

2021 03 21 Deep in the earth: Called to Deep Growth  
Lent IV, Toronto United Mennonite Church

[Jeremiah 31:31-34](#) - God will make a covenant, the law will be in our hearts.

[John 12:20-33](#) - Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth...

Good morning, TUMC. My name is Peter, he/his/him, and I am one of the pastors serving this congregation. Because I have some cool pictures I made a powerpoint. If you're not able to see the screen, don't worry, I will try to narrate the essentials of what we are seeing. I want to begin with this image of three concentric circles.

Some years ago I was leading a discussion about some sensitive matters, and I shared this diagram of the educational theory of discussing difficult topics. In the centre you see the comfort zone. In that space, a person is safe, unchallenged, and static. The outermost circle, on the other hand, is the alarm zone. In that space, a person is defensive, escalated, and focused on survival. In order to learn, you try to stay between these zones, in the middle, in the discomfort zone. This is where you encounter difference and resistance, but not in a way that is overwhelming. You have the necessary space to consider new ideas and perspectives, even experiment, and therefore to learn.

That's all well and good. And then one of the group participants pointed out something I had not considered - you may learn in the discomfort zone, but you can't live there. You have to return into safety so that you can integrate what you have heard. You have to be able to rest in order to grow. That's the image that came to mind as I thought about the theme for today. Deep in the Earth: called to Deep Growth.

Today I have to talk about violence. The sermon cannot stand today unless it speaks to the violence this last week, where one man chose to murder eight people in Atlanta, Georgia, in a act of racist and gendered violence, targetting Asian women. And I'm letting you know this in case that's not what you need to hear today. I don't want to take anyone into the alarm zone.

We walk a line in our church community. We want to explore the Spirit's call into peace making and undoing the ways of violence and domination. Yet we also want to create a sanctuary that centers the needs of those targeted by violence and fear. So on any given Sunday, some of us need to be brought out of comfort and into the zone of encounter, of challenge and change. And some are living lives that are daily made uncomfortable by a culture that gives far too much room to racism, sexism, and oppressive dynamics. To those people I want to say - you have the right to choose your participation. And you have the right to know what's coming up. This sermon is a call into the deeper places of our selves and our society, where there is great wealth of knowledge, and fearsome pain. And this sermon seeks to name the gender violence of men who kill as a failure to wrestle with these fearsome depths.

Ultimately, God is calling us to go deep. Deep into our faith, deep into our selves, deep into the truth about our conflicted lives, deep into what might frighten us. And this call is not for our own

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sake, for the perfection of our souls. It is mortal, moral work that the world needs. It is the disarming of violence, the conversion of systems away from apathy and hopelessness. We have to grow. Individually, in our souls, collectively in our society, globally in our solidarity. We have to grow.

Let's begin with scripture.

What did you hear in Jeremiah's prophecy? 'I will make a new covenant'. 'I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts'. What does that mean for us? If God's law could be perfectly housed within our very beings, no longer defined as lists of commandments, but lived out as a living covenant. 'They will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest'. What would that mean for us?

This is a new world. A world we have not seen, but which we can believe in. It's a world with no need of police or military, no border walls or internment camps or mass incarceration facilities. It's a new relationship. It's hopeful, and it's frightening. People are frightened to imagine a world without violence, without coercion, without law and police and prisons and land rights.

And addressing it, imagining it, begins in the gut. In the heart, the belly, the mind, the inside. The law goes deeper than external powers, punishments and rewards and settlements, meted out by authority. It is within us, and it is between us. 'I will be their God, and they will be my people'. It is a vision of love. And love casts out fear, and love goes deep.

If you're able, I want you to look at something with me. I know that not everyone will be able to see the screen, but most of us will, and I hope that everyone will help me describe it.

You have probably seen this piece of art already, during the opening screen of our service. Created by Kandace Boos, and entitled Heavenly Mother, this artwork was part of the package that many Mennonite churches have been using to help craft our Lent services under the theme 'Deep calls to Deep'. I'm going to ask you to unmute your microphone and tell me what you can see in this picture.

