

May 1, 2020

Trinity Musings #11: Rev Brian Goodings (self-isolating and hiding under the desk in my office at Trinity United Church: Collingwood)

A few years ago, one of my favourite authors Bill Bryson, wrote a book about Australia titled Down Under. In the opening chapter he wryly notes that there are more things to kill a person there than anywhere else on earth. These include: crocodiles; great white sharks; the ten most venomous snakes in the world; fluffy caterpillars that can paralyze you with a single bite; sea shells with nasty stinging creatures inside and a brutally dry outback desert that will bake you to death in hours. Even the feral camels will spit on you or stomp you to death if you get too close. If you do manage to make it from the airport to a beach, and avoid the saltwater-crocs and sharks, there are powerful currents that will sweep you away to the open ocean in seconds. As a friend who grew up there said to me “The whole continent is out to kill you.” Maybe explains why the Aussies drink so much and say “No worries mate”. They can’t worry about what horrible fate might await them or they would never get out of bed. Deadly perils and life-ending critters simply exist alongside them, all day every day.

Those of us in the northern hemisphere aren’t nearly as accustomed to knowing that we live in a dangerous world. Most Canadians would likely say that danger here comes from bad weather, skiing into trees, tippy canoes, and falling off of mountains. (My mom would add “riding stupid motorcycles” too.)

The list of dangers is changing for us as the world grows warmer and plants and animals from other places are moving in. Over the last few years some of our new neighbours include the Giant Hogweed (permanent blindness), West Nile virus carried by mosquitoes (neurological damage and 10% mortality rate), ticks that carry Lyme disease (aches and even permanent neurological damage) and

Equine Encephalitis (brain swelling and death). Add to these our already nasty compliment of neighbours like water hemlock, bloodroot, poison ivy, elderberry and deadly nightshade.

And then if that's not enough, include grizzly, polar and black bears as well as wolverines and cougars. (I would also add raccoons to my list because I've got "history" with those dudes.) It is accurate to say we don't really live in a perfectly safe world either.

We now can add Covid-19 to our list of neighbours we would not willingly have over for dinner. This virus has rocked our world.

The illusion that we, in Canada, live in a safe world, free from danger, is dissipating or at least waning with this pandemic. However, it's important to remember that this has always been, in large part, imaginary. We're just not used to dealing with these potentially deadly threats day to day.

I heard a program on CBC about increasing life expectancy for humans. There are more people alive now who are over the age of 100 years than at any other time in history. The program talked about the possibility of wealthy and uber-wealthy people living to be 150 and even 200 years old in the rather near future. Poorer people won't live nearly as long but that's the tragic truth already.

The assumption I believe we have all been making for a long time in this part of the world, is that our engineering ingenuity and medical genius may allow us to live forever. Our mortality is an affliction, we mistakenly believe, we can cure. I'm certainly not convinced that the length of a life is nearly as important as the quality of a life.

In my Christian tradition and other traditions too, hubris (pride and excessive self-confidence) is a deadly folly to which we can fall prey.

As the Greek god Icarus learned, flying too close to the sun can melt your wings.

In the Christian (Judeo) tradition the forbidden fruit was eaten in the garden and a tower built to reach Babel (heaven) was attempted. We are not God or gods, and our falling back to earth or being kicked out of naiveté is to grasp the reality of our mortality.

At their heart, these are wisdom stories to remind us that we have a place in creation but the time we have to live out our human story is almost always more limited than we may know or desire. The point of life is not to stay under the bed in fear of all that might kill us but rather to boldly and lovingly embrace the time we have and decide to make the world a better place as long as we can. The hard truth is that someday something is gonna take all of us out. It really isn't personal, just the way it is.

In the meantime, shake your shoes before you put them on because there might be scorpions hiding in them. I heard they are coming soon.

No worries mate. Put the barbie on...Cheers!