

into heaven.”

Is that a different way of understanding our times of trial? So often the first question we ask is “why?” Why has God allowed this? Why am I suffering? Why doesn’t God take the pain away?

Christ’s mission is to take back what belongs to him. But he does it gently. He comes along side us, he kneels down and binds up the wounds of his children.

I read a story the other about a woman named Andi who learned this after a difficult time in her life. She writes, “I dropped to my knees when I got to the side of my bed. It was time to end the day, but I couldn’t yet. The ring had to come off. It was time.

That afternoon, a judge had declared my divorce final. Though the demise of our marriage had appeared inevitable for a while, I hadn’t stopped wearing my wedding ring, a symbol of my confidence that no matter how hopeless things looked, God was still in this with me.

But now it was thirty years later. I sobbed, but it wasn’t because of sorrow. It was God’s faithfulness to me through it all. Never had I felt abandoned. Confused – sure! Confused by his allowing my life to be hard for so long when I knew he could restore it if that was his will.

On more than one occasion I wondered where God was. Was he real? If he was, did he care? I was in no shape to compose an articulate prayer. There was a lot of sobbing and groaning. I could never watch someone I love suffer like this, and yet God says he loves us. Why was he not making it better?

The next morning, wise words from a trusted friend came to me, “Andi, you need to force-feed yourself the scriptures. Through them the Holy Spirit can speak to places in your heart where human words cannot reach.”

So, the next morning I opened my Bible. My eyes fell on these words in the Psalms: “You, O God are strong, and you O Lord, are loving.” They came like smelling salts to my fainting heart. I was immediately steadied.

Kneeling again by my bed that night, my heart broke, unable to contain my gratitude for God’s persistent love through a mess that

should have driven him away. Instead, he came closer than ever.

As I slipped the ring off, a prayer poured from my heart. “Now I want to give you the devotion I thought I would be giving an earthly husband. You are worthy of my whole heart’s trust and it’s yours for the rest of my life.”

How could a vow of such loving trust pour from a heart that had lost so much? The only explanation is that while so much was dying, something was coming to life.

As I got up off my knees and climbed into bed, I thought, I should get myself a new ring to remind me of this vow I’ve made with the Lord tonight.

The next morning, I met with a group of women who gathered once a week to pray. We never talked about what we’d pray about ahead of time, we just prayed.

During the time of silence with which we always began, I noticed one of them coming over and kneeling in front of me. She took a ring off her ringer, held it out to me, and said, “I feel like the Lord wants you to have this ring. He wants you to know that you are beloved, and you are his. He is your protector and provider.”

The ring she handed me was much more beautiful and valuable than any ring I could have gotten myself. I had said nothing about getting a new ring. It was just a sign of God’s grace.

I had thought I’d get myself a new ring to remind myself of my commitment to the Lord. Instead, I ended up with one that will forever remind me of his commitment to me.”

Our king is gentle and lowly. And our king is almighty. Our lives are lived Coram Deo – before the face of God. We live out our days ever in the sight of our gentle, lowly and almighty king.

We live in the presence of the one who has promised, “A bruised reed I will not break.” Thanks be to God, Amen.

“Gentle and Lowly: A Bruised Reed He Shall Not Break”

April 7th, 2024 — Selby United Church — Scripture: Isaiah 42:1-9

By Rev. Mike Putnam

I was recalling this week the movie from 2006 called *The Devil Wears Prada*. In it, a young, ambitious, and conscientious journalism grad gets an entry level job working at *Runway Magazine* as a junior assistant to the Editor-in-Chief.

At first, Andy (played by Anne Hathaway) is a terrible fit. She doesn’t fit in with her gossipy, fashion-forward co-workers. Her boss, Miranda Priestly (played by Meryl Streep), is demanding, self-centered and relentless. But this is what it takes to make it in this cut throat industry.

So, Andy adapts. She learns to be like the rest of them. She lies, she cheats, and she begins to dress a little better. And in the end, it pays off. Andy gets the job she really wants. Her time working for Miranda Priestly gives her the leg up to move to her dream job, working for a serious editorial company in New York City.

