

BACK TO THE FUTURE

We're all familiar with the movie "Back To The Future." It was released in 1985, the same summer that Mike and I were married. We watched it at a theatre in Huntsville on our honeymoon. The plot line captured people's imagination. Who wouldn't want to go back in time and change things for the better? To right wrongs? To ensure that we lived happily ever after? The idea that we could change our future by changing the past was enticing. To a recently-married couple, it was tempting to think that we could create our own future, one where we would live happily ever after.

But "Back To The Future" was a movie, albeit a clever one. The life of that newly-married couple has not been a "happily ever after" story. There has been heartache and tragedy that we could not have imagined. And I suspect that your story hasn't been the "happily ever after" that you may have dreamed of. We've all learned the painful life lesson that we can't simply go back and fix the future.

The French philosopher Simone Weil (spelled W-E-I-L) lived from 1909 to 1943. She died of tuberculosis at the age of 34, as World War II raged. She wrote several books, including "Waiting For God." In it, she wrote: "In our affliction, we are lacerated in our sense of time. In a month, in a year, how shall we suffer?" It's not just the present suffering that we find difficult; it's the thought that the suffering may never end. Weil knew that projecting our present fear onto the future only brings us more grief. What if I always feel this sick? What if my closest relationships don't last? What if I never get out of debt? What if the climate crisis keeps getting worse? What if the political chaos gets worse? What if world conflicts never end? As Weil says, we can become lacerated in our sense of time. We can become panicked or paralyzed by a fear of the future.

As a people who are conditioned to fear the future, what are we to make of this morning's readings? In Isaiah, God says, "Forget the former things; don't dwell on the past. See, I'm doing a new thing! Now it springs up; don't you see it? I'm making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland." In Psalm 126, we read, "When God restored our fortunes, we were like those who dreamed. Our mouths were filled with laughter. Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy." In his letter to the Philippians, Paul writes, "I press on to take hold of that for which Christ took hold of me. Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me."

In these passages, the message is that God is leading us toward a bright tomorrow. Forget the past; press on to the future! Leave behind the tears; embrace the joy! To be honest, this all leaves me feeling a little flat. I have trouble summoning the energy to cheer. And I have a feeling I'm not alone.

The Bible is full of God's promises for the future, so why do we struggle to take hold of them? I think it's because we mistakenly focus on the future and our ability to create or control it. But we're not called to have faith in the future. We're called to have faith in God. Having faith in the future would mean having faith in ourselves. We don't have faith in ourselves; we have faith in God, who holds the future. As Ralph Abernathy once said, "I don't know what the future holds, but I know who holds the future."

We mistakenly focus on having faith in the future, rather than faith in God. We also mistakenly believe that, because God dwells in all of time, we need to do the same. We need to somehow dwell in the

past, present and future simultaneously – to hold them all together – in order to have faith in God. If I can't be assured that I had faith in God in the past, or that I will have faith in God in the future, then I can't be sure that I have faith in God in the present.

But this isn't what the Bible teaches. In Hebrew scripture, God is referred to as "I AM." God's name is I AM. It is not I WAS, or I WILL BE. For us, God is not in the past, or in the future. We will not find God there. God is only found in the present, and God calls us to live in the present, too.

Several years ago, I watched an interview with the Dalai Lama. The journalist who interviewed him asked the Dalai Lama if he could think of a favourite moment in his life. The Dalai Lama smiled, leaned forward, and said, "This one!" The Dalai Lama had learned the precious lesson that we can only live in the present; that our favourite moment, indeed our only moment, is "this one." The Dalai Lama reminds us that God only dwells in the present; that is the only place we will find God. We don't have to go anywhere, we don't have to do anything, to find God. We only need to allow ourselves to be found by God.

This understanding, this knowing, that God is only found in the present, is expressed most clearly in the season of Lent, and of Easter. Lent is a time to set aside all that would distract us from the holy – including the past and future – and enter into the present moment. Easter is also a time to enter the present moment, to stay with Jesus, to wait with him, to meet God there.

The name "Easter" comes from the name of the Anglo-Saxon goddess "Eostre." It's linked to the East, the rising sun, and the spring equinox. It's associated with eggs and fertility, hence Easter eggs and the Easter Bunny. The word "estrogen" also comes from "Eostre." Christians adopted the name from pagans, turning a celebration of the feminine into a male-centred event.

And yet, aspects of the feminine remain. It was Mary, a woman, who anointed Jesus. The men were focused on money and the future. But Mary understood what the male disciples did not, that this present moment was sacred. It was the only place to find God. Jesus knew it, too. Instead of fearing the future, he received God's blessing in that moment.

In anointing Jesus, Mary reminds us that staying in the present is the only place to find God. She also reminds us that we don't anoint ourselves, we don't bless ourselves. We bless each other. Jesus could not bless himself; someone else needed to do that.

Jesus couldn't bless himself, and he couldn't save himself. Jesus didn't rise. He was raised. Jesus had to surrender to a power beyond himself – God's power – to receive new life. When we experience suffering, loss or death, we do not rise from it. We are raised by the power of God; we are raised through the blessing of others.

As we sang in the hymn based on Psalm 126: When God restored our common life – when God drew us together to bless each other – that is when our tears sprang up into a song. When God liberates us, and when we bless those who mourn and who suffer wrong – that is when our tears will spring up into a song.

Shortly after Mary anointed Jesus, he told his friends, "When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself." In speaking about his crucifixion, Jesus was saying, "When I am lifted up, when my arms are spread wide like a mother bird, then I will draw all people under my wings."

Jesus went on to say, "You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy. I have told you these things so that in me you may have peace. Under my wings you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble and tribulation. But take heart! Cheer up! I have overcome the world."

How do we deal with our fear of the future? By not focusing on the future, but focusing on what God is doing here and now, in this time and place. How do we have faith in the future? By not focusing on our faith in God, but focusing on God alone. How do we find joy in the future? By not focusing on ourselves, but on each other, and the blessing that we can give and receive.

During the children's time, we wrote down on tears the things that are sad or scary about our future. We took those tears and put them "under God's wings." These wings are made of the colours of the rainbow. They are formed from raindrops, the tears of heaven. Rainbows are curious things. They are actually white light that has been broken up or refracted into its different colours. We wouldn't have light if we didn't have all of these colours. This reminds us that, as God's people, we don't have God's light unless we are all reflecting it together.

As I read the following verse, I invite you to hold up your wings, to look around and see how God transforms our tears into the promise of joy.

We dwell in God's shelter and rest in God's shadow.
Covered with feathers, under God's wings.
God is our refuge, our rescue, our stronghold,
Here we are safe and here we will sing.

Amen.