

## Sermon - March 6 2011

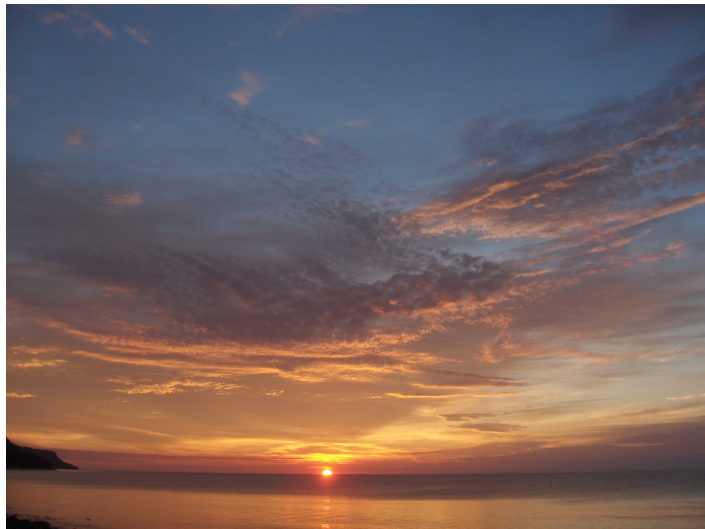
*By The Rev'd Canon Dr. Lorne Mitchell*

I speak to you in the name of God, the Author of all life, the Creator and Redeemer of all that has been, all that is, and all that is to come. Amen.

As some people know, I have developed a keen interest in photography over the years. I'm really not very good at it but I keep learning and I get great pleasure out of it. It's such a thrill to capture a beautiful fleeting moment in time... one that otherwise might not be noticed.

An example is this picture I took last summer. The interaction of the clouds, sky and sun were magical. But an interesting thing happened that got me thinking. When I showed the photo to a friend, they commented on the richness of the colours and then asked, "Was it at sunrise or sunset?". Interesting!!! In the picture, just as it is, there is really no clue to tell you if this is the end of a day or the beginning of a new one. A person looking at this photo needs a little more information to discern between these two interpretations. At very least you would need to know what direction I was pointing the camera.

Of course this is all pretty obvious. However, what I would like to point out is that this is also a good parable about the interpretation of scripture. What I mean to say is that most verses of the Bible do not stand well all on their own. The fullness of meaning cannot easily be discerned without reference to other passages in the Bible. In other words, you need to know the other stories in order to appreciate the significance of what is being said. Each story, each law, each word, each metaphor of scripture exists within a particular history, tradition and language. The full power, beauty and wisdom handed to us can best be experienced by looking at the wider context of a given piece of scripture.



For example, If you look up on the large chancel arch in this church, in plain sight for all to see is the familiar verse from the gospel of John, where Jesus says: "I have come that you may have life, and have it abundantly." For me, this is an incredibly powerful passage of scripture. When I grasped the full meaning of this, my heart was changed, and my life was changed forever. Nevertheless, if I look at this phrase objectively, I am also aware that its meaning is not totally obvious to the average person on the street. For example, for some very consumer oriented business manager, it could easily be chosen as the banner that is hung over the entrance of a new discount department store! "We have come so that you may have life and have it abundantly!"

## **The Biblical Context**

The full power of this verse of scripture only starts to really engage us when we know the wider biblical context. For example:

- In Genesis, there is the story of God making a covenant with Abraham: God says to Abraham, "You will be my people and I will be your God". A covenant relationship has been established. A covenant relationship is different from a contractual relationship. When a contract is broken - it's broken - over and done with. In a covenant relationship, when one disappoints the other, the relationship is not over... the dialogue continues... in other words... In other words... don't give up on me... because I want give up on you... this kind of covenant relationship returns in many forms over the years...
- In Exodus, there is the story of the Hebrew people who have become slaves to the pharaohs of Egypt... it's tempting for them to give up on their relationship with God... but at the right moment, God sends the Hebrew people Moses who comes to lead the people out of a land of slavery and death
- There is the story of Moses coming to the people with the ten commandments as a guide for living their lives; They seem to be more interested in returning to Egypt but the message to them is that they must return to a relationship with god; following these laws mean life for you and not following them means death - so choose life.
- At several different times in scripture, The relationship with God once again feels distant and the prophets like Elijah, refer to a deep need to return to a relationship; perhaps even the need for a saviour; a great one that will restore right relationships among all people; a wonderful counselor, a prince of peace

- There is the story of how at the beginning of his ministry, Jesus stood in the synagogue in his home town and said, "Today, these scriptures have been fulfilled in your hearing"
- And finally, there is even the future context; the events of his suffering and crucifixion; His desire to bring the message of love and even if it means his own death.

Jesus grew up surrounded by the stories and traditions of the Hebrew scriptures. It's a tradition of God not giving up on us even when we wander away. It's a tradition of God taking some initiative at just the right moment - and coming to us in unexpected ways. All of this is the larger context of what brings fullness of meaning to the words that come out of Jesus' mouth:

**"I came that you may have life, and have it abundantly"**

**The words echo all the themes of what have gone before. They echo the reality of a God that will not give up on us but One that will do what ever it takes to bring us to the possibility of abundant life.**

I know that some people like to quote a piece of scripture and impress people by naming the chapter and verse. They like to use a verse as though they were stating a fact from some encyclopedia. But that is not the way to understand the Bible. They are not a series of facts to be read like a textbook. They are stories, songs, poems and letters that reflect people's relationship with the author of all things down through the ages. You must be able to see any given verse within the context of the whole picture. You must be able to see and explore the words and themes and metaphors that flow in and out and all around a given passage. Only then will you see the depth of wisdom and mystery that is reaching out to us here and now in this present age.

### **The Context of the Picture**

On the day I took this picture, I got up early, just as light was beginning to creep into the sky. I noticed that unlike the day before, the sky was not overcast, so I took my tripod and camera down to the Dyers Bay beach. I aimed the camera east, looking over the waters of Georgian Bay... and waited patiently for the sunrise.

*People, look east and sing today:  
Love, the Lord, is on the way.*

In NFSHS. Amen.