And that all sounds plausible, doesn’t it? On so many levels, this story sounds about right. People like Miranda Priestly make it to the top by being shrewd, cut throat and demanding. People like Andy make a go of it by playing that game.

But that causes me to ponder the way of Jesus. I mean, Jesus is at the top. We even call him “the king of our hearts.” But what kind of king are we dealing with? And how does he deal with us, his lowly and needy servants?

Is he shrewd, cut throat and demanding? Will Jesus make great and unreasonable demands upon us? Will he use us and throw us away if we don’t measure up?

I mean, there’s no doubt that Jesus is on a mission, he’s not just wandering through life smelling the roses. Again and again, Jesus tells us why he has come and it sounds pretty

cut throat to me! He says, “Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword,” (Matthew 10:34).

He says “For I have come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law” (Matthew 10:35).

He says, “For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me.” In other words, he’s reporting back his progress to the Board of Management at the top (John 6:38).

I don’t know – that all just sounds a little cut throat! I mean, watch out for the boss – he’s under a lot of pressure! With mission statements like those, Jesus probably isn’t the easiest guy to work for. And, I’d imagine he’s not the sort of person who tolerates weakness or failure.

Christ comes into this world as a kind of general laying conquest to this earth – reclaiming forfeited ground – taking no prisoners. He has landed on the beaches, so to speak, and he is moving into his objective territory. But make no mistake, Jesus comes in such a way that is true to his nature, that is consistent with who he is. Jesus comes gentle and lowly.

In the Bible, Isaiah prophesies, four hundred years before Jesus’ birth, about a mysterious figure known as the “servant of the Lord.” And the gospel writers confirm that this person that Isaiah foretold is Jesus Christ. And today, Isaiah tells us how this “servant of the Lord” is going to function. He tells us what kind of boss we’re dealing with.

“Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight;” says God. “I will put my Spirit upon him, and he will bring justice to the nations.” And that sounds like what you’d expect. Jesus is God’s go-getter.

Jesus is on a mission. You're either with him or you're against him.

But listen to what it says next... "He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out. In faithfulness he will bring forth justice; he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth."

And as we think back over Jesus life, we see that this is absolutely true. Jesus doesn't come with overwhelming force. Jesus doesn't come thundering down on his people about their failures to live up to his standards. Jesus doesn't come condemning and canning those who don't measure up.

How does Jesus come? Think of the woman at the well. Think of the gentle conversations, where this physician of the soul, carefully penetrated people's defences. Think of the story of the woman caught in adultery. She's clearly in the wrong, and yet Jesus turns the tables on her accusers – "Which one of you can cast the first stone?"

"A bruised reed he will not break." Picture a reed that has blown over in the wind and the rain of last Wednesday. It's bent and it can't stand on its own anymore. It's fragile. It's vulnerable. It's lost its ability to be a proper reed.

I wonder if there are some among us who feel like broken reeds. I wonder if there are some here today who have been tossed about – maybe broken again and again. If there are some who feel like they are now defective, unable to do what they need to do, unable to be the warrior they want to be. Now what? Are we disposable? Are we just in the way? Are we a hindrance to the great mission Jesus is accomplishing in this world?

No, you see, Jesus comes for the fragile, the broken, the vulnerable. He comes and he tends to their wounds. He strengthens them where they feel weakest. "A bruised reed he will not break." See, Jesus is nothing like Miranda Priestly in *The Devil Wears Prada*.

So, let's think a little more about what scripture is telling us here. First, who is a bruised reed, second, why are bruised reeds so important to Jesus, and finally how does Jesus deal with those who are bruised reeds?

So first, who is a bruised reed? The great Puritan author, Richard Sibbs literally wrote the book on bruised reeds. And he says, "The bruised reed is a person that for the most part is in some misery, as those were that came to Christ for help, and by misery he is brought to see sin as the cause of it...and seeing no help in himself, is carried with restless desire to have supply from another, with some hope, which a little raises him out of himself to Christ..."

