

Centre Street Congregational Church, UCC

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Oil Can

Rev. Susie Maxwell

Let us pray . . .

In the Wizard of Oz, there's a scene where Dorothy and the Scarecrow find the Tin Man rusted in place. As they bang around him, they hear a faint, "Oil can!" So, they find his oil can, lube his joints, help him loosen up and before long he is good to go.

This morning feels like we are collectively mouthing "oil can!"

We've sort of become rusty around how we move together and forward as we begin helping each other get around to the point of being good to go in a post-pandemic world.

The lesson Margaret read for us is relatable is it not?

Mark's Gospel was written for Gentile Christians — meaning those who were not Jewish — as they faced persecution for their beliefs and were suffering the destruction of the Temple. So over and over, Mark is relentless in recalling that suffering will yield to triumph, but triumph cannot be had without the price of the cross.

To make this point, Mark's Gospel relates in dramatic ways the in-breaking of God's reign through the life and actions of Jesus beginning with John the Baptizer announcing Jesus, and Jesus announcing God in chapter 1 verse 15 *The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.*

To show what it means that God is near, our story is one of many extraordinary deeds including healing a paralyzed man, curing a woman with a chronic flow of blood, restoring a girl to life, and healing the Gerasene demoniac.

But like all good stories, there is of course the inevitable conflict within the plot. And in Mark, the problem is that the disciples want to have the glory that they see Jesus revealing without the message of suffering that they must hear. But God doesn't work that way because God is all about relationship and covenant, meaning that suffering and triumph cannot be separated because they are one in relationship to each other.

That's not a great thought until we realize how much of life is about suffering. Not one of us goes without it. The beauty of the whole Gospel story is in its fullness, in its completion which ultimately says that suffering is not the last word, triumph is.

But often, we are busy with our noses to the grindstone. We're out in the woods chopping some trees, trying to get by when the next thing you know, some rain falls on our lives and we're stuck. Or damaged.

So, we can relate to the disciples, yes? We've been in stormy seas too, and lately, we want to go across to the other side of mask wearing, social distancing, constant sanitizing, red and green arrows, Zoom everything and anything else you'd add to the list because it feels like a great symbolic windstorm arose, causing waves of distress that left most of us feeling beat about and it's not been unusual for me to be asked various forms of the question "Does God not care that we are perishing?"

When life gets rough, it's a reasonable question for people of faith. The story acknowledges that God knows our lives are threatened by forces of chaos and confusion and that sometimes, our lives even succumb to those things.

But the point of the story is that the forces of chaos and confusion are no match for the reign of God as present in the person of Jesus who came to show us that life's storms aren't the last word.

To show how certain Jesus is of this, he takes a nap in perilously rough seas and before long, his disciples are freaking out even to the point of pushing back on him saying, *Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?*

I know I become almost indignant with God in the face of suffering! Seriously God? Boat's filling with water, the situation is only getting worse and oh, your son is sleeping on the job. Don't you care???

When we are suffering, this is our challenge to God.

So, God does what God does and in a calm moment God's challenge back to us is, *Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?*

You see, God is a big-picture thinker.

For sure there are tender mercies and acts of grace along the way,
just think of the oil can.

But the story, as theologians remind us, is of a cosmic reassurance and
not just as a report of a once upon a time amazing event. This story is a
Christological narrative representing an encounter with the human AND
divine to convey that God's nearness and power is met in Christ and
was, is and will be triumphant for all time.

It's baffling really.

But God doesn't ask us to understand it,
God asks us to have faith in it.

While science can explain its composition, who knows *why* some
molecules get together to create a substance called oil.

It seems miraculous enough to me.

Beloveds, as we enter a new week with restarts,
awkward movements and new hopes,
let your faith free up your rusty bits.

Then when it rains on your life, because it will inevitably rain on your
life, let God take care of the big picture.

Your job is to try to trust and relax into this vexing relationship.

Remember to draw in a breath to create a calm moment and then,
may your exhaling prayer be, “oil can.”

Amen ~