Can you see all the elements we have explored so far in Lent? Deep in the sea... deep in the woods... deep in the changing sky... deep in the wilderness - and deep in the earth.

As we look at this together, what draws your attention? What do you notice that isn't obvious at first glance? What is 'Deep in the Earth'? Unmute your microphone and tell me what you see.

The bear really gets my attention, whenever I look. Some of you know I'm rather fond of European Medieval art. Last year I got to tell you all about the Pelican in her Piety, a popular and rather gruesome metaphor for God's salvation. Let me introduce you to Ursus, the bear.

The monks who compiled these bestiaries taught that the mother bear spent her winter in hibernation licking her cubs into shape. They were born shapeless, formless, and after giving

birth she patiently forms them and feeds them, and nourishes them. It's an image of the patient work of God as Creator, speaking the universe into being out of a formless void, piece by piece. And it is an image of the soul in slumber, hidden away in silence and darkness, growing into something wonderful and holy. It is the idea of a womb, deep in the Earth.

Which one of us hasn't wanted to be a hibernating bear from time to time - fill up on honey and porridge, curl up in a den, and wait for better weather? This tells us that when we sleep and when we dream, when we are apparently inactive and passive, God is working away at us. We are being licked into shape. Like returning to the comfort zone, the safe place you need to have, to return to, to reflect and rest and heal.

Going Deep in the Earth is a beautiful image of going deep within the self. When you go deep, you are trying to be authentic. You are seeking to be connected to your truer self. That means the version of yourself that isn't curated for the sake of other people. Sometimes that can be delightful. You can encounter creativity and hope and wonder. And sometimes you find your places of pain and shame. You feel again the things you have done wrong and remember the wrong things that have been done to you. Sometimes when you go deep you hear the voices of other people that they have left inside of you, rent free.

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What are the things that help you to go deep? I think it's time for a list. Let me know what you'd like to add to the list in the chat. What helps you to access that inner space, the internal voice, your soul space where you are authentically you?

Look over this list and think about which ones of these help you to connect with your deeper self.

- Encountering, creating and sharing music, poetry, dance, art...
- Intellectual debate, discussion, diagrams and concepts, understanding the systems that define and delineate the self
- Psychological and psychotherapeutic work, deep sharing, stream-of-consciousness, emotional awareness
- Physical activity, sport, dance, and play. Competition and challenge, sharing successes and failures
- Nurturing others, hosting gatherings, making meals and gifts, discovering connections, telling stories.
- Engaging the more-than-human world - growing plants, caring for animals, farming, fishing, & forestry, turtles & pelicans.
- Meditation, contemplation, mindfulness. Noticing your own inner state, building your awareness.

What should we add or expand? Put it in the chat.

There are two main categories of reasons why we can't access these spaces. One is that we are not allowed to. There was a time when I couldn't have told you where I am most alive,

because parts of my own sacred being were blocked from my consciousness. It wasn't safe or permitted. I wasn't able to live fully, to encounter God in crucial parts of my life, and to grow in the ways God wanted. I had to be liberated from that.

And we are also blocked by our fears. Fear of being inadequate. Of being seen as a fraud. The dread of being vulnerable, being embarrassed, the threat of being judged, the paralysis of unrealistic expectations. We believe we are too angry, too old or young, too passionate, or too unfocused. There are a lot of reasons why it's not easy to go deep. There are a lot of fears that keep us focused on the small things we can control.

But it really matters, because these are the places where God invites us to integrate the sacred law, the holy calling. God says, the days are coming. The new covenant, the new presence of God, is not God taking us by the hand and leading us out of Egypt, out of captivity and collaboration and coercion. Instead, God is coming to dwell with us, within us. God's law is not an external matter, it is buried in us, and flows between us.

