

THE ICE CREAM TRUCK – Rev. Rosemary Doran

February 26 2017

based on Psalm 42 (selected verses) and John 4: 3-15

I want to share a story with you this morning. I was thinking earlier this week about what I might preach about and this story kept coming into my head. And when I feel that “nudge”, I have learned to pay attention.

The story is by Ralph Milton, one of my favourite writers. In his book *Sermon Seasonings* he writes of his experiences as a Christian, of how the things that he sees and that happen to him impact on his Christian faith and his understanding of God. He's often funny, always down-to-earth and he makes you think. So here's the story, slightly adapted. Milton wrote it for the Advent season but I think it's applicable at any time. If you have been to Israel, some of it may ring a bell.

It was right out of Monty Python – this during my summer sabbatical while studying in Israel for six weeks. It's morning on the Sinai Peninsula. We've climbed the holy Moses mountain and we're on our journey home through the most desolate area in the whole earth. If God wanted to get the attention of the children of Israel, this was the place to do it. This is the wilderness. Rock, rubble, 35 degree heat.

Halfway between nowhere and nowhere, the bus dies. It just quits. I begin to wonder how to word the note which will be crumpled in my mummified hand when they find our desiccated bodies ten years from now. We stand in the narrow shade of the tour bus. Our Egyptian tour guide smiles and promptly flags down a taxi which just happened to be coming down the road at that time. He seemed to see nothing unusual in that.

The taxi disappears over the horizon of rock and rubble. I take a disconsolate sip at my bottle of tepid water and again begin composing my famous last words when...now this is true...I didn't make it up...along comes an ice-cream truck, complete with pictures of ice-cream cones and other goodies all over its pure white exterior. We assumed it was a mirage until two smiling men got out of the mirage and asked about our problem. One of them opened the back and offered us...no, not ice cream...they didn't actually have ice cream...but ice cold water! The other man helped our driver tinker with the engine and soon our bus was running again.

Advent is the time of standing in the wilderness not wondering whether we'll survive but feeling quite certain we won't. Along comes John the Baptist driving a taxi that goes for help. And God's response is to send a baby to Bethlehem, a baby who grows and goes to desiccated desert travellers with a drink of cold, refreshing water.

I took three things from this story – a good Presbyterian sermon has three points!

Here's point #1.

I don't know about you but I often feel as if I am standing in a wilderness these days, wondering if I – if we'll - survive. Some days I don't recognise the landscape any more. I seem to be in a wilderness filled with alternative facts and fake news, with the elevation of hatred and intolerance as prime virtues. I

seem to be surrounded by an obsession with greatness, whether for individual or nation, with a preoccupation for getting and spending as the way to happiness and with anxiety for where all this is going. I can't seem to find the landmarks that have guided me for years – love and generosity, honesty and trustworthiness, tolerance and the offering of a helping hand.

At times the wilderness is also very personal – too many deaths, too many friends struggling with cancer, too many unanswered whys or why nots. It's kind of bleak out there some days and my faith seems a bit shaky. Then Jesus comes to my rescue – again – driving that ice cream truck and he offers me life-giving water. He offers himself.

The water theme is central to the story in John 4. There are several sermons in the passage but not to worry, we're only looking at one today. We don't have enough time for all of them! One of the issues in the story relates to Jesus talking alone in public with a woman. That would have raised a few eyebrows. When the disciples come back to find Jesus, they are surprised at this. It was against the social norms and was not the only one that Jesus broke. Or we could look at the implications of Jesus talking with a Samaritan of all people. Another eyebrow raiser. Jews and Samaritans were sworn enemies because of religious differences. Sound familiar?

But the story hinges on water. The two central characters are talking about water on two different levels. The Samaritan woman is concerned with plain, old well water that she uses for taking care of her family – doing the washing, cooking etc. Jesus speaks to her of a different kind of water – living water – water for the soul – which he will provide to those who want it. It is water which, he says, will become “a spring...gushing up to eternal life.”

Which brings us to point #2.

I think we need to let Jesus back into the world today, bringing us that life-saving, life-giving water. As a society we have spent a lot of time over recent years getting rid of Jesus and God. They aren't part of the scenery, the landscape any more for many people.

A couple of weeks ago on that very snowy Sunday, my husband and I didn't manage to get to church. Driveways were plugged, roads were a mess. So we stayed home and checked out the TV for a church service that would provide a worship experience for us. There was very little out there – a half-hour faith programme here – another there. Occasionally we could tune in to a full hour of service from different sources – we finally ended up with a Roman Catholic mass in French from Quebec! - but faith programmes were largely lost amongst the usual smorgasbord of reality shows, crime shows, questionable comedy shows and – what else, of course? - sports!

Now, if I sound like a grumpy, old lady who wonders what the world is coming to, because it wasn't like that in my day, it's because sometimes I am – a grumpy, old lady! But I'm also concerned about my world and its people. I want them to see the ice cream truck. I want them to know about the life-giving water, which, when we access and accept it, opens the way to recognise, experience and be changed by God's amazing love for us. It does not mean that we will immediately be rescued from the wilderness but it does mean that we can endure, that we will survive.

And finally point #3.

Once we receive that life-giving water, we get a job to do. As noted earlier, Milton situates the story in Advent. He refers to John the Baptist, who is part of the Christmas story. Born to Mary's cousin, Elizabeth, he may have grown up with Jesus and in time he becomes a man with a mission. John the Baptist becomes a PR man for Jesus, the one who gets things ready, who sets things up for him. He

stirs people's hearts to the need to change their ways, leading them to Jesus who effects that change, which is the fulfillment of the human longing for God that the Psalmist speaks of in Psalm 42 – God who, we instinctively know, is our heart's desire, our strength and our shield.

John the Baptist is a PR man for Jesus. So is the Samaritan woman – a PR person. After Jesus opens her eyes to who he is and what he can do for her, she rushes off to tell the neighbours. “Come and see”, she says, and as we read later in the Gospel, everyone in town did indeed come. If we can see the ice cream truck, if we drink the water of life that it, that Jesus brings, we too are called to be PR women and men for God-in-Jesus. Those of us who know about the life-giving water and who gratefully drink it, are called to share it, to lead others to it.

How do you feel about that? Overwhelmed? Scared? Inadequate? Do you do the Moses thing? You remember that Moses, when tasked by God to lead God's people out of Egypt, says in effect “Who me, God? You gotta be kidding. Try next door.” I

I have felt, and sometimes still do feel, all of the above. But, you know, it's not really that big a deal. You don't have to be a PhD, though some are. You don't have to have all wisdom and all knowledge, though some think they have. You don't have to be a brilliant orator. It's just a matter of sitting down, maybe over a cup of coffee at Tim Horton's, with someone in pain or distress, someone confused and lonely, wandering in his or her particular wilderness. And sharing at the right moment through a word or touch or loving look our personal experience of the water of life and how it can help us through whatever wilderness we're wandering in.

We might begin by saying “A funny thing happened to me on the way through the wilderness – see, there was this ice cream truck....”