

**Sunday November 17, 2024**  
**Twenty-sixth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 28**

**Meditation:** “Inside, Outside, Upside Down”

Those of you who have read the Berenstain Bears books to children or grandchildren will likely recognize the sermon title as also belonging to one of those books. Young bear wants to go to town, so he calls a cartage company to come and pick up a box and deliver it to the town. Next, he climbs into the box, which is located outside of the house, right by the curb where the driver will pick it up. And then the driver, ignoring the “This Side Up” label, loads the box onto the truck upside down. Young bear is inside the box, outside the house, upside down on the truck. It seemed like a fitting image for the readings this week.

First is the responsive reading: Hannah’s prayer. In a few weeks we start Advent, and we will get to the song of Mary. When we do, I want you to think back to Hannah’s prayer. Hannah’s prayer is about God turning everything upside down. “The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength. Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who were hungry are fat with spoil. The barren has borne seven, but she who has many children is forlorn... He raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor... He will guard the feet of his faithful ones, but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness.” Oh, how the mighty will fall, and the lowly be raised up. Good news indeed... if you are the lowly. For the mighty, this sounds like a threat to be resisted at all cost. In the global scheme of things, where do you think we fit in? Lowly, or mighty? Whichever it is, truly I tell you, there is no Rock like our God.

Speaking of rock, Jesus told the disciples that no two stones shall be left standing one upon another, and the disciples were dumbfounded. They weren’t dumbfounded because they knew the Romans would make that literally true by toppling the temple in 70 C.E. and that Jesus could foresee it. They were dumbfounded because these ‘stones’ were “STONES”. The stones

that Jesus is talking about are the size of railway boxcars, or shipping containers – the big 40 foot long ones that some people are turning into housing. A single stone, 40 feet long, by 7 or 8 feet tall, by 6 or 8 feet wide. That would weigh about....well, the Scottish would say, several stone. The disciples can't even begin to fathom *how* such massive stones would be toppled, let alone *why*. And Jesus isn't talking about stones being toppled, but about how their lives, their culture, their religious practice will be turned upside down when the stones are toppled. Without the temple, there is no place for animal sacrifice – the center of their religious practice and their culture.

This last week, my life was turned upside down. Some of the things I had planned couldn't happen and others had to be done quite differently because I was sick with the flu, and even at that my brain isn't really working great. Some meetings I had planned to attend in person got changed to attending over speakerphone. An education course I had planned to attend one afternoon, well, let's just say I had a much needed sleep. But I did prepare for it. Part of that preparation was to listen to a youtube video of a TED talk given by Simon Sinek – Start with why.

Sinek talks about an epiphany he had that turned everything upside down for him. He talks about a golden circle. Actually, it looked more like a target with two outer rings and a bullseye. In the bullseye he wrote the word 'why'. In the next ring, he wrote the word 'how'. And in the outer ring, he wrote the word 'what'. His epiphany was that most communication starts at the outside (what we do) and works towards the middle (how we do it), and much never makes it to the bullseye (why we do it) at all, but great companies and great leaders and great innovators communicate the other way around – from the middle out.

Let me give you an example. 1) Hi, we're Dorchester United Church and we want to be a good neighbour. We do that by throwing the Holy Diner in the summer and donating to the Dorchester Food Bank. Want to join us? 2) Hi, we believe that every single person deserves to live a life of dignity and to be treated with respect. We do that by donating to the Dorchester Food Bank and

by opening the table during the summer months at Holy Diner. Oh, we also happen to be a church. Want to join us in changing the world? Which pitch are you more likely to buy into? Sinek says that it is the 'why', the belief statement, that drives behaviour, whether that is the sale of a new computer or joining a cause – because it is about lining up our own belief with the beliefs of the company or organization that makes the difference.

Right about that point in the video I had my own epiphany. This is what is wrong with the mainline churches. We lost the 'why'. It could have been as far back as a couple of hundred years with the rise of fundamentalism, but we lost the 'why'. We know who we are. We know what we do. We know how to do it. But do we know why? And even more importantly, can we explain why we do what we do to anyone who asks? In 1 Peter 3:15 (NIV) we hear these words, "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have." Or, better yet, in *The Message* "Be ready to speak up and tell anyone who asks **why** you're living the way you are." When was the last time we told our next-door neighbour why the congregation does what it does, let alone a total stranger? Would you even be able to tell me if I asked you in private, one on one, why you do what you do?

To tell you the truth, I wonder, even if we were able to tell others why, would it even make a difference anymore because society's values have changed so radically in the last fifty years. It appears that what people value most now is celebrity – how many likes they have on social media.

So what do I know? Jesus said, "Beware that no one leads you astray." Not Facebook, not the social media platform formerly known as Twitter, not TickTock, not some populist politician, not anybody, for "Many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray. When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. For nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines.

This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.” Birth pangs. When do birth pangs happen? Oh yeah, right before something new is born. That’s the long version of “Keep the faith.” Keep the faith, know why we live in hope. Why do we have hope? Because, “There is no Holy One like the LORD, no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God.” Our God is one who sees the world in a way that is totally upside-down to the way that the world sees itself, and thank God for that, because I don’t like what I see.