“It Came to Pass”
A Sermon by Rev. Michael Scott
The Dublin Community Church

January 22, 2017
Luke 2:1-20

I’m sure some of you, after hearing today’s scripture reading, have concluded that “Mike has finally gone ’round the bend”. Let me assure I still have all my marbles, and I am not about to deliver a Christmas sermon. My text this morning is actually just the four words that introduce this passage in the King James translation: “it came to pass”.

I was drawn to this odd little phrase by a story told by the psychologist Merle Jordan. He tells of a preacher who was once asked about his favorite Bible verse. He thought for a moment and said that his favorite verse is, “And it came to pass.” The questioner objected. “That’s not a real verse; it’s just a phrase. It shows up everywhere.” “Exactly!” said the preacher, “Isn’t it comforting to know how many things ‘come to pass’, and not to stay?”

It’s a cute story, but one that reveals a profound truth. It is one of the great wonders and gifts of creation that so much in life is transitory. How good it is to recall that the time of oppression and slavery of the children of Israel in Egypt “came to pass”, that the hour of torment in the garden of Gethsemane “came to pass”, that the Crusades “came to pass”, that the Civil War and slavery “came to pass”, that the Holocaust “came to pass”.

All you Biblical scholars out there are squirming in your seats about now. Modern translations of the Bible have omitted all of the “and it came to pass”es. “Surely,” you may be thinking, “he’s not going to base an entire sermon on this obsolescent phrase that is a poor translation to begin with, and amounts to little more than a dead metaphor from the King’s English.” That’s exactly what I’m going to do. If the Bible says Christ can be raised from the dead, then perhaps by the power of the Spirit we can also breathe new life into a few dead and buried words. And in the process we might even recover a profound kernel of wisdom that was buried along with them.

It’s a single Greek word, egeneto, that the King James translates as the phrase “And it came to pass.” The more modern translations simply leave out the word entirely. Biblical scholars these days consider it an irrelevant “formula” word for introducing a passage or story. The word is the aorist middle form of the Greek verb genomai. Now I realize that none of that is of particular interest to most of you, but what might be mildly interesting is to know that this Greek word is a form of the verb that means “to create”. So, when the formula is used, meaning “It happened that . . .”, or “It was that . . .”, or “it came to pass that . . .”, it carries the freight of all creation – things that are because they were created to be. The most simple and ancient Biblical truth about creation is that it is of the dust of the earth; and that which is of the dust inexorably turns to dust. That which comes, by the power of the one eternal creative force of the universe, also passes. For something to “come to pass,” therefore, is the most natural and fundamental process of existence.
And yet, that simple truth is at times so hard to bear. A good deal of life is spent by many people grieving over that which comes and passes. Friends and loved ones come into our lives, ultimately only to “pass away.” Good times and happy moments, like summer vacations, come and go. This is the truth we know. But it’s only half a truth.

I recently learned about an amazing tree called the strangler fig. Figs come in a remarkable variety, all sizes and colors, and the trees that bear them are also quite an assortment. The strangler fig begins as a tiny little seed that some careless bird drops from its beak while flying by. The seed lands in a crevice on the limb of a tree and there it starts to grow, dropping roots downward in a kind of woven web around the host tree. Sometimes this web becomes so dense and so disruptive to the host that the original tree dies. The fig tree then becomes a kind of spider web of roots winding around a dead tree. This sounds pretty dark and dreadful. But the figs produced by the strangler tree are a significant food source in these dense forests. And over time, the dead host tree will completely rot away, leaving the fig tree as a hollow, cylindrical web called a “columnar tree.” It is a remarkable, intricate sculpture of nature that one can climb into and stand inside of.

The force of divine creativity is ceaseless. So every passing is a prelude to another coming. Every loss is an opportunity for gain. There is creative potential, a slice of hope, to be seized at every turn in the road, because the current of life is always turning over the rocks in the river bottom, and change is always the order of the day.

That’s why it’s good that even the incarnation of Christ that we celebrate every year at Christmas “came to pass” and not to stay. Because out of the dark moment of the crucifixion, out of the loss of the man Jesus from the face of the earth, a wondrous possibility became a miraculous reality. The power of his life and his message ignited a movement that swept across the globe, and promised a rebirth of hope—new life for old.

