

## ***Ashes to Resurrection: How Covid Days Are Shaping Us For Newness***

I begin with gratitude to UCRMN for inviting me to animate this exploration and with thanks to all of you who participated, told your 3-sentence stories, and shared your explorations of those stories.

Although we are now in Lent, when I first received the invitation, it was the season of Advent. My heart and mind were filled with annunciations (all those Advent announcements to Zachariah and Elizabeth, Mary and Joseph). It was also filled with the great variety of their responses. I think in these pandemic days we are in a moment of annunciation. Each one of us, each individual, each congregation or community of faith, each region and each denomination will hear the announcement of God's Presence in a particular context. Not only a physical context but a context of time and gifts.

I wanted to **listen** with you to the annunciations you are hearing; the announcements of God's presence in our contexts as we move through Covid days and beyond. I wanted also to focus on the value of stories in imagining how we might respond because stories have the power to both root us and lift our hearts.

### **I had three hopes for our time together.**

The first was **to lift some of the weight we feel** as we navigate days when so much is different. I hoped we would create a generous space in times that often feel constricted by just being together and by the tiny creative acts of telling and sharing our 3-sentence stories and sharing our discoveries.

The second was to offer a space in which we could **be nourished by Scripture**. My intent was to highlight a few stories from Scripture, stars, stories of star, wilderness, exile and annunciation,<sup>1</sup> and to let those stories permeate our present situation.

Third, I wanted **to hold up the question WHY are we church**, as a way to help us discern our newness being seeded now. Being clear about the why of church helps us answer the how. This **how is not one-size-fits all**. To imagine it is, limits the great variety of possible expressions of how we might be faithful. While we might find a common WHY our 'hows' will be a bright and varied patchwork.

Covid has certainly changed our shape. It has squeezed us, constricted us. It has changed the ways in which we worship together, the ways in which we reach out to one another and to our neighbours in all creation. It has slowed us down, suspended us in uncertainty and liminal space. It has made us more acutely aware of ageism, racism, financial inequity and the dangers of closing schools for those young ones who depend on them as safe spaces. It has made us more acutely aware of loneliness. All these things, hard as they are to dwell in, have the potential to shape us for newness. The way we live with them, the way we reflect on them, the way we pray with and story them will shape who we are to be. James Baldwin writes, "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed that is not faced". In what follows, I offer my

---

<sup>1</sup> Worship: UCRMN workshop, February 18, 2021

thoughts on how we might face those things that Covid has uncovered; how we might live in the ashes of these days so as to shape a resurrection space.

### **Constriction**

Certainly, the pandemic has been a time of constriction. But constriction can be surprising. Just as we learn that imagination flourishes within some limits, so an fountain of living water can be released and overflow through constriction.

*Thomas Keating, writing about consumerism in the Music of Silence, critiques the way an individual or society maintains its influence by increasing the size of its container to hold more, never allowing it to well up and overflow.*

*The joy of overflowing, gratefulness, is taken away from us. But if we make the vessel smaller and smaller by reducing our needs, then the overflowing comes sooner and with it the joy of gratefulness. [. . .] Nothing is more needed in our lives than superfluity, because only with overflow is there joy. [. . .] When your needs are limited, your vessel is easily filled, and you can delight in the overflow.<sup>12</sup>*

*While Keating is speaking of consumerism, I think the constrictions of age also allow for this welling up.*

The constrictions of Covid, while they have brought great pain and loss also, in time, prayed through, prepare the possibility of welling up. *We might imagine ourselves as a fountain drawing from the groundwater of spirituality, experiencing the constrictions of aging and learning to allow the overflow that nurtures and companions a society that has forgotten the value of superfluity.<sup>3</sup>*

Nancy Shrek, quoting Hans Urs van Balthasar, asks, *"And is this wellspring in the chaos, this trickling weariness, not the beginning of a new creation?"<sup>4</sup>* How can we dwell with constriction so that it may overflow as blessing? It helps to tell good stories.

