

“Moving Beyond Crow Conformity”

A 2-part sermon series using ‘The Wiz’

Romans 12: 1 – 2

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What do you do when you find yourself in Oz?

A couple of years ago I purchased a book which then landed on my bookshelf and was forgotten. Forgotten, that is, until a few weeks ago when news came out that the Summerfest play in Woodland Park was going to be ‘The Wiz’. It took me a few minutes but I found the book and am using it today and next Sunday as a springboard for our sermon themes. The book is “The Gospel According to the Wiz” by Otis Moss III, pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago. And if you haven’t seen the play “The Wiz”, don’t head toward the door. Knowledge of the old classic ‘The Wizard of Oz’ will be enough!

Pastor Moss’ book begins with the question, “What do you do when you find yourself in Oz?”

But before answering the question, a definition of Oz is in order. More than likely our thoughts automatically jump to that place in ‘The Wiz’ or the more well known ‘Wizard of Oz’. You know, the land that Dorothy and Toto all of a sudden find themselves dropped in with a yellow brick road, munchkins, a talking scarecrow, tin man, lion; flying monkeys and seemingly mighty wizard. According to Moss, and what we most likely know deep inside, the Land of Oz isn’t a real place. It’s not just a make-believe place either. Rather than a physical *place*, it’s a state of mind.

I’m sure we’ve all been in Oz. Eight years ago, Ken and I flew from Seattle, Washington to Lexington, Kentucky for me to be interviewed by the search committee of this church and for Ken to take a look around the city. (After all, it was only fair. The decision to make such a move would need to be both of ours.) We got in late at night when it was dark, settled in to the hotel. I looked out the window and thought what I saw were warehouses. The next morning when I woke up, I looked out again in the daylight and much to my surprise, those warehouses were actually barns. “Ken, they have horse barns right in the city! There’s a stall being cleaned out, and look, a horse!” (I learned later that these were the barns for Red Mile.) But right then, it felt like Oz. I turned to Ken and said, “Toto, we’re

not in Kansas anymore.” That line became our private code to each other whenever we ran into something out of *our* norm.

But you don't have to move across the country to experience landing in Oz. In fact, everything may look familiar but your world has changed. From the Gospel According to the Wiz, “Whenever a storm upends your life, you are living in Oz. Whenever you lose a loved one, experience a shock of losing your job, are going through a trauma – you are living in Oz.” p. 4 When things seem more than a bit real or strange or out of the ordinary way your life, world, political climate has been defined, you are in Oz. Change – and it doesn't have to be negative, just different.

So back to the question, what do you do when you find yourself in Oz? In a state of mind where the ground seems to be moving, day to day reality is in flux, life is disoriented. How do you get out of or handle your Oz?

Today's sermon and next week's will give us two suggestions for answers to that question. There are probably more suggestions. We could have an entire summer series exploring the answers to how to handle our Oz. But for this summer, just two - and the first one is to move beyond crowd conformity.

Those of us who grew up watching the Wizard of Oz remember the Scarecrow, accompanied Dorothy to find the Wizard, wanting the Wizard to give him a brain. The Broadway play, 'The Wiz' has an added scene with a dialogue between the Scarecrow and crows.

There's poor old Scarecrow, hanging on his pole in the field while three crows happily munch on the corn around him. Scarecrow calls out to them, “Hey guys! Hope you are enjoying that corn! Isn't it good? Hey, do you think today is the day when you are going to help me down from this pole? I'd really like to walk around!”

And the crows all caw out in hilarious laughter! “Help you down? You get down? No way! Don't you know that that's your place?! You're stuck up there. You're not going anywhere! Walk?! How do you think you are going to walk with them legs?! You're just a bag of straw!”

And then they insist that he sing the crow anthem, some of the words are:

You can't win, you can't break even
And you can't get out of the game

People keep sayin' things are gonna change
But they look us like, you're stayin' the same

You can't win, the world keeps movin'
And you're standin' far behind
People keep sayin', things'll get better
(Just to ease your state of mind)

Dorothy appears, and says, "I'll help you down!" When she does, he – predictably falls flat on his face and all the crows let out their caw laughter, "Ha, look at that! You can't do it!" But Dorothy encourages him saying, "You're just a product of some negative thinking. First thing we have to do is get rid of these crows." And she threw rocks to scare away the crows, the Scarecrow said, "You mean all that was standing in the way of hanging up there on that pole and living it up down here was those crows?"