And when we can't go deep, something grows unseen, untended. Something that may be poison.

I sincerely believe that one of the roots of violence is the inability of individuals to look within, and the inability of social models to support individuals to go deep. I believe that the racist and misogynistic violence that led to murders in Atlanta this week was made possible by shame. This gunman was taught to hate parts of himself by his church and his family and the political and social worlds that they were part of creating. And he chose to project that hate onto others, and try to kill what he hated about himself. The causes are multiple and intersecting - racist propaganda spread by the former US president, deep rooted misogyny, hatred of sex workers, and toxic conceptions of Christian masculinity. The outcome is - lives destroyed, families mourning. Because one person was unable to look within, without projecting his hatred lethally onto others. And was able to buy a gun.

Sometimes when you look within you find hatred and hindrance. You might find you have a knack for cruelty, or coldness. You might have grandiose dreams that deny the needs of others. You may find a blank place, an emptiness, a fear. These are lodging in the place where God wants to bring you to life. They have to be dealt with.

Sometimes what is growing deep within is a cancer. It's a perversion of what God intended, a twisting of healthy life. Did you know that a cancerous cell doesn't know how to die? Unlike healthy body cells, it serves no purpose, and it has no instructions to die. So it simply grows and spreads.

And dealing with that is sometimes a type of death. The mystics talk about the need to die to self. The goal of emulating Jesus, emptying the self, being willing to let go of everything that is not of God. The doctors talk about the poison that fights cancer. Dealing with death is frightening.

So there are these Greeks, who come and talk to Phillip. And Phillip talks to Andrew, and Andrew talks to Jesus. All these people come to see Jesus. They are looking for him because they know he has some truth for them, some connection to God, some way to become more fully human. Or maybe they just want to see him do a cool miracle. And Jesus offers them truth. He talks about death. 'Now my soul is troubled', he says. Jesus is being authentic. He is speaking his truth. And part of his truth is wrestling with the fear of death.

Going into the earth has always been frightening. Down below is the direction of the things we have hidden away - treasures, secrets, skeletons. It is the darkness of caves, of initiation, of tomb, the darkness of repression, and also of safety, of sleep and salve. Lifting the rock and looking underneath, disturbing that which sleeps can be fearsome. It is a visit to the land of the dead. And God says, fear not.

Baptism is a sort of death, after all. Baptism asks us to go down into the water, into the earth, to risk, however symbolically, the element of water where we cannot survive for long. It calls for vulnerability and trust. To go down into the waters of Baptism is professing a belief in resurrection. As Anabaptist Christians we believe strongly that the ritual is not important - but that choosing the ritual is important. Following Christ, wherever he leads. Even down.

The path that Christ calls us is one that takes us into death. My sincere hope is that for all of us, that will be a natural death, one that concludes a long and valiant life. But whenever death comes, in Christ, it is not the end. Christ has redeemed death, has gone down into death and healed that wound. Christ walked up out of a tomb, and just kept going, up into the skies and deep into our lives, further up and further in.

Death is still sad, it is still real, it is still to be respected and not to be desired, and not to be caused. But it is not to be feared. Death is not to be held as the greatest evil.

They Tried To Bury Us. They didn't know we were seeds. These words, made world famous by Mexican human rights defenders and Black Lives Matter protesters were translated from the writings of the Greek poet who passed away last summer, who chose as his pen name *Dinos Christianopoulos*, meaning Son of Christ. Another Greek, two thousand years after other Greeks came to seek Jesus, and heard his words 'Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.'

They Tried To Bury Us. They didn't know we were seeds. Friends. May God's Spirit draw us to look within, to dig deep, in all courage and vulnerability. May we meet God's welcoming presence in our places of pain and shame. May we know whatever forgiveness we need, whatever healing we need, whatever salvation we need. May we be willing to face death itself in whatever shape it takes - physical, spiritual, metaphorical, social. And may we know resurrection. Resurrection. Resurrection.

In the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.