In an article about George MacLeod, Scottish pastor, author, and founder of the modern-day Iona Community, biographer Ron Ferguson used the Gaelic term Seanachaidh, or storyteller, to describe him. He wrote, “George MacLeod was aware of the power of story. In his lectures to Church of England ordinands in 1936 he advocated . . .  the use of powerful stories and images to engage the imagination. He practiced what he preached, repeating and repeating and repeating until his stories became a community litany.”

So, when MacLeod was asked how the Iona Community began, he told this story: “I remember preaching individual salvation in the street in Goven one day, yes, to 500 men on a weekday at 4:00 o'clock. What else was there for them to do in the marketplace but listen to curate or Communist? An outspoken man in Question Time, speaking almost as God spoke to Isaiah, asked, ‘Do you think all this religious stuff will save?’ Very down at the heel he was, but very clear of eye. Suddenly, as he was speaking, I realized **he** was preaching the gospel and not I. I asked him to come up on the platform, but he refused and left the meeting."

MacLeod continued, “Some weeks later I received a message asking me to go to the hospital and see a man called Archie Gray. I had never heard the name before, but when I reached the hospital I found it was my questioner from the meeting and he was dying of starvation. The man was single, in a whole household of unemployed, which he had left because he felt he was eating too much of the rations. . . . He said he was bitter about the church, not because it was preaching falsehoods, but because it was speaking the truth and it did not mean what it said.” It was MacLeod’s contention that Archie Gray was the true founder of the Iona community.

Here Ferguson says, “At the heart of the myth there is the reality of a street encounter between an unemployed man and a privileged upper-class preacher, in which the minister suddenly finds himself addressed by God in a moment which changes his life. To hear George retell the story with all the oratorical gifts at his command is first to be drawn into the Goven street crowd, and then to be addressed directly. Thus in the riveting preaching of the theatrical  . . . Seanachaidh, a raw Glasgow street encounter becomes living story, becomes a contemporary word event, becomes life changing moment. The story  . . .  points to the burning heart of his conviction: that the church has the message which the world needs to hear and it must not be apologetic about it in the face of other ideologies–but the message is being denied by the life and practice of the messenger. George despairs of the church precisely because he loves it, and because he believes the church to be the one body which can point the way forward for the world.”

Jesus’ dear friend Lazarus died and Jesus raised him from the dead. Archie Gray died and the Iona Abbey was raised from the dead. Human beings are not givers of life but we have powers at our disposal and, as followers of this Christ, we have a calling to act. Christianity wants more from us than we like to admit. MacLeod saw Christianity as both irrational and “the better option for the kind of world he wants to live in.” And that’s it really, if we want peace, we must practice peace. And it still poses to the powers and principalities.

Just beyond the reading for today, John wrote, “Many of the Jews, therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did and believed in him. **46**But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. **47**So the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the council and said, “What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. **48**If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place[[h](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=john+11&version=NRSVUE#fen-NRSVUE-26561h)] and our nation.” **49**But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, “You know nothing at all! **50**You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.” **51**He did not say this on his own, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus was about to die for the nation, **52**and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God. **53**So from that day on they planned to put him to death.”

Society at some level has always accepted the hardships and deaths of the Archie Grays of the world to protect the status quo. The structures of Empire continue to be upheld around the world and in our own country. It is an ancient and modern pattern to accept colonies of the working poor, make scapegoats the vulnerable, and create fear of the immigrant and stranger as a potential enemy before considering they may be a potential friend.

Our Psalm for today speaks about the “depths.” In the words of one commentator, the depths or the “*profundus*” in the Latin are, “the state we cannot get out of by our own efforts.” There are psychological depths of grief, abuse, loss and authoritarianism. And there are the theological depths of human sin.

Counselor Sam Simmons was with our Wednesday evening group ten days ago to tell us about the ways the imposed and deeply learned behaviors of slavery, Reconstruction, and Jim Crow still echo in the bones of African Americans in our country. I am assuming it’s now similar to what researchers have documented in altered DNA and hormone levels in the children of Holocaust survivors and those with PTSD. It's possible that deep down we all have some kind of chemical memories from ancestors who did not have enough to eat or feared violence. Are we living from the depths, from profound and embedded fear? Do we pattern corporations and even churches in the pattern of Empire to feel more safe?

Then we must look again to MacLeod’s realization that the life and practice of the church does not convey healing, acceptance, wellness, wholeness on a wide scale. They prompt one commentator to ask us, “What is the difference between resurrection and resignation?” Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life.[[b](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+11%3A1-6%2C+17-27%2C++38-44&version=NRSVUE#fen-NRSVUE-26538b)] Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, **26**and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.” Do you and I believe this? And in this question I think he is really asking, are we living this? Or are we simply resigned to living in an unjust and wounded world? Ron Ferguson wonders if we treat the church as a symbol for God’s story rather than live as active participants in God’s story.

I recently heard this wonderful description of the gospel of John: “It is shallow enough for a child to play in and deep enough for an elephant to swim.” It prompts a consistent challenge to keep sifting through what we think we know of Christianity and our Christian calling, inviting reexamination and deeper engagement. And now is a good time to consider that because next week is the Sunday of the “Hosannas!” that are followed by Caiaphas’ triumph.

George MacLeod had another well-known community litany: “One of our local Clyde-side brilliants, a quasi-communist who has smoked more of my cigarettes than any other man alive, suddenly burst into my room unexpectedly to proclaim, you folk have got it: if only you knew that you had it and if only you knew how to begin to say it. It was his certainty that rebuked me; his implied need that moved me. What in effect he said was you know you could save me and you know you aren't doing it.”

Jesus lived the paradox of letting his close friend die in order that Lazarus might live. He raised his friend to life knowing it would provoke his own death and made the choice to do it anyway, he intentionally bolstered the chaos of the pharisees and chief priest. In one of his published prayers, MacLeod refers to this as a “chaos of uncalculating love.” They tried to kill the message by killing the messenger; we need a living message to share. This is a call to find our words for our love stories, to tell our stories until they become community litany. And we haven’t much experience with that.

So, I listened back to our August 7th service when Randi Roth, director of Interfaith Action shared a litany of our joint work. She said our Project Home cots were slept in 10,127 times over the years that House of Hope hosted hundreds of families in the building. And in her words, these neighbors (these Archie Grays) gained stability and economic mobility; everyone involved was changed by the work of authentic relationship; something changed in the city when we could see ourselves as one community; and finally our faith is strengthened by the work. Interfaith Action has now invited us into conversation about being an Anchor Congregation And we will discuss that calling.

In 1989, MacLeod received the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion and his son Maxwell wrote the following: “What makes this award utterly appropriate to the man is that it is not given for conventional behaviour. It is not given to loyal servants of the Church, to bureaucrats or even to honour great learning. No, this award is given to specifically honour anguished souls who act because they must in order to sleep at night. To trouble-makers who have turned over tables screaming blue murder. To intellectual vandals who break moulds with unwise words. To shockers who refuse to let us turn on the television and forget our ghastly world. It is given to the Solzenitzyns, the Dalai Lamas, to the George MacLeods.”

This Christian life is both comfort and risk. As we vision and discern our way forward, we are invited to go deeper to seek life and wholeness for as many of God’s people as we can.  May it be so. Amen.