### **Stories**

We began our time together with stories, stories in worship and stories we crafted into 3 sentences. These little stories help us find focus, they can soften conflict, and surprise us with the tale that tells itself. As Pádraig Ó Tuama says, "sometimes we tell stories and sometimes stories tell us."<sup>5</sup> Stories are always a good place to begin.

Stories set the inner life into motion, and this is particularly important where the inner life is frightened, wedged, or cornered. Story greases the hoists and pulleys, it causes adrenaline to surge, shows us the way out, down, or up, and for our trouble, cuts for us fine wide doors in

---

<sup>2</sup> Steindl-Rast, David with Sharon Lebell, *The Music of Silence: A Sacred Journey Through the Hours of the Day*. Ulysses Press [Kindle].

<sup>3</sup> Smith, Catherine, [Spirituality of Aging](#), Session One: The Invitation.

<sup>4</sup> Nancy Shrek, "[However Long the Night: Holy Mystery Revealed in Our Midst](#)," (address to Leadership Conference of Women Religious – August 2014), 8.

<sup>5</sup> Ó Tuama, Pádraig, *In the Shelter: Finding a home in the world*. London: Hodder & Stroughton, 2015.

previously blank walls, openings that lead to the dreamland, that lead to love and learning, that lead us back to our own real lives . . .<sup>6</sup>

Stories can also be told through ritual. Our grief can be told through rituals of lament. Our joy too can be told in embodied ways. Baptism and Communion tell with our bodies the mingling of our lives in the divine life.

We get to know ourselves and one another through stories. We wonder whether this is the story we want to live into or whether we've outgrown the story we're telling. Perhaps we've grown smaller so that it's become unwieldy. Perhaps we're carrying a story that isn't the truth of us as individuals or as church. We may be telling a story that holds truth but that doesn't tell that truth in a way that leads to wholeness. We might be telling a story of being small, but the last line ends in numbness and resignation rather than nimbleness and intimacy. How do we live so that the last sentence makes a story congruent with the dream God has for us?

It's important to really listen to the story we're telling, to dig under and around it. How do we look under our excitement as the numbers at online worship outstrip our attendance at in-person gathering? How do we go deeper to consider why this excites us and what the needs are that are being met? Is this a star, an annunciation, a wilderness and how does it inform our lives together post-Covid?

Sometimes we need to rewrite our story. As our quote from C.S. Lewis said, "you can't go back and change the beginning, but you can start where you are and change the ending.". Does the story you're telling hold truth in a way that encourages your wholeness as a community of faith, as a person of faith, as a neighbour in the world?

I've met congregations who were tiny and lively. They were like little stars, "not on anyone's star charts". Even were they to close, they would be, though sad, full of grace. I've met others who were so wedded to the story of power sown in the Christendom days, they lived bitter and ashamed. Ashamed that power had been lost and afraid lest they lose anything more. They kept looking back. Turned to hard pillars like Lot's wife, they were impermeable to the good news of smallness that Scripture brings. How will we tell the story of small? How will we tell the story of rural? How will we tell the story of Covid? Where is God in each of these stories?

As Richard Rohr writes: "Jung goes so far as to say that transformation only happens in the presence of story, myth, and image, not primarily through rational arguments. What fits (or does not fit) into your preexisting storyline? For Christians, the map of Jesus' life is the map of humanity: birth, everyday life, betrayal, abandonment, death, resurrection, and new life."<sup>7</sup>

Rohr described our big story as Christians. How will we place the stories of our present experience within it? How will we weave them together? How will we shape the story of our Covid days and how will the story we tell shape us as rural congregations, pastoral charges, people of God, living

---

<sup>6</sup> Pinkola Estes, Clarissa. *Women Who Run with the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype*. Ballentyne Books: 1992, 20.

