

Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa
Sunday, June 13, 2021 – Elizabeth Bryce

Readings: Psalm 92
Ezekiel 17:22-24
Mark 4:26-34

Sermon: Ever Green (season after Pentecost)

I don't know how many of you might have noticed the little orange tshirt that has been pinned to the front of this banner for 2 weeks. It's much more visible against the solid green than it was in the rainbow banner last week. The orange tshirt has become THE symbol to represent the experience of our indigenous people in and following the residential school system.

If you don't know the story, it comes from the lived experience of Phyllis Webstad, who was sent to a Mission residential school in British Columbia, and was stripped of the new orange tshirt her grandmother had bought her for her first day of school. In retelling her story, schools and communities have started holding "Orange Shirt Day" on September 30 so that others will learn the history of what was taken from our indigenous peoples. The bright colour orange symbolizes the hope and joy of a child going to school for the first time, but also serves as a reminder that their hope and joy was crushed by the institutions that created the schools. (Yes, we in the United Church are one of those institutions.)

So as vigils and presentations and protests began to be organized to hold Canadians to account for the 215 children who were buried in secret at Kamloops, every one was told to "wear orange". The next thing you know, stores were selling out of orange clothing, sporting events were draped in orange flags, even Niagara Falls shone orange lights on the falls to honour those 215 children lost.

Now the colour orange will forever be indelibly linked with the struggle of our indigenous peoples to make public the history of residential schools and to redress the wrongs.

Colours can be symbols all on their own. Many schools mark Pink Shirt day to teach anti-bullying to young people. Black circles started to appear on Facebook profiles to support Black Lives Matter. Red ribbons raised awareness about HIV/AIDS. And I grew up listening to that song about "tie a yellow ribbon round the old oak tree" to welcome home someone who had been to prison.

Of all these symbolic colours, however, I don't think any have risen to quite the same power and influence as the colour green, the symbolic colour for environmental action to save our planet.

When I first looked up the scriptures for this week, Green was the colour that popped into my mind, as I opened my Bible to Ezekiel's prophecy:

*Thus says the Lord God:
I myself will take a sprig
from the lofty top of a cedar;
I will set it out.
I will break off a tender one
from the topmost of its young twigs;
I myself will plant it. Ezekiel 17*

I found it again in the words of the Psalm:

*The righteous flourish like the palm tree,
and grow like a cedar in Lebanon.
They are planted in the house of the Lord;
they flourish in the courts of our God.
In old age they still produce fruit;
they are always green and full of sap, Psalm 92*

You can almost smell the wet grasses, and hear the plants growing, can't you? The Prophet and the poet both likened the life force and energy of our Creator as being something green and growing in the garden, something fruitful and vegetative, something that starts in the earth and then reaches towards the sun.

Jesus had the same green attitude in his teachings, according to the gospels: whether it was lilies of the field, or wheat and weeds, whether it was a parable about a sower, or a tiny mustard seed, Jesus pointed to the power of green in order to grow our understanding of God's kingdom.

With what can we compare the kingdom of God, (he taught) ... the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.'
Mark 4:34

The environmental movement is nothing new, at least not from a biblical perspective. According to Genesis, we began in a garden, and according to Jesus, it is our destiny and our intention to be partners in creation with God. In every generation the environmental movement has taken on new meaning, and new challenges. As a teenager, I can remember making posters for my dad's recycling paper project, and then in university, it was writing petitions for the government to do something about acid rain.

That long history doesn't make the current challenges and climate crisis any less important, however. The current heat wave is no joke: while global warming deniers may point to ancient cycles of warming and cooling, since the mid 20th century there has been unprecedented warming of earth's oceans and air temperatures. The current warming trend is occurring 10 times faster than the recovery from the ice age. Populations increase, but the real issue is our increasing consumption of non-

renewable energy resources, and our continuing production of greenhouse gases, especially in wealthier nations, like Canada.

And so, we turn in hope to the colour green. A week ago I was walking in the “green space” that surrounds the walk paths near my house. Yesterday I thought I will have to start calling it “brown space”. One week of extreme heat, without rain, and the greenery is gone. I believe it will come back, but it is symbolic of what a delicate balance we live in, where living species go extinct every day.

The prophet and the poet, and even Jesus - they didn't say anything about climate change in the 21st century, that is true. They didn't prophesy about issues like shrinking ice sheets, glacial retreat, rising sea levels, extreme storms and ocean acidification. They probably couldn't imagine that the infinity and resiliency of God's creation could be jeopardized by something we puny humans might do.

But they did find God in the world around them. God in the cedar branch, God in the rising sap, God in the seed and its sower, God in the mustard bush, and even in the birds sheltering in the branches. All 3 were prepared to learn from creation the mystery that is God's love for us.

And thus, the ability to start again or to make an abrupt change when it is needed. Ezekiel envisioned God breaking a green sprig off the top of an older tree and taking it somewhere safe to replant it for a new beginning. “I bring low the high tree, I make high the low tree.” Ezekiel prophesied. “they are ever green and full of life, showing us that God is good” says the Psalm.

One of my favourite contemporary artists is Scott Helman. Not long before the pandemic started, he began a project working with a local artist and other young people across Canada to write something that he called the “evergreen manifesto”. Basically, he had people write into the manifesto many of their thoughts and feelings about the current climate crisis. He wrote a song called Evergreen based on what he heard.

What struck me was the testimony of all those young Canadians found in the manifesto. Page after page after page of young people expressing their anger and despair and their courage and hope and their wisdom and even faith, for the future of the world they live in. When I was their age, I worried about employment and housing and isolation and relationships. They too have all those worries, but now they worry about them in a context where the world itself might fail.

There are young people saying “I always wanted to have a family, but I don't want to bring another generation into a world that is not going to survive.”

Others saying “We know what we need to do, and we have the technology, so why aren't we doing it?”

There are voices that call out for revolution – to seize power, and then there are others that just want to work with their neighbours to start community gardens and electric car plug-ins.

When we think of our ministries with youth and young adults, we usually think of programming like Winterlude or youth groups or camps. But I think we have to ask ourselves as a church: are we equipped to provide spiritual care for a generation that might not believe it is going to survive? That might not see their grandchildren? That do not expect to build any kind of life without worrying about the impacts of rising sea levels and extreme storms and the loss of glaciers?

What does that kind of spiritual care even look like? It's not counseling or cards or prayers in church. Clearly the best spiritual care we can give them is to show them that we are prepared to do something about the state of the planet they are about to inherit.

That we are prepared to change our housing, our transportation, our eating and shopping, our travel. A couple of years ago I was at a greening sacred spaces workshop, where a facilitator was talking about installing solar panels at their church. He said: "to be perfectly honest, electricity in Ontario is pretty clean, solar panels are not as significant a change as they were a few years ago." But then he said "On the other hand, it has changed how people in our community see our church. They see those solar panels and they say that is a church that is taking climate change seriously. We have young people who call us that green church."

Jesus used the image of a seed and the faith of the one who plants it. It is clear in the parable that you don't have to have all the answers, you just need to get started. In the Evergreen song, Scott Helman's lyrics go like this:

*And I can't take it
This ever-changing spinning world
But maybe I can make it
If we plant seeds in the dirt
I think I need a change of scene
I think I need to change my life
Thank God our love is evergreen...
The only thing that never
Says a word it doesn't mean
Makes me feel like I'm alive
Thank God our love is evergreen...
The only thing that never dies*

May we plant seeds of hope and transformation in our care for creation and one another.