I was recently reawakened to just how significant that movement of new life was in the early Greco-Roman world when Bruce Fox loaned us a book. It’s titled, The Rise of Christianity, by Rodney Stark. Professor Stark is a sociologist who took a look at how Christianity became a dominant movement in the context of the culture it encountered. He paints an almost stomach-turning portrait of life in the urban centers of that time. The cities were small geographically, but unbelievably, densely populated. The only means of heat in cold weather were fires burning inside the crowded tenements which not only led to smoke in rooms and buildings everywhere, but frequent fires. The supply of water, although readily available to the wealthy, was scant. The best that passed for sewage systems were open pits and channels. In most areas, not even these were available, and human waste (and sometimes a human corpse) was simply dumped onto the street. The stench was everywhere, as, I’m sure you can imagine, was disease. And with so many dying in the cities, new people coming from other places were always needed to replenish the population, resulting in all kinds of conflict. And these are only some of the terrible circumstances that accompanied great social upheaval on many fronts. Are you and I not grateful that this is a time that “came to pass”? And the passing of that time was facilitated in some ways by the early church. The suffocating density, disruption, and disease of this time comprise the background into which the Christian movement emerged. Stark writes,
“Christianity revitalized life in Greco-Roman cities by providing new norms and new kinds of social relationships able to cope with many urgent urban problems. To cities filled with the homeless and the impoverished, Christianity offered charity as well as hope. To cities filled with newcomers and strangers, Christianity offered an immediate basis for attachments. To cities filled with orphans and widows, Christianity provided a new and expanded sense of family. To cities torn by violent ethnic strife, Christianity offered a new basis for social solidarity. And to cities faced with epidemics, fires, and earthquakes, Christianity offered effective nursing services.”

Change – losing and gaining, coming and passing – is not only the stuff of history, it’s all around us. Indeed, it’s the structure of our very being. An amazing number of our own body cells die each day and are then replaced with new cells. Our society thrives on change. If it weren’t for the constancy of change, Wall Street would go bust. Every moment brings change, and therefore brings the potential for both trauma and treasure. The Chinese reflect the wisdom of this reality in their symbol for change. It’s made up, so I’m told, of two characters standing side by side. One represents danger, the other, opportunity.

But all too many people become frozen by the dangers, the losses, the passings, and therefore never seize the opportunities. To live one’s life either moping in the shadow of loss or cowering in fear of it is a tragic waste. Since so much in our experience comes to pass and not to stay, we would do well to accept it. Since change is our constant companion, we must strive to make it our friend. To do so is to find a “peace that passes all understanding.” To look life’s passings in the eye and give thanks for that which goes and that which comes, to find an acceptance of the losses and heartbreaks, to welcome change as a trusted friend, these are the gifts that will give birth in your soul to the incarnation of divine grace well after the Christmas tree lies rotting in the woods behind the house.

David Anderson, in his book, The Tragic Protest, describes the portrait of an elderly woman “by a contemporary painter (the portrait is in a private collection).” He writes, “The old woman’s face is deeply lined as though it had been ploughed up again and again by agony upon agony. It is the face of somebody whom life has tortured and tested without mercy. The furrows speak of wounds and deeper wounds, of sufferings and cares piled one on top of the other. It is the face of somebody who has found life an experience of continuous betrayal. The old woman looks as if no sorrow has passed her by, as though she could never be surprised again by any kind or degree of pain. Yet in his portrayal of this agonizing tragic face the artist has given an overall impression of triumph. In its very lines and furrows the face gives off an invincible strength. The old woman possesses a wisdom and serenity which nothing can take from her. She is in possession of true and indestructible riches. She has looked on the travail of her soul and is satisfied. She is at peace – the peace which can belong only to those fully and deeply alive.”

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Anderson’s description is so powerful partly because you and I know of such remarkable women. I’ve offered the description of her face, not to suggest that intense life-long suffering is the best path to enlightenment, but to say that the gift of being “fully and deeply alive” seems to have come to such a woman when she had reached a point of acquaintance with the passages of life. Triumph seems to shine in her face because she is no longer afraid. Peace seems to be hers because she has seen the face of truth.

Such triumph and peace are within our grasp. In this hour of opportunity let us pray a prayer of thanksgiving for all that comes to pass and not to stay, let us make change our friend, thereby taking hold of grace itself, and putting our fears to flight.

Pastoral Prayer

O God, we come today bringing all our concerns, responsibilities, unresolved issues, and interpersonal struggles. We bring these things into your presence along with all of our doubts and unanswered questions, hoping that you will gently sift them and help us to gain a sense of order and perspective. Rearrange our hearts and minds, we pray, so that our concerns will not be first for ourselves, but for those around us. And make our spirits thankful for all the good we enjoy.

In this time of momentous transition in the halls of government we pray for your presence and guidance. We pray for our new President and his administration that they may be led in paths of peace and justice, and that we would do all in our power to make that happen.

We acknowledge how much we take for granted the blessings and comforts of our own lives. We confess our carelessness. We are often careless with ourselves, giving little thought to the right food or exercise that sustain our bodies, or the times of rest, reflection, or redirection that strengthen our minds. We are often careless with our relationships, paying insufficient attention to the needs of others, or the emotional presence that true relatedness requires. We are often careless with our planet, extravagantly using energy and resources without thinking of the consequences.

Forgive us, we pray, and help us to be moved by the love we have been shown and the deep inequities of our world to work for justice, move toward wholeness, and to strive for peace. We pray all this in the name of Jesus, and lift up the prayer he taught us:

“Our Father, who art in heaven . . .”