

# Salmon Stream

At the Presbytery meeting last Saturday, during the morning worship, a minister talked about church leadership. He compared it to a salmon run. He said church leadership is like salmon going upstream. Some streams help salmon to make their way, while some streams don't. There are always challenges and obstacles but the salmon somehow manage to swim upstream to lay their eggs. The minister invited everyone in the room to think about what makes us keep going as church leaders. I appreciated him using the idea of salmon to describe church leadership, but there was something missing.

Salmon, most of all, are full of energy and vitality. I went fishing last year, and I experienced the thrill of reeling in a fighting salmon. No wonder salmon can swim upstream with such determination! I asked myself, "Do we church leaders have as much energy and vitality as salmon have?" and "Where does our strength come from?" I am not the only one who has observed the difference between their thriving local congregations and their struggling Presbyteries. Leadership beyond individual churches is difficult; for every thriving church in our presbytery, there is a church that is struggling to stay open. You could argue that it's simply a matter of demographics, of cultural relevance, of Sundays booked with soccer games and shopping. It's easy to make the overall decline in church attendance sound like it's not the church's fault at all... But Hans Küng, whose most recent book is *Can the Church Still Be Saved?*, says that the church is suffering a "crisis of leadership".

I thought maybe salmon had something to teach us. So I went where the minister told me to go, hoping to be inspired by the wisdom of salmon. Unfortunately there were none, except a couple of dead ones floating in the water. But, even without salmon the place was so beautiful, it inspired me to imagine the amazing migration of the salmon. As I was observing the ocean, the river and the estuary where the ocean and the river met, I was filled with awe and wonder; how can salmon find their way back to their birthplace to reproduce after migrating across thousands of miles of open ocean? After I came home, I found in my boy's bookshelf an interesting book, *Salmon Stream*, written by Carol Reed-Jones.

At the end of the book, Carol explains about the salmon cycle; parts of the story attracted my attention. “When young salmon migrate downstream to the ocean, traveling by night, hiding and resting in pools by day, if they are forced to linger too long in any resting place along the way to the ocean, they may lose the urge to migrate. Then the young salmon may not complete the cycle and spawn.” I thought this was interesting. The challenge for salmon not only comes from other creatures like bears, wolves, eagles, bigger fish or humans, but also comes from within, when they lose their desire to continue their journey, despite their heritage, despite the species-deep need to go on. Here, salmon give us a clue; maybe the deepest challenge of church leadership doesn’t stem from the secular world, but comes from within, when we lose our yearning for God’s kingdom, when we forget how and why our journey of faith began, and the one who is always calling us.

When the people of God cross the Jordan River, God tells Joshua to command the priests to carry the Ark of the Covenant into the Jordan River before anyone else crosses. What is the Ark of the Covenant? It’s the visible sign of the invisible God’s presence. Inside the ark a copy of the law was placed as God had instructed Moses. The ark is sacred. It accompanies the people and it sustains them. The sacred is present in the lives of the people and in our lives. But just because a thing is sacred does not make it easy to live with. The people’s struggle to live out their covenant with God is endless in Egypt, last for forty years in the desert, and even carries into the Promised Land.

In the midst of their difficult times, it is crucial for them to be reminded of their purpose and desire to live out God’s way. So the Ark of the Covenant is a reminder of their journey with God, and evokes their deep yearning for God. After the people see the Ark, they follow after it, confirming that they have only one true leader: not Moses nor Joshua, but God.

Jesus affirms this saying, in Matthew 23:10, “None of you should be called the leader. The Messiah is your only leader.” Thank God I am not your leader. Thank God none of us are the leaders: not the Board members, not the Presbytery, not the Conference, not the General Council. We have only one leader, Jesus Christ our Lord. This is a very powerful message. In fact this is a warning to all church

leaders, including myself; if we lose Christ's heart, we will lose our leadership. Throughout the whole chapter of Matthew 23, Jesus condemns the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law, the religious leaders at that time.

But if you look deeply into the chapter, you will find that Jesus' intention is not just to denounce those leaders, but to empower his followers to become leaders, hoping that they will continue to follow his teachings. Notice to whom Jesus speaks - the crowds and his disciples. They are not perceived as leaders. They are just ordinary people. But they can be leaders if they have Christ's heart.

Anyone who has Christ's heart is our leader; it can be you, it can be children, youth or a stranger. The question is who has Christ's heart today. That is, I think, the key to revive church leadership. Christ came to serve, not to be served. He lived by example. He listened to people's needs and concerns, prayed for people, washed his disciples' feet, and showed his love and compassion even on the cross. True Christian leadership doesn't come from the highest – not from superior bureaucratic skills, not from job seniority, not from the amount of degrees and honours on the wall; it comes from the lowest. The ones who listen more than they speak, the ones who serve more than they are served, the ones who understand that we each journey differently, but trust that God is bringing us all to the same place.

I wonder if the salmon who never leave the river regret their choice. Their lives, however long, would have been lived in a safe, quiet place with few challenges and no surprises. Maybe they would have congratulated themselves on their wise decision to abandon a journey that would have certainly been dangerous and demanding. But – they would have never experienced the ocean – not its depths, its currents, the amazing food they would have discovered, the hazards that may have shortened their lives but also taught them to appreciate the simple miracle of being alive. Worship is ingrained in us as a species; we, as a people, follow Christ. It's always tempting to step out of the full flow of the demands of a Christian life, to seek an unchallenging spot and question why anyone would feel the need to swim any harder than they have to. The answer is simple: God wants us to have a bigger life. God wants to lead us to a deeper life. All we have to do is follow.