<sup>7</sup> Rohr, Richard, Stories are Essential: A New Story [Contemplation and Action Archives](#) Sunday, January 10, 2021.

faithfully into what comes next? Where is the star in the wilderness? The announcement of God's presence in exile?

**Stories are important. Find lots of ways to tell them.**

Here are a few stories I believe we need to spend time with beginning in this moment coloured by Covid and moving into post-Covid days.

### **The Story of Small**

Several years ago, I shared with my congregation a reflection<sup>8</sup> on the text I Corinthians 1:18-21, 3:9 about foolishness and wisdom and God's building.

*Whatever our theology of cross and resurrection we can, I hope, agree that God offering God's self in a story in which accomplishment involves, death particularly a death like crucifixion, is foolishness to society's narrative. It is weakness to those who understand strength as death or loss-denying rather than the learning to live wisely and peacefully with our vulnerable human lives. We gather around a story, a narrative, that looks foolish by the standards of consuming culture. If we truly gather ourselves around that God's narrative it should become a part of us, slowly, gradually, falling into our hearts [In it] we are God's building, a flesh and blood building, a flesh and blood field.*

*Because you know, better than I, the landscape of your community and of your hearts. I can only open possibilities, encourage, and tell you about my own geography. The things that drew me into ministry, the things that my doctoral dissertation are caught up with and shaped by how different God's wisdom looks from ours; how wise God's foolishness, how strong God's weakness. Much as Indigenous scholar and botanist, Robin Wall Kimmerer delights in mosses, I delight in the possibilities of small congregations, small prayer practices, those who as they age become in the world's eyes, small.*

Here is what Kimmerer says about mosses, which I think holds much to encourage rural congregations during and post Covid.

*"I think the task given I to me is to carry out the message that mosses have their own names. Their way of being in the world cannot be told by data alone. They remind me to remember that there are mysteries for which a measuring tape has no meaning". This, I think is true also about small faith communities. Kimmerer says about mosses, "[. . .] being small doesn't mean being unsuccessful. Mosses are successful by any biological measure --- they inhabit nearly every ecosystem on earth and number as many as 22, 000 species." (Just as rural churches have made and still do make up a large part of the United Church).*

*"Mosses can live in a great diversity of small micro-communities where being large would be a disadvantage. Between the cracks of the sidewalk, on the branches of an oak, on the back of a beetle, or on the ledge of a cliff, mosses can fill in the empty spaces left between the big plants.*

---

<sup>8</sup> Smith, Catherine: A Reflection on 1 Corinthians 1:18 -21 & 3:9, August, 2018.

*Beautifully adapted for life in miniature, mosses take full advantage of being small, and grow beyond their sphere at their peril.”<sup>9</sup>*

*We are rural mossy places, God’s field for the sowing, God’s building [. . .]. There is nothing in God’s story that says we have to be large or loud or exhausted. There is a lot that says we have the resource of God’s wisdom in what to the world seems foolish and God’s strength in what seems weakness. There is everything that says we are saved, healed, re-created by the God we give our hearts to in love.*

**Don’t plan something large unless you can tell a good story of small.**

### **The Story of fullness of Life**

Sometimes it seems all we want are stories of success in ways we can measure. We want higher attendance, more generous offering, more volunteers, better technology, more effective mission programs. We want to know how our congregation can achieve these things measured in ways we can write down on paper. We turn to books and programs that offer lists and examples of how these things may be accomplished. We want to hear. Perhaps it will rub off on us. Perhaps just by following the same motions as the churches that tell particular stories of thriving life, we might ‘catch’ their particular ways of growth.