So, a bruised reed is someone who bears their own cross – who suffers under the weight of something in their lives that they are forced to carry. Or, a bruised reed is someone who carries the weight of guilt or shame caused by sin (whether that own sin or someone else's). In other words, the world is full of bruised reeds. I might even dare to say, that most of us fit in this category to one degree or another. And if you don't today you will some day.

So, I want you to hear these words as words of comfort and encouragement from our Lord for you. "A bruised reed he will not break."

So often our defects – the things about us that make us kind hard to love at times – relate directly back to our bruises. Why does she act like that? Why is he so angry? Why is she so defensive? Why can't they just stick with something? Because we're bruised. We have tender spots that cause us to respond in the same predictable and unhealthy ways time and again.

And yet when Jesus encounters us – with our bruises showing – and he does not condemn or cajole, but he comforts. You might even say that he is drawn to those who are most bruised.

But why is that? What good is a

bruised reed? Why does Jesus expend such effort attending to those who can't very well attend to his mission?

Well, what if those who are bruised in our world are actually Jesus most beloved? What if those who are bruised are the ones in whom Jesus is accomplishing his greatest work?

Sibbs says, "Christ's way is first to bruise and then to heal." But why? Why does Christ seek to bruise?

Sibbs says that bruising has four main purposes. First, "Bruising is often required for conversion to faith so that the Holy Spirit may make way for himself into the heart by levelling the proud, high thoughts, and that we may understand ourselves to be what indeed we are by nature." So bruising is actually part of how God saves us.

Second Sibbs says, "Bruising makes us set a high price upon Christ. Then the gospel becomes the gospel indeed; then the fig leaves of morality will do us no good."

And what he's saying is that when you're doing just fine under your own steam, when you're convinced the world is your oyster, you have no desire for a saviour. Your pride and self-sufficiency cloud your judgement of your actual condition. So, bruising becomes a tool that Christ uses to humble us so that we recognize our profound neediness.

Next Sibbs says, "After conversion we need bruising so that reeds may know themselves to be reeds and not oaks. We need bruising to remind us that we are human and necessarily limited, weak and frail." Confuse yourself with an oak and you will be tempted to go it alone – to live life far from God.

And finally, Sibbs says that we need bruising so that we will not too quickly pass judgement upon others and instead become instruments of God's mercy in the world.

So, when we find that we are bruised, it's not that God has turned his back on us. It's that God is accomplishing something in us. It's that God has chosen us, for reasons we can't

yet see, but even so we can find comfort in our bruising.

Now, that's a tough thought to get your head around. But remember, resurrection means we get it all back. It won't always be like this. But maybe without bruising we've got no other way forward.

But now, how does Christ deal with a bruised reed?

Doctors who do their jobs may actually inflict pain or even appear to injure their patients in order to heal them. Anyone whose every undergone chemo therapy knows that the treatment involves injecting poison into your body, causing all kinds of terrible effects. If you didn't know better you would conclude that your doctor is a cruel psychopath. But we know that our physicians are doing what is best for us – prolonging our life - even as it causes us pain and suffering.

Jesus is given the title of physician, husband, shepherd and brother because he discharges the offices of each of those roles with care, love and protection.

And so in times of bruising, Christ draws us to himself. We cannot conceal our wounds from him. We are called to go to him, trembling as the poor woman who said, "If I may but touch his garment." We should never fear to go to Christ in our need, for that is his purpose in allowing our need in the first place.

We are naïve when we think we can hide our frailty from God. Because we live *Coram Deo* – Before the face of God. Nothing is ever hidden from God. Our deepest thoughts are plain as day to Him. How silly it is to hide – like Adam and Eve did behind the bushes. God looks deep within our hearts – but sometimes he has to take significant measures to bring us out into the open. Not for his sake, but for ours.

Because in His presence He will make our afflictions tolerable. If we let him, he will support us when you feel bruised. He will bruise you but he will also heal you. Sibbs says, "No sound, whole soul shall ever enter