

“Facing Struggles; Discerning Hope; Understanding Grace”

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman
at St. Andrew’s United Church, Sudbury
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READINGS: Job 1:1, 2:1-10 and Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-10

Here we are – how did it become October so quickly, and our first frost of the fall season has come and gone? How is it that activities in the church are escalating, our calendars are getting filled with activities, and our local newspapers are brimming with various community events? How is it that the longest election campaign in Canadian history is only two weeks away from voting day?

How is it that we just got back into the rhythm of the season and already we are into a stewardship focus?

The truth is, issues of stewardship are issues of how we live our faith. They are not somehow separate from what the church should be about, or even disconnected, like a trailer sitting on the side of the road with a flat tire is disconnected from the truck that once was towing it. To speak about “Stewardship” means that we are speaking about what is meaningful in our faith, and how can we live it and support it.

Today, then, is a day of looking at the depth of life.

We can go along in life and not think about things too deeply. Sometimes that is even a good thing. When busy, we want the energy to face all that comes our way, and worrying about what we cannot do, or what has been our focus, can only burden us and get us down.

But having a sense of the deep value in life is comforting and energizing. It is the issue addressed by Douglas Copeland in his book *Life After God*.

You may recognize the name – Copeland is the Author of the Book *Generation X* that first introduced us to the generation that followed the Baby Boomers, and variously understood to be somewhere between 1960 – 1965 until 1975 or even 1980.

In that work Copeland writes:

“Sometimes I think the people to feel the saddest for are people who are unable to connect with the profound – people such as my boring brother-in-law, a hearty type so concerned with normality and fitting in that he eliminates any possibility of uniqueness for himself and his own personality. I wonder if some day, when he is older, he will wake up and the deeper part of him will realize that he has never allowed himself to truly exist, and he will cry with regret and shame and grief.” (p. 50)

“And then sometimes I think the people to feel saddest for are people who once knew what profoundness was, but who lost or became numb to the sensation of wonder – people who closed the doors that lead us into the secret world – or who had the doors closed for them by time and neglect and decisions made in times of weakness.” (p. 51)

The story of Job, and the insights from the book of Hebrews, are a reminder not that we all have different experiences in life, and what the future holds depends upon what has happened to us.

But in actual fact the passages read, and the insights gleaned from these biblical books, is that when we have a sense of depth and purpose in life, we are able to face whatever comes our way.

It is not that life is good because good things happen to us, but life is good when we have a deep, personal sense of what is important, and we do not allow any superficial experience to influence our response to what happens, and thereby derail what we hold as important to us.

In *Hebrews* we have the sense that Jesus comes to the world after a long line of prophets, teachers, and leaders gave to the people of their day a hint of what life can be like when lived in the best ways possible.

According to the writer of that book, Jesus was not a phenomenal character who simply appeared unannounced to the world, but people were awaiting his arrival – they had a sense of who was coming, and what it was all about.

There were those who shared truths about God in ways that helped all prepare for the teachings of Jesus, who were able to hear his teachings and view his example in such ways that it all made sense, for they were ready for this new message.

Some of us may be ready for all that life brings because of those who guided us, prepared us, taught us, reared us. How we view the world, and what we see as the essence of life, is not something that we magically receive and ultimately know because of our birth. We have had examples around us, and guides to inspire us, and individuals to teach us.

There is not a uniformity to that teaching, but each one of us knows that much of how we view the world is a product of where we were born and how we were raised. Our views then have been further shaped by the experiences we have had in our lives subsequently.

Some of us have been encouraged by others – those who see a depth of life, those who bring energy to what they do, and those who encourage us, inviting us to be involved in what takes place around us.

When I left here 10 years ago to work with the Mission and Service Fund of the United Church, I said my mother was giving 10% of her income to the work of the United Church through the Mission and Service Fund, so if my inheritance was being used to support others, then maybe I should place myself in a position to have some say as to how that money was being used.

Now behind the humour of that line is the fact from a young age I learned that what one did in life was not a personal, selfish focus, but my mother (and others) taught me that in everything one does, one needs to consider the impact of others as well as the needs of oneself.

It was an insight learned and developed thanks to the example I had.

Today in our stewardship focus we examine the ways that the United Church reaches out to others through the Mission and Service Fund, and we invite you to consider your gifts to that work, and invite you to share in that outreach.

As we look deeply as to whom we are, and what we do as a people of faith, then we are invited to remember others in our actions and in our giving. In such a way, we can be the presence of Christ for others each and every day.