There is nothing wrong with these stories. They can be manna for some. But, if we turn to them as a blueprint for each of us, who are as small and varied as Kimmerer’s mosses, as savory as salt, as bright as stars, we may miss our own annunciation. We may also become infected by shame when we don’t look like the examples most often held up as something to emulate. We have to remember one size doesn’t fit all, even when others forget. We have to live bravely into our own good story of small; to make our own “covenants with change”.<sup>10</sup>

Our large story holds these words, “I have come that you may have life and have it abundantly?”(John 10:10). It’s important to learn from one another. But rather than becoming fixated on the latest story of someone else’s thriving, or success, we need to learn to recognize its story in our own context. If fullness of life seems elusive, we have to dig into our story and see where its seeds need tending. Is what you hold of success consistent with the narrative of a vulnerable God, seen in the life of Jesus Christ and in the currents of the Spirit. Is it, or does it, offer abundance?

For example, if many in your congregation aren’t connected online, if your area doesn’t even have because of their geography, the possibility of robust connection, you can still find your fullness of life. You can dig into your belovedness and your beauty and share yourself with others. If you are aging, tell the story of aging’s gifts. If you can’t afford or maintain your building nourish your gathered life in whatever way is possible in this very moment. If your congregation is disbanding, ask what blessing you want to offer the world from your time together? Face into your life in this moment where God greets you. You are enough.

---

<sup>9</sup> Kimmerer, Robin Wall, *Gathering Moss: A Natural and Cultural History of Mosses*. Corvallis: OSU Press: 2003, 6.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 37.

Tell a good story of fullness of life.

**The story of uncertainty: Living in the In Between – Liminal Space**

“The times are urgent; let us slow down.” writes Bayo Akomolafe, author and Executive Director and Chief Curator for [The Emergence Network](#). “More hurry; less speed”, my grandmother used to say when one of us was rushing and got into mess or dither. While health care and other front line workers are stretched to the limit, Covid has forced many of us to slow down. How might this shape us for newness?

Above all, trust in the slow work of God.  
 We are quite naturally impatient in everything to reach the end without delay.  
 We should like to skip the intermediate stages.  
 We are impatient of being on the way to something unknown, something new.

And yet it is the law of all progress  
 that it is made by passing through some stages of instability—  
 and that it may take a very long time.

And so, I think it is with you;  
 your ideas mature gradually—let them grow,  
 let them shape themselves, without undue haste. [. . .]  
 as though you could be today what time  
 (that is to say, grace and circumstances acting on your own good will)  
 will make of you tomorrow.

Only God could say what this new spirit  
 gradually forming within you will be.  
 Give Our Lord the benefit of believing  
 that his hand is leading you,  
 and accept the anxiety of feeling yourself  
 in suspense and incomplete.—<sup>11</sup>

Finding new life, making “covenants with change”, following stars and hearing annunciations requires of us a facility with slow. It requires the practice of honouring the in-between, liminal space, the time of uncertainty, or waiting. One of the reasons we want to put on other people’s stories or to rush to answers about what we need to do next is that we haven’t developed a facility for living in the space in uncertainty, liminal space, the in-between.

There’s no doubt that this is a hard space to feel comfortable. But it’s a wonderous space too. Something happens to us when we take a deep breath into our fear or impatience and stand in it. All sorts of things start to offer themselves. In liminal space old answers fall away opening room

---

<sup>11</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, SJ, <https://www.ignatianspirituality.com/prayer-of-theilhard-de-chardin/>

for possibility that we couldn't have imagined without allowing this time. Our sacred story tells us this. The people of God find their identity in the wilderness, that liminal space between Egypt and the Promised Land. Jesus goes into the wilderness to feel the fullness of himself in the emptiness. We see our own temptations in the ones pressed on him, all of them quick fixes, all of them overflowing with unholy gifts. Map out temporary focal points and deep roots and far horizons. Create some prayers and rituals to help you through these moments. Practice Sabbath. Rest. Play. Be curious and actively patient.

Tell a good story of the in-between time. Search out its gifts.

