

Easter in Autumn
October 14, 2007
Luke 17:11-19; 2 Timothy 2:8-15

Have you ever lived through a season when life feels more draining than fulfilling? You may feel like Charlie Brown who once said, “I’ve developed a new philosophy. I only dread one day at a time.” It is difficult to wake up to a new day for fear of what additional challenges it may dump on an already overwhelming load. The weariness of body is a reflection of the dreary state of the inner soul. While it holds a beauty of its own, an autumn season of change and loss can feel bleak, lonely, and depressing.

The author of the second letter to Timothy seems to be experiencing such a season. It is written in the name of Paul, but it may have been someone else who wrote in the spirit of Paul. The letter is written to Paul’s young protégé, Timothy. There are hints that the letter was dated in the fall of the year, for late in the letter he pleads for young Timothy: “Do your best to come to me soon....When you come, bring the cloak that I left....Do your best to come before winter” (4:9, 13, 21). There is a sense of urgency in the letter.

The letter is written in the autumn days of another kind. Paul knows that his life is drawing to a close. He writes, “As for me, I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith” (4:6-7). He is still alive, but death, like winter, is fast approaching. He is in prison and perhaps he fears that he will not again experience freedom to travel and to embrace his many friends in the faith.

Though nearing the end of his own life and ministry, Paul recognizes that Timothy is still in the fullness of life and ministry. He realizes that Timothy also experiences autumn days that are bleak, cold, and depressing. Paul has known them well, days of rejection, illness, scorn, shipwreck, and imprisonment. This letter is written to encourage Timothy to remain faithful even under pressure.

Early in the letter he writes, “I am reminded of your sincere faith....Rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on my hands; for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline” (1:6-7). We have heard his affirmation of faith, “Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead...” (2:8). Paul says that this hope of resurrection is a solid promise. He trusts in this faith so completely that he is imprisoned because he has preached this radical good news. Even from his prison cell in the final season of his life, Paul is able to proclaim the Easter faith, “Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!” He recalls the suffering and persecution which afflicted him in several cities. “What persecutions I endured! Yet the Lord rescued me from all of

them” (3:11). He writes of being deserted by co-workers and those he thought were his friends. “At my first defense no one came to my support, but all deserted me....But the Lord stood by me and gave me strength” (4:16, 17). As the encroaching darkness of autumn hinders the sunlight, he sings the springtime sunrise song, “Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!”

Rachel Naomi Remen tells of attending an Episcopal church service on Easter morning. She was in the Four Corners area of Utah in a little town called Bluff. Most in the congregation were Navaho people and the worship was led by a Native American bishop. Dressed in a white robe with a woven scarf of Native American symbolism around his neck, he seemed deeply moved by the occasion and the story of the resurrection.

Most of the sermon was in Navaho, the bishop reading from the Bible in a voice filled with emotion. Then he realized that Rachel and her companion would not have understood a word of Navaho. With a deep courtesy, he began to repeat the sermon and the reading for them in English. His English was perfect, but the passion of the first reading was simply not there. After a few moments, he abandoned his Bible and simply spoke to the guests from the depths of his heart. “This man Jesus,” he said and paused, “This man Jesus, He *is* good medicine.”¹

Jesus is good medicine for whatever ails us. Jesus offers us the hope of new life. That’s what the ten lepers experienced simply by being in Jesus’ presence. They didn’t touch him, out of respect for him, that he might not fall captive to their dreaded skin disease. They kept the distance required by society, yet they prayed for help, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” He saw their need and sent them to the priest to be declared clean, and on their way, indeed, they were made clean. Even before being made well, they claimed the promise of Jesus’ word and acted in faith.

That’s the good news that we are reminded of today in the midst of autumn. Remember Jesus Christ risen from the dead! Whatever weighs us down, whatever threatens to discourage us, whatever burdens we bear, the promise of new life is ours to claim.

Author Nora Gallagher suggests that “the essence of healing may be to write a new story or to have the capacity to write a new story.”² It is the ability to pick up the fragmented pieces of our lives and put them together in a new, creative, and fresh work of art.

I recently read a review of a new book called *The Starfish and the Spider*. It is really about organizational change and leadership, but the images of the spider and starfish fit our need for the new in the face of despair. “If you cut off a spider’s leg, it’s crippled; if you cut off its head, it dies. But if you cut off a starfish’s leg, it grows a new one, and the old leg can grow into an entirely new starfish.”³ Flexibility is the strength of a starfish. It is able to adapt and adjust

under stress. The starfish is able to write a new story. Out of its pain and suffering emerges new life.

Throughout the ages the church has offered rituals to renew the hope of the people and to move them toward new life. The ritual of anointing with oil, laying on of hands, and prayer is a sacrament of healing intended to remind us of the healing presence of God. In biblical times oil, usually olive oil, was universally considered a medicine. The oil used in anointing has no magical qualities; like the bread and cup of Holy Communion, it points beyond itself to the healing balm of Jesus' presence.

This morning during the hymns following this message, we offer the opportunity for you to receive anointing with oil, the laying on of hands, and prayer for your healing. We invite you to bring your pain, whether it be grief, illness, broken relationships, anxiety, broken hearts, loneliness, battered spirits. Open your hearts to God's healing power and allow God to lead you through autumn to the hope of springtime sunrise.

A visiting schoolteacher who worked in a hospital was asked by the classroom teacher of a little boy to go and visit him in the hospital and help him with his homework. The classroom teacher said to the visiting teacher, "We are studying nouns and adverbs in this young man's class, and I hope you will help him."

When the visiting teacher arrived at the hospital, she was dismayed to discover that the child was in the hospital's burn unit in very serious condition and experiencing great pain. She was embarrassed when she walked in the room and saw him in his state of misery, but she decided to press on and stumbled through the lesson, ashamed of herself for putting him through such a senseless exercise. The next morning, the nurse on the burn unit said to the teacher, "What did you do to that boy yesterday?" Before the teacher could get out her apology, the nurse said, "We had given up on him, but ever since you visited him, he seems to be fighting back, responding to treatment."

The boy himself later explained that he had given up hope, but it all changed when he had come to the simple realization that they wouldn't send a teacher to work on nouns and adverbs with a dying boy, would they?⁴

Even in autumn, Jesus Christ is still risen from the dead. And this man Jesus, He is good medicine!

¹ Rachel Naomi Remen, M.D., *Kitchen Table Wisdom: Stories That Heal* (New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 1996), p. 101.

² Nora Gallagher, Writer's Alley, www.goodpreacher.com, retrieved October 11, 2007.

³ Quoted by Barbara Brown Zikmund, "Loosen Up: When Chaos is Creative," *Christian Century*, September 18, 2007, p. 32.

⁴ Joyce Hollyday, *Sojourners*, March 1986, p. 19.

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