

TRYING TIMES

This weather..... and its conversation domination is getting old.
Winter just won't leave. It's wearing on people.
Not only are we fed up with dealing with it, but it is also causing a backlog: Spring chores and activities are piling up.
And, ...the forecast for the week calls for more of the same.

These are "trying times".

The early birds are Not getting any worms. Flocks of geese are beginning to arrive, as if it is Spring.
Friday, in the wind blowing snow, I watched a magpie struggling to carry a stick for her nest.
I almost,....almost felt sorry for her.

The annoying weather just adds to the daily difficulties we all face, and then there are the surprise little calamities,... and they seem to come in groups.
For me, the week before last was one of those times.
Things kept breaking or going wrong.
To list a few:
The sliding barn door was stuck in a frozen puddle. I tried to push it free, and it jumped its track and the whole thing fell over.
I was already frustrated by a few other things, so I decided to do some research on the computer, but Yourlink was down in my area... something about radio interference, they said.
Still seeking to relieve my stress, I opted to play some music through iTunes on my computer while I worked on the Good Friday service.
But, that program froze, and when I finally got it going again, half my songs were missing, including the selection I planned to listen to.

Then, when I came home from the Maundy Thursday service, I pulled in the garage, and pressed the button to close the door.
There were some interesting sounds as a cable snapped and the door lodged crooked, half way down with a couple of sections hanging freely over my truck.

My blood pressure was reduced when a couple friends came to my aid. We were able to get my truck out.

Those were trying times, albeit minor compared to what some people have to deal with.

A trying experience is when one's patience and stability is pushed to the limits.
Circumstances / threats / adversities feel almost overwhelming,... and it's a personal response / reaction.

What stresses one person out, may seem like nothing at all to another.

For example, I could handle being lost in the bush, a lot better than being lost in Tokyo or even NYC.

Life can be vexing when the demands or threats are beyond our control and seemingly without end.

The disciples were in such a condition in the John text.

They were hiding out together, perplexed and fearing reprisals for being followers of Christ. Yet, there's no mention that they were wanted by the authorities, at this point.

It was their perception / reaction / their reality.

What a strange way to begin the post resurrection era.

Instead of confidently proclaiming the risen saviour, they were hiding and full of doubt.....it seems they didn't grasp the big picture.

They were consumed with the immediate, perceived state of affairs.

They were not grasping what was going on, and that is why Jesus came to them.

The Gospel of John was likely written, 60 - 70 years after the resurrection, and this scenario was included so that other believers and ourselves would learn from it. So, that we could learn how to handle "trying times."

The disciples felt differently and acted differently after this encounter with Christ.

Notice the difference presented in the Acts passage.

At this point, they really were being persecuted, and even arrested by the authorities. Yet, when they were miraculously freed from prison, they didn't run and hide; instead, they continued to confidently proclaim and teach the Gospel,.....in public places, for all to see.

The police again took them into custody to face an inquisition.

The authorities reminded them that they had a gag order against them.

The leaders didn't want them to speak freely. They were muzzling them.

It sure is a good thing that we live in a free and open society, and that our government doesn't try to limit or muzzle information.

It would be terrible, even frightening, if the authorities were trying to control information.

People can Not know the truth if knowledge and facts are suppressed.

Moreover, there are many ways to muzzle voices, such as labelling and devaluing those who challenge authority, such as calling them, "radicals", anarchists or protestors.

Observe the disciples response when told to keep silent.

They boldly answered, "We must obey God rather than any human authority."

They were living / being in an higher, a more aware level.

They were no longer tripping over the dots in the way.

They were Connecting the dots.

The disciple understood what was truly important, and it wasn't conforming to the cultural rules or submitting to an immediate threat from the authorities.

By putting the realm of God first, the typical hazards of life, seemed menial.

Too often, the array of little tasks and demands arrest us and throw us in a prison of discontent and fear. Then our motivation / our reason for existing gets distorted.

Instead of seeking quality of life and fulfillment, we swirl in the chase for money, temporal success and consumerism.

For ex., it can happen when a business becomes a large corporation, and its purpose/ drive is solely to please the stockholders.

Then, the corporation is less concerned about serving people, than it is about making money. It becomes amoral, and large corporations are very powerful.

However, there are exceptions and sometimes those trapped / jailed by greed and power, see the light.