### Age

Covid days have revealed the agism in our society. This devaluing of those who are old exists within faith communities too. It is present even in the attitudes of those of us who are old and aging. We devalue our own gifts, our own selves. How often we hear the cry, if only we had more young people. Perhaps if we valued our aging selves we might indeed share space more often with those who are young. Because elders have much to offer. *“If we hold the days of our aging tenderly, attentively, courageously, they open us to depths of life we might never have imagined. In these depths we may find a holy freedom. The spirituality of aging is as vital to reflect on as the biology of aging. This deepening spirituality is not only vital for our individual lives; it is vital as a gift we may offer to a restive society. [ . . . ]*

*While each stage of life has its challenges and gifts, it is the challenges of aging that are often foregrounded. Why? Perhaps because the value of life is often defined by those who stand to gain from a people made restless and relentless in their doing, in their pursuit of things. In this desperate pursuit there is little time to still and to be. Even meditation or yoga is often grasped as another way to manage or sustain us in our busyness rather than as a way to connect with the unbounded spirit of life.*

*A counter-cultural embrace of the factors of aging, those restrictions and relinquishments that shape its freedom is a vital corrective to the prevailing frantic life often described as successful.<sup>12</sup>*

As we say about aging individuals, so we might say of our aging churches. Honouring our aging helps us to honour the wisdom and holy freedom that it is possible to find in our rural communities of faith. Our large story, our sacred story, helps us to do this. Telling a good story of aging is a gift we can offer the world. Especially as we view the ageism of our North American culture, seen in the conditions that encouraged Covid's rampant spread in senior living facilities, telling this story well is vital. Our sacred story and our great pool of elders make it possible to offer this gift. Face the preponderance of age in rural communities and say, what can we do with this gift?

Tell a good story of Aging

### Connection in the Midst of Viral Loneliness

---

<sup>12</sup> Smith, Catherine, [Spirituality of Aging](#) Session One.

Long before the Coronavirus Pandemic there was a viral threat which has only worsened in the last year. Loneliness has become more visible as reports of Covid honed in on long-term care residents bereft of family visits. Hospital staff told stories of those who died without the presence of family or friends or in some cases with family only present through phone or computer. Many who might have been lonely at the best of times were deprived of those moments of human connection provided through shopping or banking or in person worship. In some cases, faith communities reeling from the necessary restrictions placed upon their own gathered life were frozen. In some cases, we learned to turn our hearts to reaching out. Reaching out must be accompanied by grounding deep.

Online technology has been such an amazing gift to our need to be together for worship, work, faith formation and visiting with one another. The ways in which it may help us be the church as we emerge from the grip of Covid 19 will be an ongoing exploration. Since there are many places in which the techniques and possibilities of this technology are explored, including our UCRMN mini workshop on March 18<sup>th</sup>, I will just give thanks here and place it in conversation with other ways of connecting.

Not everyone is equipped for virtual connection. Rural geographies are sometimes disadvantaged in this way. Congregants may not have internet connections or even computers. This raises questions of advocating for good connectivity in rural places. It suggests activities that pair young people with elders to learn ‘internet’. It also turns us toward other ways of being together and reaching out. And it turns us always toward the call to reaching deep.

Digital technology has been and will continue to be a vital how. But we mustn’t neglect that other how which is the practice of going deeper to rest in the One in whom we are all connected. This is vital work. Without it we become stale and predictable rather than vivid and vital. Imagine ten tiny things that seed worship throughout the week, rooting us deep in God with us.

Nourish too the sense of saints, the great cloud of witnesses of which we’re a part. Merton writes in a letter to his friend Bob Lax,

**And in Him, while I sing in the big church,** will be also: Lax, Gibney, Seymour, Slate, Rice, Gerdy, Knight, Huttlinger, and Van Doren, and the Baroness, and Mary Jerdo, and my brother and my uncle and my aunt and my father and mother who died and Brahmachari and the whole mystical body of Christ, everybody: [. . .]. **All people. The living and the dead. All days, all times, all ages, all worlds, all mysteries, all miracles....**<sup>13</sup>

Recall often our relationship with the natural world. Nan Merrill’s version of Psalm 106 reminds us. “Awaken us to the Oneness of all things, to the beauty and truth of Unity. May we become aware of the interdependence of all living things, and come to know You in everything, and all things in You. For as we attune to your Presence within us, we know not separation, and joy becomes our dwelling place.

