

**“Now Comes the Hard Part”**

Meditation Preached by The Rev. Jennifer Cameron

November 15, 2020 – St. Columba Presbyterian Church, Belleville

**Hymns for Worship Video – November 15, 2020**

“Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise” #290 in the Book of Praise

Immortal invisible God only wise

In light inaccessible

Hid from our eyes

Most blessed most glorious

The Ancient of Days

Almighty victorious

Thy great name we praise

Unresting unfasting

And silent as light

Nor wanting nor wasting

Thou rulest in might

Thy justice like mountains

High soaring above

Thy clouds which are fountains

Of goodness and love

To all life thou givest

To both great and small

In all life thou livest

The true life of all

We blossom and flourish

As leaves on the tree

And wither and perish

But naught changeth thee

Great Father of glory

Pure Father of light

Thine angels adore thee

All veiling their sight

All praise we would render

O help us to see

'Tis only the splendor

Of light hideth thee

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“God, whose giving knows no ending” #663 in the Book of Praise

God whose giving knows no ending  
From Your rich and endless store  
Nature's wonder Jesus' wisdom  
Costly cross grave's shattered door  
Gifted by You we turn to You  
Offering up ourselves in praise  
Thankful song shall rise forever  
Gracious donor of our days

Skills and time are ours for pressing  
Toward the goals of Christ Your Son  
All at peace in health and freedom  
Races joined the church made one  
Now direct our daily labour  
Lest we strive for self alone  
Born with talents make us servants  
Fit to answer at Your throne

Treasure too You have entrusted  
Gain through powers Your grace conferred  
Ours to use for home and kindred  
And to spread the gospel word  
Open wide our hands in sharing  
As we heed Christ's ageless call  
Healing teaching and reclaiming  
Serving You by loving all

*Robert Lansing Edwards*

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**Scripture Texts: Judges 4:1-7**

Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord, now that Ehud was dead. <sup>2</sup> So the Lord sold them into the hands of Jabin king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor. Sisera, the commander of his army, was based in Harosheth Haggoyim. <sup>3</sup> Because he had nine hundred chariots fitted with iron and had cruelly oppressed the Israelites for twenty years, they cried to the Lord for help. <sup>4</sup> Now Deborah, a prophet, the wife of Lappidoth, was leading Israel at that time. <sup>5</sup> She held court under the Palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites went up to her to have their disputes decided. <sup>6</sup> She sent for Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali and said to him, “The Lord, the God of Israel, commands you: ‘Go, take with you ten thousand men of Naphtali and Zebulun and lead them up to Mount Tabor. <sup>7</sup> I will lead Sisera, the commander of Jabin’s army, with his chariots and his troops to the Kishon River and give him into your hands.’”

**1 Thessalonians 5:1-11**

Now, brothers and sisters, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, <sup>2</sup> for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. <sup>3</sup> While people are saying, “Peace and safety,” destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. <sup>4</sup> But you, brothers and sisters, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. <sup>5</sup> You are all children of the light and children of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. <sup>6</sup> So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be awake and sober. <sup>7</sup> For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. <sup>8</sup> But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. <sup>9</sup> For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>10</sup> He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. <sup>11</sup> Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.

## **Meditation**

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Twenty-five years ago Bruce and I were one month away from the rehearsal for our wedding ceremony. I was a stressed out wreck. In the midst of wedding stuff, and preparations for final papers and exams in my second year at Knox College, I discovered my final exam for my course on Romans was scheduled for the Monday following the wedding day! At the beginning of the course we had been told there would be a final essay rather than an exam, so I had not been worried about a scheduling conflict. All of my other courses were settled and I didn't have to worry about moving things around. When the professor announced he had changed his mind and scheduled an exam, I just about cried. So I went to him with my situation, asking if there was any way I could write ahead of time. He was so gracious. He smiled and said that as long as I didn't share the questions with anyone in the class, I could write early, as that was no way to start a marriage. What a relief. It had all worked out, and I actually did quite well on the exam. All other papers and assignments were completed and handed in, and I was good to head home for the wedding, still a stressed out wreck, but at least I didn't have papers to write.