The Globe and Mail published yesterday the story about billionaire Tom Steyer. He made his fortune investing mostly in the fossil fuel energy sector / the oil business.

Partly, inspired by his young-adult children, he changed. He got out of the oil business and became an avid environmentalist.

He said in the interview about leaving his high paying job, "I couldn't do it in good conscience and hold down a job – and get paid very well for doing a job – where I wasn't directly doing the right thing." He broke free.

After Jesus' visit, the disciples understood what was going on.

They got their priorities in order.

Putting God first reveals that they had arrived / transcended the immediate threats and fears that come along.

To be sure, breaking free / sorting things out is not an easy task.

In the story Life of Pi, the main character named, Pi, had to contend with a fierce threat in his captive life--a Bengal tiger.

Not only was he adrift in a lifeboat in the middle of the vast Pacific Ocean, and had to deal with all the related threats associated with that, but there was also "Richard Parker", the tiger, there, too.

He had to fend off this predator, yet at times he saved it and nourished Richard Parker, too.

>It is truly strange how we can become attached, even nourish, what is seeking to devour us.

Without giving the Life of Pi story away, Pi had to reconcile / sort out / come to terms with threats and sorrows that came his way,..... and more importantly, he had to come to term with himself.

He had to find peace.

Jesus' visit to the paranoid and doubting disciples was in essence a restart for them / a wakeup call. They were stuck, a self imprisonment, and they needed to be set free.

Repeatedly, Jesus said to them, "Peace be with you."

Peace be with you.

Jesus didn't alter their circumstances.

He didn't provide them with guns in order to defend themselves.

Jesus didn't crush their perceived threats. He didn't destroy the authorities.

Instead, he attended to their greatest need.

They needed to believe and be set free.

In that solemn room, there was touch--personal, human touch.

Jesus was with them. God in the flesh was with them, and that awareness can take away a lot of fear.

However, they also needed to step out of their cage / to be free.

Peace be with you, without changing a thing.

Peace be with you, with all the threats and difficulties.

Peace be with you.....in trying times.

Peace be with you.....as you engage the world.

Peace be with you..... so you can start living.

Peace be with you..... because feeling / sensing is powerful and life changing, and peace begins in our soul.

Jesus went on and said, that whomever they forgave would be forgiven, and whomever they didn't forgive, were not forgiven.

They were not bestowed with divine powers anymore than we are.

*How we regard events / how we regard others affects ourselves and those WE touch.

If we hold a grudge, then that grudge is alive and well. It is being nourished like a viscous tiger.

If we forgive,..... then everyone feels it and feels the change.

Trying times are actually about the times we are on trial.

Life is not about ending the threats and difficulties.

It's not about succeeding at work or defeating our adversaries.

Life is not really about making money to eat and pay the bills.

What really matters is who we are and how we relate to others and God. It is possible to see beyond the fray.

Life is like learning a new skill, such as playing an instrument.

The process of training the mind and body to transpose dots on a page into digital actions on a musical instrument is brutal.

As a parent, I can confidently state that.

I witnessed extreme rage from Jessica when she was struggling with those agonizing frustrations.

I won't embarrass Katherine with stories about her learning to play the guitar, so I'll share my own experience.

When I was learning the guitar,.... well THOSE were trying times.

At one point, I hit my cheap little, beginners guitar so hard, I broke the brace on the inside.

Freeze frame this.

My fingers weren't responding, and they hurt, even bled.

This torture went on like a never ending winter.

Focusing on the pain and threats can steal one's peace and mental health,..... unless..... something bigger is going on.

Why do we do what we do?

What is captivating our thoughts and our spirits?

Is it the mundane? ...the irritations without form or purpose?

Are the threats and difficulties defining our life,..... or is there more?

Friday evening, Katherine leafed through a song book, and started playing music with the guitar.

There was music.

She hadn't done that before.

There was music flowing freely.....

From anguish, frustration and trying times..... Music.

Today's passages prompt us to examine what is controlling us, what are our priorities and what is our purpose in life.

Are we defined or controlled by the threats and fears,..... or a vision?

The Gospel message is about God, through Jesus, taking us by the hand, and leading us to the crest of a hill to see beyond the snow and daily chores,..... so that we can hear the music.

There is a harmony waiting for you and me, with God.
Peace be with you.