Has anybody here had the experience of ‘running on fumes’? You know, when the needle on your gas gauge says empty but you’re thinking I can still make it. Those gauges aren’t accurate anyways. There’s always still a little bit more. But wait, that’s what you said yesterday.

Maybe you’ve got one of those digital measurements that say how many kilometers you have left. I’m thinking, it still says I have 118 km to go, so I can get to Blenheim and back. But then when you’re driving it seems to be going down a lot faster. And that’s when you realize that the estimated distance is probably based on someone going around 50 km/hr. Oops.

So now you’re driving with one eye on the road and the other on the gauge, as if willing it to stay out of the red will make it so. You grip the steering wheel harder and maybe sit a little more forward on the seat, as if that will help. This is when you realize that you’re ‘running on fumes.’

Life’s a lot like that too. There are things that we know are better to do earlier than later. Paying your bills on time, losing weight before it’s swimsuit time, saving for retirement before you realise that most of your friends are already retired.

Time has a way of running out on us. We think we’ve got lots of it left, just like the gas in the car, until we realize it’s almost too late. We’re not just running on fumes, we’re running on empty.

When Joshua was leading the Hebrews into Canaan, he knew that this was the beginning of a new start for his people (Josh 24:1-3, 14-25.) It was time to put away the old things of life, and start anew. He refers to the old days, when Abraham and Nahor, the sons of Terah, lived on the other side of the Euphrates. There they served other gods. It wasn’t until Jacob wrestled with the angel of God that they became worshippers of the one God, (Genesis 32:22-31.) When Moses encountered the burning bush in the desert, he learned that this God was the God of his ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who became Israel. This god’s name is Yawheh, which
means in Hebrew, “I AM WHO I AM”. There can be no other god beside the one who is “I Am”. The power of Yahweh is never empty; it is there for all believers (Ex.3:1-17.)

But, during their journey the people have wandered through many lands with many gods. It wasn’t unusual for pagan people to have several gods at the same time, and so some of the Israelites worshipped Ba’al, Ishtar and others alongside Yahweh. Joshua is telling them that this kind of polytheism is no longer appropriate. They are entering a new land, and they need to claim their identity as a unique people, the ones who serve the one true God. It is the power of this God that has brought them to this point.

Often it’s the case that you don’t know where you’re going until you look back to where you came from. In the parable of the ten bridesmaids, five of them were experienced enough to know that they needed to bring sufficient oil with them. But the other five did not. When the bride-groom came, they found that they were running on empty. They wanted the others to share, but they would not. That seems rather rude to us, but having enough oil for your lamp meant that you could see where you were going. It was dangerous to be outside at night in the dark. There were all kinds of robbers and wild beasts. A prudent person would protect themselves. A foolish one would expect other people to do it for them.

When Paul wrote to the early churches they were excited at first. To hear that the Messiah had come, and would come again! What could be better news than that? They had suffered a long time, under Egyptians, Babylonians, Assyrians and Romans. At long last they would be free of tyranny. Once more they would take possession of their ancestors’ lands.

Paul’s letters were written around 70 CE. They are among the earliest Christian writings. The gospels didn’t come until around 100CE. So when they heard about Jesus and his glorious return, they were going on faith.
They expected Jesus to return in their lifetime. So they waited. And they waited. And then they waited some more. When was Christ coming back? And what about the people who had died before the return of Christ? Their faith was beginning to wear out. They were running on empty.

Paul’s answer to the church of the Thessalonians was to paint a more vivid picture of their ultimate victory. Jesus was not an earthly Messiah who brought victory to the people of Israel. Jesus was the Christ who would bring the universal victory of life over death, triumph over grief. The Thessalonians were told by Paul, “Therefore encourage one another with these words.” (1 Thess. 4:18.)

We also need to encourage one another with words of faith, especially when we are running on empty. To be human means to experience loss, loneliness, discouragement and fear of the future. That is when we most need to hold up one another in faith.

Prayer is the fuel we use when we are at our lowest point. I don’t believe in a God who answers some prayers and not others, but a God who hears all prayers. Through prayer we are connected to the divine energy that exists in all things. For Christians, that divine energy is the Holy Spirit, which is of God but is not separate from God. A spiritual crisis occurs when we are not spirit-filled. We feel empty and alone at these times.

A church has a lifetime as well. It is strong and vigorous in its youth, and more wise and moderate with age. But churches need to go through a renewal to survive. Protestant churches originated in the period called the Reformation. Our tradition believes that churches need to be reformed and reforming. Churches need to be reborn.

Our church is running on empty. This is not news to most of us. But I’m here to tell you that a church does not run on money, or numbers. It runs on faith. If a church is dying it is a sign that it needs a spiritual renewal.
How will we know if the Spirit is alive within us? We will experience hope and peace and love. No one will have too much and everyone will have enough. One person’s pain is shared by all, and the joy of one is the joy of everyone. People who have been blinded by despair will see joy again. Those who have been deaf to hope will hear good news.

Those who have not been able to walk in a path of freedom because of addictions and mental problems will have hearts that leap and dance in celebration of the fullness of life.

Is this a dream? Perhaps it is. But it’s a dream worth living for. Jesus said, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” (John 10:10.) Let’s live those words as if they mean something. Let’s make it so.