



**“De-fence-less”**  
sermon for  
**The United Church  
in the Valley**  
April 27, 2008  
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Read: Acts 4:32-37; Genesis 1:27-28; 1:31-2:1; John 20:11-16a

Marilynn and I have driven Highway 22 from Calgary to the Crows Nest Pass many times now in the seven years we've lived out here. As the landscape changes going southward from the parkland west of Calgary to the sweeping, tree-less grasslands south of Longview, I've noticed something interesting. There are fewer and fewer fences.

We more or less take fences for granted nowadays but they mean so much to people engaged in agriculture. The barbed-wire fence is the basic way you control livestock. But it means more than that, too. When you put up a fence it signals to others that you own what's inside – no trespassing. The poet Robert Frost famously wrote, “Good fences make good neighbours.” And since this is a ranching area, the fence has an even deeper significance. The fencing of the western plains of North America in the 1800s was a cause of controversy, even violence. If you drive from Priddis to the Whaleback and see fewer and fewer fences it's like going back in time, back to the time when the range was unfenced. There has been a shift since the late 1800s in how people out here make a living from the land – A shift from ranching on free range to industrialized herds with corrals and feedlots. Kevin Costner's 2003 Western movie, *Open Range* reflects the "range wars" that occurred in the American West in the late 1800s. The "wars" pitted those that believed in the "Law of the Open Range" - free access to water and grass for everyone, against the "barbed wire" men – land barons, who used the new fencing to define their empire and block the free-range cattlemen from moving their herds. [Review at <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0316356/>]

These meanings are part of your history here in the Valley. And so I invite you to hold in your mind's eye an image, one we have all seen so many times off the shoulder of the road: a horse standing by a barbed wire fence. I suggest this can become a very powerful symbol for us.

If the horse could speak it might tell us how it longs to taste the lush green grass that grows just across the fence, so juicy, so delicious (to a horse!). Or perhaps it is dreaming of the wide-open vistas that lie beyond, a rolling horizon which invites the stallion to race the wind and raise the thunder of its hooves upon that unrestricted prairie. Could the horse speak it would say “Yes” to those possibilities beyond the fence, “Yes, please!” But if the fence could speak, it would talk of boundaries and limits. It would insist on land titles and stock control and the economics of the feedlot and of how tough it is to make a living these days when the fence always needs mending and feed prices are going up. Could the fence speak, it would say “No”.

The horse at the fence can be such a powerful symbol for us, such a potent metaphor for our human experience. Many times in our lives we feel a “yes” sweep up from within us only to encounter the “no” of boundary, restraint, limitation.

So keep the image of the horse at the fence in mind as I turn now to speak of church realities. If you live and work in churches for any length of time you get used to hearing over and over again at meetings, when the budget comes up, people calling for “financial responsibility”. The claim is always “Be realistic! It would be great if we could do that new ministry but we just can’t afford it!” Or: “You can’t keep going back to the same well! The givings of our faithful congregation members are already at their limit!”

Now financial responsibility and prudence and foresight in themselves are good things. But sometimes when we talk this way about reaching our limit what we are really doing is expressing a deep-seated fear. We have a deep-seated belief that the world is haunted by scarcity. It’s like we are programmed to expect that there is not enough to go around.

Three weeks ago in her sermon Shelley walked you through “nine steps to abundant living”.

1. *Be totally financially honest – analyze how much you really spend, and on what.*
2. *Go for quality, not quantity*
  1. *Give away 10% or more.*
  2. *Say everyday what you are grateful for.*
  3. *Eliminate jealousy, envy and resentment from your life.*
  4. *Practice forgiveness*
  5. *Practice receiving from others*
  6. *Work with diligence*
  7. *Believe that there is enough in the world.*

It’s when we get to the end of that list that we get right down to the nitty-gritty. The last and most basic step to take if we are to live abundantly is to “believe that there is enough in the world”. It is because we do not fundamentally believe there is enough in the world, enough to go around, that we fail to live abundantly, that we cramp up in spirit and grasp what we have. It is because we don’t really believe that God has stocked God’s good creation with wonderful possibilities that we hold back and refrain from venturing beyond what we know. In brief: instead of listening to the “yes”, all we hear is the fence saying “no”.

Against that, the biblical witness is: listen to the horse. Live in the “yes”. The biblical witness says that over and over again. It says it through the image of the abundant garden. If you were to read through the Bible, Old and New Testaments, and be on the lookout for it, you’d be struck by how often the image of the garden shows up at crucial moments in the Bible’s story of God’s graceful dealings with humankind.

According to the first account of creation in the book of Genesis,

*<sup>31</sup> God saw everything that [God] had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day. <sup>2:1</sup> Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude.*

Notice: the heavens and earth are filled with a “multitude” of wonderful things. A multitude – meaning abundance beyond counting. And that overflowing abundance is connoted by the garden image in the immediately-following, second creation story in Genesis.

*2:8 And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the East; there God put the man [= human being] whom God had formed.*

Now skip forward over the many other occurrences of that garden image in the Bible and notice a little detail in the Easter story as it is recounted in John's Gospel: Mary, weeping at Jesus' tomb

*20:14 ... turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. 15 Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him,*

On first encounter with the risen Jesus she supposes that he is just "the gardener". I've always wondered why this little detail is thrown in by John's Gospel. But we can see why. The garden is a frequent symbol in the Bible that points us to God's abundant blessings. The new order of things signalled by the rising of Jesus brings human beings back into alignment with what God originally intended. In fact it brings even the earth, the land, back into right relationship with God, and therefore fruitfulness. And so it is just so fitting that the resurrection happens in a garden. In some profound sense Jesus is the new gardener, that is, the new Adam. The garden of the empty tomb undoes the barren hill of Golgotha, and returns us to Eden.

Or to put it another way. Good Friday represents the power of death, death the final limit, death the loudest "No!" that we ever hear. Death, and the fear of it, is like a great barbed-wire fence, a fence that stops us in our tracks, and holds us back from living abundantly and keeps us from pursuing passionately the desires of God for us. But Easter morning represents God's breaking down of that fence, God's opening a gate for us, opening up to us a lush green pasture full of the abundant gifts God has prepared for us.

Our faith challenge is to be Easter people, not people held back by a fear of the Good Friday realities in life. Our faith challenge is to be good and faithful stewards, to give generously in order to unlock abundant living for the world around us – and for ourselves.

There's a horse inside each one of us that wants to race with the wind across the green meadows of God. And that horse has to ignore the "no" which the fence represents, and keep moving, looking, for the place where God has created a gate in the fence for us, and where God invites us to race right through.