When we find ourselves in Oz, when our world is different, or shaky or unknown, one thing we might want to do is to look at those metaphorical crows flying around us, that negative thinking, those ideas that we have perhaps from our earliest days or acquired just recently; that we are not enough, that we are no good, that the world is spinning out of control and there is nothing we can do about it, and on and on and on....

Our scripture passage for today is from Paul's letter to the church in Rome. One author suggests that these two verses from chapter 12 begin a section addressing the problems of daily life. Listen again, this time from the New International Version: "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world." Or from a direct Greek translation: "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." Yet another translation, the Otis Moss/Wiz translation, "Do not conform any longer to what the crows are saying to you, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is, God's good, pleasing and perfect will." P. 16

One suggestion if you find yourself in that Oz state of mind, when you've lost your footing, when you are unsure of your surroundings or what tomorrow is going to bring, one suggestion is to stop listening to the crows; be they actual negative people in your life or negative messages you give to yourself. Instead, open up what Otis Moss calls your blueprint for salvation, the guide upon our journey, the

rudder of your ship – i.e., the Bible. Turn to the scriptures, to the stories of our faith that remind us of God’s grace, of God’s unconditional love poured out for you and me and the world, and allow yourself to be shaped by that message, not by the message of the world (the crows)! We only have to look at advertizing to see messages that we aren’t thin enough or good looking enough or smart enough or rich enough; just stay up there on your pole, you’re just a bunch of straw!

Do you remember how the Scarecrow was in search of a brain? In the Wizard of Oz, it was the Scarecrow who was always thinking his friends and himself out of difficult situations. In ‘The Wiz’, he was stuffed with newsprint and always pulling little scraps of words of wisdom out of himself to share. He had all of this within him but instead of recognizing those gifts within that God had given him, he listened to the crows, he conformed to their message. When one finds oneself in Oz, move beyond crow conformity.

Wise words for each of us and wise words for the church as well. Remember, Paul’s words were written to the church of Rome, facing difficult times, not individual members sitting in the pews. His words were for the body of Christ gathered in a particular place, facing.....

This last week at our denomination’s General Assembly with over 3,000 present in Indianapolis, we had the opportunity to hear a number of preachers. I’ve purchased DVDs of most of the sermons and hopefully we’ll be able to view them together this fall when Sunday School resumes. Monday evening, the Rev. Dr. Serena Jones, from Union Theological Seminary in New York City, began her sermon laying out her interpretation of the moral and political climate that we mainline churches find ourselves in today. I won’t go into all of that (instead, invite you to watch the DVD), but do want to share with you some of her words on what I interpreted to be crow cawing; those negative messages that we as the body of Christ hear and often believe and follow:

That when we look around at what is going on in the world and in our churches, we feel like at the end of the day we don’t have anything theologically important to say. We are outdated, old fashion. But in her sermon, Dr. Jones counteracts this crow negativity by sharing her reality; she lives in New York City, perhaps the most diverse and unchurched city in the country. And every day she hears and

feels the hunger of young people for a deep morally good story about the meaning of their lives, young people seeking a better world not just for themselves but for all of us.

Dr. Jones calls on us to stop listening to the crows, to get beyond that negative message that has us as church throwing up our hands in resignation, believing we are irrelevant in a world that is more diverse and pluralistic. Instead, she suggests, what we need to do is take a deep breath and relax, and fall into God's love. She goes on to say that it takes courage and conviction to relax into God's reality. It's not turning a blind's eye to what is going on, not living in our own little bubble, but engaging the world and all of its problems while holding on to our faith story; that nothing – nothing – can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

Move beyond crow conformity and remember the Jesus story; one who came to the world as a light in the darkness, showing us a Divine love that reaches out to include the prodigal and the Samaritan, the leper and even Pharisees and tax collectors. A story that doesn't end at the cross but continues to resurrection and still lives today, that with God all things are possible and each and every day that power of love, that is in this very room, is active in the world creating goodness and newness.

That's a much better message, one that brings life and vitality, instead of being like the scarecrow stuck on a pole of paralysis. When we find ourselves in difficult places/times/situations, when we find ourselves in that land of Oz, what can we do? One thing is to stop listening to the message of the crows.

Next week....finding home.