The few days leading up to the big day saw winter hit with fury. Toronto got snow like they hadn't seen in years, and Bruce was a plow operator. On the day before the wedding, he was later than he had planned to arrive in Sarnia, and I was losing my mind. Understandably, he had gone home to get a few hours of sleep. Needless to say, I was glad when we finally walked up the centre aisle at Paterson Church in Sarnia and could begin our married life.

Little did I know, that after all that stress and planning and anticipation, the hard part was just beginning. Marriage takes a lot of work. It's one of those things people tell you, but you don't truly understand it until you're there, committed to a relationship that is going to see all kinds of joy, sorrow, challenge and celebration. After all of the build-up to the wedding day, the big event is over. Then comes the hard part. Keeping a marriage healthy and strong takes a great deal of hard work, sacrifice, forgiveness, encouragement and dedication. And, as Bruce and I know without any doubt, it takes faithful commitment – to one another, and to God who is the binding that keeps it all together, even in those times when we feel discombobulated.

Life hasn't always been smooth, and it certainly hasn't been perfect, but it has always been based on the foundation of knowing God is at the centre of this relationship, and we are confident to lean on him when things get tough.

As we read the story from Judges today, we see a situation in which God's people knew how important it was to lean on the Lord when they felt discombobulated and at wit's end. The people had been warned, through Joshua, that if they were sincere about serving the one true God, they had to make a firm, dedicated commitment and stay with it. Things would not go well for them if they strayed, if they turned to the idols and false gods of their ancestors. They promised with great enthusiasm that they would obey the Lord. That's when the hard part began.

It's one thing to make the commitment. It's another to honour it.

It didn't go very well. They strayed again and ended up under the rule of the king of Canaan. They lived under his oppressive reign for twenty years and yet again cried out to the

Lord for help. It's a pattern. The people make the commitment to Yahweh, they stray, they get into trouble, and they cry out to God for mercy and help. When they have been freed from whatever they have been enduring, they again promise to love and serve the one true God. And the cycle continues.

In the case of today's Old Testament reading, Israel cries out for help, and turns to Deborah for her faithful leadership. She was a prophet and knew how to stay on track in serving God. When she hears the people cry for help she knows what to do. She sends for Barak to lead Israel as they fight for their freedom once again. God speaks to her and through her. With Barak leading Israel's troops, Deborah will lead the oppressor into their hands. God will free them once again.

The hard part for the people is in giving control over to Deborah and her leadership and trust that God will act in their favour, despite their straying from the Lord. Israel has only Deborah's prophetic voice to follow, and God's Word to trust. I can't imagine they felt an abundance of control in their situation, so leaning on the One that could take control for them was their best plan. Would it work? They had to trust, but they had a history from which to draw, and in that history they knew the stories of God's deliverance when the people followed and trusted. What did they have to lose? They had everything to gain. So they had to stay focused on their commitment to serve the Lord, which they had let go of, but turned back to – again. Turning back to God may not have been that easy as they knew they had strayed again. How long would God's patience last? But turn to him they did. Staying committed was the hard part.

As we continue to make our way through the pandemic, I wonder how we are doing with the hard part. Churches everywhere are wrestling with whether to open, or stay open as the numbers rise at an alarming rate. We are all feeling the spiritual effects. We are all feeling the effect on our resources. I have had conversations with colleagues that include how difficult it is to even concentrate some days, because we are so overwhelmed with how different ministry is in these days. I can tell you, I was not trained for this kind of approach to ministry. There was no course in Zoom and Google Meet, leadership via technology, decision-making that doesn't include the gathering of God's people. We did learn about the importance of outreach and connecting with the community around us, but not without the gathered community to literally put one foot in front of the other. We learned how to preach within the context in which we find ourselves, how to read the needs and communicate the challenges to our congregations. But how does one prepare for a context in which people far beyond the membership roll are longing to hear the Gospel and how to live it within their own lives? In short, I kind of feel like a rookie again. Worship and leadership are quite different. It is one thing to say I'm committed to learning and growing and having to take a whole new approach to ministry, having to re-think everything and how to do it. It is a different thing to figure it out, to keep up the energy needed to face each new day and the challenges that come. It is a different thing to stay focused in this very different reality. Making the commitment is one thing. Staying the course is the hard part.

