied. And whether they found it in baptism, or in shared bread and cup, that never died.

God's grace came to be embodied in them.

May this be the message we leave with today – God is so much greater than all that we know. It may not make us great, but it should make us thankful. Thanks be to God.
Amen