

“Even Tired Eyes Can See New Truths”

A Sermon Shared with the Congregation of St. Andrew’s United Church
for the Sixth Sunday after Epiphany
(also known as Transfiguration Sunday)
on Sunday, February 11, 2018 at 10:30 a.m.

Scripture Readings: Psalm 50 (VU #775); Mark 9:2-9
(by The Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)

We all have our time of day that works for us. Some of us are alive and alert first thing in the morning – it may be 5:00 a.m., 5:30 a.m. or 6:00 a.m., and we already are getting our news source for the day, reading a favourite book or reviewing articles from the magazine pile next to us in our favourite chair.

Then others among us prefer the evening – a time to relax and reflect after the day is all but done, the meals prepared and eaten, and the dishes put away. We may lose ourselves in a late night reflection or a captivating movie, and fall asleep on the couch before we make it to bed. We hate to get up before 8:30 or 9:00 a.m.

Life has its rhythms, and we all relate to those rhythms in our own way.

I have lived long enough to observe that my mother’s decree has been proven true: one goes to bed earlier and wakes earlier as you age. I am one who once would work to all hours of the night, awaiting the quiet of the house to produce papers for graduate school or work on sermons for the coming Sunday. I now find myself fading quickly by the time 10:00 p.m. rolls along, and rarely do anything demanding attention and thought past 11:00 p.m. But 6:00 a.m. is not the intimidating rising time it once was. (This morning I was actually up and wide awake at 5:22 a.m. – so like some of you, I am ready for a nap during the sermon!)

Whatever your cycle of life, you know that it is difficult to concentrate and think when you are tired – morning or night. Yet you also know, I am sure, that your basic beliefs, your understanding of the world, the values that you uphold, are never compromised no matter how tired you are. Who we are remains true in all circumstances.

And so today I invite you to reflect on how we may gain insights and understanding no matter how tired we are. Even if we are exhausted from what is happening around us, we are still able to be open to new insights and understandings. Being tired does not change our desire to understand the world better, or be clearer about our faith, or understand anew what God expects from us and we, in turn, expect from God.

In fact, when tired we may focus on what is around us in a very systematic way.

Joan Dunning took 8 years to write her book on *The Loon: Voice of the Wilderness*. It began as an idea when she and her husband spent time on the edge of a lake in the Adirondacks, and she discovered the alluring sound (wail as she characterizes it) of the loon.

She says that loons have many ways that they impact us, but ultimately it is their mysterious nature that captures our soul. In Dunning's words: "It is this latter quality, enigmatic and disturbing, that has kept this book nagging me the way a book on sparrows may not have. It kept it from being rationalized out of existence before it reached print...the fate of so many books that are abandoned soon after conception."

She goes on to speak of the haunting quality of the loon, which many identify with, as she can see it on their faces when she raises the subject with others.

Writing about the common loon is captivating for those of us who have been on a northern lake and heard two loons calling to one another. Why, it connects with us if all we have done is driven through Echo Bay along the old Highway 17 toward Garden River and see the statue of a large Loonie to honour the artist of our dollar coin. There is something common in our experience of the common loon (pardon the pun) – it captures the reality of the northern wilderness.

I got thinking about loons because this is often known as Transformation Sunday, and the first thing that comes in the mind of most Christians on this Sunday is probably the loon. (I am kidding – your silent reaction is the right one.)

To be perfectly frank, I see no connection whatsoever between the loon and Transformation Sunday within today's scripture, except, upon reading Joan Dunning's book, I realized there is a connection in terms of the disparity of these two experiences.

Let me explain: Stop at a local coffee shop and speak to a perfect stranger about your latest loon sighting, and they will know of which you speak. If they do not, they will politely listen, for they know this is something that a person in Sudbury should have experienced or at least should have some knowledge about.

Not so much the experience of the disciples. How do the disciples go back to town and break the news over a cup of green tea: "We were out with Jesus and we had this incredible experience – we were in the presence of Moses and Elijah – Jesus himself was changed before us and inhabited a spiritual body, dazzling in colour. We were so afraid we did not know what to do, so Peter thought we should build some memorials to honour the event, but just as quickly the experience ended. It was amazing."

I am not sure where you buy your morning coffee, or if you make your own tea, but I can imagine such a story would not play well in most places. It is amazing, far-fetched, beyond belief. Give me a story about a wailing loon under the midnight moon any day – that I can understand and believe.

So what is my point? This story is so far from what you and I can imagine that there must be something to it. Whatever these disciples experienced, and however they felt the presence of God and the truth of the prophets symbolized by Moses and Elijah, they knew that their lives had been transformed and changed. As John Wesley said in his own new insight for sharing the gospel, his heart "was strangely warmed." That's close to what the disciples experienced.

This passage is so far-fetched that it is proven to be an authentic passage that communicates an experience of the disciples with Jesus.

What? You might ask. It is so far-fetched that it is real? That is one of the principles in the understanding of the gospel accounts. The writers of the account of Jesus life and teachings would be pre-disposed to recounting events and experiences that made sense to their readers that put Jesus and the disciples in a good light. Anything that was confusing and upsetting would only make it into the account if they were well documented and part of the strong tradition handed down.

This experience, whatever it was, clearly was an important experience in the lives of the disciples.

And in our lives we may find surprises where God is particularly revealed to us. Unless we are ready to hear and experience that reality, we may miss moments that are magical and mysterious. Why, experiencing God may even be enigmatic and disturbing – words that Joan Dunning used to speak about the common loon. Such experiences need not be so common, or so ordinary, if we are open to them.

No doubt you cannot ignore a loon on a still lake in summer at any time of the day or night – today's story reminds us we should be as attentive to God's presence in our lives even when it surprises us at unexpected moments, and in non-traditional ways.