I know I'm not the only one feeling this way. Congregations are facing the hard part too. People have made the commitment to follow and serve the Lord through the church, some in

formal membership vows; all in their participation in a local church and their personal commitment to serve Christ through his church. I am sad to see complacency rearing its head. People seem to be waiting for things to return to what we knew as being normal before the pandemic, but that normal is not going to return. In other words, people are waiting for something that isn't coming, or for something to return that isn't going to be the same. I'll join a Bible study when I can do it in person again.  
I'll increase my givings when the church opens again.  
I'll start giving again when the church re-opens.  
I'll join a prayer group when it isn't online.  
I'll connect with people I sit with when I can do it in person.

Even when some of these things do happen, it won't be for a while yet, and they won't be the same as before. But in waiting, the church still has to work within this current reality. The church is still at work, even though buildings may be closed. Leadership is working harder to keep things going. The work being done "behind the scenes" has increased to meet the new reality. Planning is difficult because we don't know what will happen from one week to the next. The church is facing some difficult days because everything is different.

Or, perhaps a better way to look at it is that everything is being made new. We certainly have been given a wake-up call as we have had to change how we function as the body of Christ.

The reading from 1 Thessalonians today reminds us to stay awake because we do not know the day or time when the day of the Lord will arrive. He has promised to return, but not given us a date to mark on the calendar. We have to be alert to our life in him all the time – pandemic or not. The church has to be awake and alert to serve the Lord, especially in times of greater need, even if we feel weary. When I say the church, I mean all of us.

This isn't just about those who work in the office;  
those who put in the hours to create worship videos;  
those who put in the time to practice and prepare and record;  
those who are meeting pastoral needs;  
those who are keeping the building sanitized;  
and those who anxiously keep track of financial resources.

This is about everyone who has made the commitment to be a disciple of Jesus. 2 Cor. 5:17 says *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!* The motto of the Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century was "The church reformed and always reforming."

The church is in Christ. It is his body at work in the world. And in him the church is made new and renewed. And we are being reformed, or perhaps transformed, all the time. In this particular moment in history, we must be transformed because to wait until the past returns, well, that doesn't make much sense, does it. But to engage in the present reality and take the risky step into the future, that is what we are called to do.

We are the church, the heart, hands and feet of Christ at work in the world. We have made a commitment to serve him through his church. That was the easy part. Following through

and fulfilling that commitment, that's the hard part, especially now when we are no longer able to do it like we always have. It is new and strange, and sometimes overwhelming. It is easier for us to become complacent, to sit back and wait for things to "get back to normal." Well, normal looks different now. Our daily life has changed and will not go back to its former ways. The same applies to the church.

But there is good news. In the midst of everything changing and yet having the feeling that we are in limbo, we can rely on one thing that will always remain: *Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever* (Hebrews 13:8).

His Gospel remains truth.

His Word remains solid.

He remains the foundation upon which the church is built, and on which we can be confident in standing with both feet firmly placed.

No matter how we must change and grow in how we serve him, we still serve him, and we still serve in his name.

That will not change.

I need to remember that when things get tough. We all do.

Knowing it is the easy part.

Remembering it can sometimes be difficult.

Taking each risky step in believing it when we don't know how it will turn out – that's the hard part.

I'm sure glad God knows, and that we can trust his leading, even when the path – for us – gets hard to follow.

Amen.