

I'm going to zero in on the gospel and our canticle this morning. Canticle? What canticle? What's that? A canticle is a song of praise, just like a psalm except... it's placed somewhere else in the bible than in the Book of Psalms. Probably the canticle we know best is the Magnificat. The Beatitudes are a canticle. How about the canticle we call the Song of Simeon - I bet you recognize it. It begins like this:

Lord, now you let your servant go in peace; *
your word has been fulfilled.
My own eyes have seen the salvation *
which you have prepared in the sight of every people;
a light to reveal you to the nations *
and the glory of your people Israel.

This morning's canticle praises God, holds up a vision of God's greatness and all the reasons we have for rejoicing. Which might seem a strange juxtaposition with a Gospel full of gloom and doom, nation rising against nation, earthquakes, famines, and plagues. Actually we can take them as important partners. The canticle can be experienced as what the Quaker sociologist, Elise Boulding, calls '*futuring*'. This is when we lift up a vision for ourselves of what we believe God is capable of, of what God calls us to believe in and work for, and... of what God believes we are capable of. A powerful vision gives us courage to go forward even in the worst of times, the scariest of times, the most unsettling of times. Which is what Jesus speaks of in the Gospel. But what if he isn't describing terrible times a-coming to frighten us. What if his goal is to remind us that the only way to overcome fear is to face it. And then to remember that we do have agency and choice.

We do have a choice. We have a choice to live courageously. To live from the heart. And courage means, for one, facing our fears and being willing to ask ourselves - what am I most afraid of? And *then* what am I most afraid of? And we keep asking ourselves this question, peeling back layers and layers of fear, til we create space for the fears we didn't even know about to come to the surface of our awareness. And yet again we ask, "what am I most afraid of?" and so we face our fear.

We used to call it walking the plank - you take your fear and you say well; if that happened, then what? And if that happened, then what? And you keep asking that question until you get to a point where either you simply find yourself saying, "Well I'd cope with it just the way I've coped with everything else." Or... you find yourself laughing as you spot the absurdity of it all. Because none of us can predict the future! We don't really know what's going to happen. And there's a moment of realizing "well? Even if this terrible thing happens I'll still be me and I'll be doing what I choose to do which is respond with my best self. And draw on my gifts. And we each have gifts. They're all different, thanks be to God! Such a diversity of gifts here in this room

And we draw on them to respond to whatever situation we're in. And there is where our agency is found. We have the choice to say yes to the fear's existence, then to name our fears, to confront them and get to know them a little bit, and to discover that actually once we bring them out in the open and shake the dust off they aren't quite as scary. And the reason they're not quite as scary is because we can see what we might do. We can see that we have the possibility of being our best self in the face of whatever comes our way. We can see that we have the possibility of living our gifts and being an agent of love and light in the world around us.

And nobody's going to do that all the time. We're all going to fall down, we're all going to goof up, we're all going to snap at somebody or be sarcastic to someone or say something mean. It's just going to pop out of us and that doesn't mean we're bad. It means we made a mistake - oops! - and it means we get to apologize for it "I'm so sorry. That was hurtful. I didn't mean to hurt you." And then we go on. We can still be living our love and our light in the world. And how much more powerful it is when we do it after recognizing our mistakes, making our amends... Isn't that what confession and absolution is all about? Yeah, of course we make mistakes! And then we confess them and give them over. Because that's what Jesus wants to do for us. He says, "Give me that stuff! Give me that stuff that's too heavy for you. Give me your mistakes. Give me your errors. Give me your shortcomings. I'll carry them for you." Because he understands that when we give over to Jesus what is hard and heavy and difficult to carry... (BREATH OF AIR!) we feel lighter. You know for Jesus all that heavy stuff weighs nothing! It's easy for him. It's like this: I'm at a retreat centre, and I'm carrying a heavy bucket of clay over to the studio. Walking with friends and Lyle says, "I'll carry that for you." And I say, "I'm fine." Cause I'm a strong independent proud woman. Maybe a little too proud? And he says in this very casual voice. "You know how men's bodies are built differently than women's? So it's actually easy for me to carry that because of these larger arm and back muscles." I thought about it and it made total sense and I handed him the bucket. Being strong, proud, and independent doesn't mean I have to be stupid!

So imagine Jesus walking along beside you and saying, "did you know that it's actually easy for me to carry that heavy burden of guilt or remorse or regret for you?" And then maybe Jesus says, "You know? I've got some love and light for you to take out into the world. It's really light - like a feather! Trade you." And how can we resist an offer like that? And what happens when we hand it over, all that heavy stuff? We feel more open. Our hearts open up again cause you know when we make mistakes our hearts go (creak-growl-grinch)... They close down into hard little shells, tight little knots. That's what it means - 'Jesus took on the sin of the world'. It means we make mistakes but instead of bearing the pain of them forever, we get to give them to Jesus. It doesn't mean - cause I know some of you are going to be thinking this - it does not mean that we never have to feel bad or be remorseful. Remorse is a teacher. Remorse says, "Oh man, I wish I hadn't done that! I don't want to do that again!" But the teacher only works if we go on from there and ask ourselves, "How would I do it next time? How could I be more loving and radiant in the world next time I encounter that?"

So we have to allow fear and remorse to be our teachers. We have to bring them out into the open where they serve as a catalyst for our own power as agents of healing and transformation in the world. Sometimes all we can see at that point is a first step. And isn't that enough? One step forward and we are in motion. And usually once we take that step the next step becomes visible. And so we move forward, one step at a time, as each one is revealed. And isn't that how God works - giving us one step at a time.

Moving forward, shaking off the weight and heaviness of our mistakes, allowing ourselves to be light-filled beings - which is when we do our best thinking. Mostly, we all know that feeling of dread and foreboding when we think we've made a terrible mistake and our hearts close up and our thinking shuts down and our gifts become small, insignificant, useless in our minds. What's needed in times like ours is the opposite of that - our best thinking, our gifts fully and generously offered, our bright shining selves restoring hope, kindness, and mercy in the world. God is on our side for this. And we are on God's side. Doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with our God.
Amen