---

<sup>13</sup> Montaldo, Jonathan, *The Road to Joy* Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1989. 163 – 164.



In rural places we are often close to the natural world. We need to know that through it we are in companionship with God and with one another. We need to learn ways to pay attention to the holiness of those moments and our everyday life in God.

Covid has broken open our hearts to the viral loneliness that has swept our neighbourhoods for years. What can we learn? Who can we be as a people whose identity is found in the Christ appearing in the faces of the lonely. Lent instructs us in the story of Christ's loneliness. Covid has made the question acute. How will we tell the story of church in the midst of loneliness?

## Tell the story of loneliness and the church

### **Ministry**

Once of the things I think about a lot these days is ministry. In the United Church of Canada we have a lingering history of having a minister for each pastoral charge and a pastoral charge for each minister. Increasingly this is not the case; cannot be the case. Many pastoral charges now have neither ordered nor designated ministers. This is hard and sometimes frightening for congregations and for regions. Sometimes creative solutions are found, and sometimes hasty alignments are made. Perhaps Covid has, as it has in so many areas, uncovered a need to see things differently. Perhaps this is an opportunity to further consider the shape of ministry. This is not an argument for or against ordered or any other designation of ministry. It is two things. First a plea for us to take seriously the participatory nature of our life in faith communities. Second, an invitation to consider shaping ministry that is trained for and excited by a ministry of mentoring leadership in rural places. Remember the Baldwin quote. "Not everything that is faced can be changed but nothing can be changed unless it is faced". Let us face into our constrictions and see how they may overflow in blessing.

## Tell a good story of ministry

### **Why are we church?**

I wonder how often we ask that question of ourselves? This question is fundamental to the way we will be, the who we will be, as we move through the lingering days of the pandemic and beyond. The way we answer or avoid this question will determine so much.

*In the New Yorker the author shares the same kind of questions we might ask.*

*The pandemic has collapsed [. . .] divergent trends into an existential question: What's an office for? Is it a place for newbies to learn from experienced colleagues? A way for bosses to oversee shirkers? A platform for collaboration? A source of friends and social life? A respite from the family? A reason to leave the house? It turns out that work, which is what the office was supposed to be for, is possible to do from somewhere else.*

*The pandemic has presented [. . .] countless other large enterprises with an unprecedented opportunity to rethink the importance of presence, proximity, and place in workspace planning [. . .]*<sup>14</sup>

The pandemic has also presented the church with an unprecedented opportunity to rethink, to re-examine to ask good questions. What's a church for; not just a church building but a church. What are we for? Who are we for? Why are we church? How we answer that question or how we avoid it will inform everything.

I was once in ministry with a congregation going through the challenge of moving into a new space. We were in liminal time. The old building was gone; the new was being prepared. Before the walls were painted, I invited people in to write their prayers on the walls. The contractors made space and people arrived with prayers and HB pencils. They wrote what would soon be painted over. I wanted us to tell a story of church in which prayer was under it all. In worship, in meetings, in our gathering and our work of love in the world, prayer was under it all. We told this story together.

Covid has constricted us and this constriction, even as we grieve our losses can overflow in blessing. What story will we tell in words and rituals and with our daily lives? What identity are we discovering in wilderness and exile? What stars and annunciations will guide our going on?

*Blessings on and through your story*

For a few instances of story woven into ministry, the practice of 'church', see [Governance as Spiritual Practice](#), [Table Church](#), [Rural Routes Through the Holy](#).

---

<sup>14</sup> Seabrook, John, *Has the Pandemic Transformed the Office Forever?* The New Yorker: January 25, 2021.