

# St James United Church

Message for February 27, 2022

Transfiguration Sunday (Last Sunday after Epiphany)



“The Path to Peace”

- Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: Exodus 34:29-35; Luke 9:28-36; Excerpt from *Disciplines of the Spirit* by Howard Thurman

Today we stand on two thresholds, and they are surprisingly connected. What likely comes to most everyone’s mind is the one we face globally as Russia wages a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. A previously unthinkable scenario has happened and the security of Europe that came with the collapse of the Soviet Union thirty years ago is no longer assured. In many ways it feels more like a precipice than a threshold and we are unsure if we’re all about to fall. The second threshold is ecclesial in nature as we move from the Season of Sundays after Epiphany and begin Lent this coming Wednesday. So let me share with you now how these are connected.

Consider the main reading for today - Jesus on Mount Tabor with his closest disciples. The tale is itself a transition in the narrative. Eight days prior, Jesus asked them who they thought he was. Peter piped up and affirmed his belief that Jesus was the hoped for Messiah to which Jesus explained that he faced torture and death in Jerusalem. Peter protested and so in response Jesus cast him as Satan trying to tempt him from his path. What happened on the mountain shows that even being compared to Satan couldn’t dislodge Peter’s conviction that the Messiah was about power, him wanting to freeze the moment of victory and glory, and build shrines for Jesus, Moses and Elijah.

It feels to me like we’re witnessing some of the same as Russian troops swarm Ukraine. As much as for more than half a century we’ve “enjoyed” relative peace in most of the Global North, we have done so tied to the machinery of war. We like the trappings of power, regardless of the side of the conflict we’re on. President Putin seems to dream of restoring the glory of Greater Russia and will both reframe Ukrainian-Russian history and sacrifice the lives of soldiers to do so. As for the West, we were unable to resist proving the “superiority” of capitalism by wooing former Soviet Bloc countries into the fold, even though we said we wouldn’t in the early nineties. Both sides seem wed to narratives of glory regardless of long-term consequences, and sadly on both sides religious bodies seem willing to align with their governments’ nationalistic agendas.

It seems like everyone needs to re-read what happened on Mt. Tabor in its full context. Jesus is transfigured as he prays and within that prayer speaks with Moses and Elijah about his coming suffering and death. The vision doesn’t validate Peter’s understanding of the messianic path as one of victory, but rather what Jesus said earlier about his future. It shows that the way of divine glory is never about power but comes through the opposite. Paul in his letter to the Philippians wrote: “Though he was in the form of God, [Jesus] didn’t deem equality with God as something to exploit but emptied himself... and becoming like human beings... humbled himself by

becoming obedient to the point of death on a cross.” Glory came through his embrace of the cross, and the same is true for us as his followers. We experience God’s grace in and through us as we let go of power, not cling to it.

One way to facilitate this is by taking on Jesus’ own practice as seen in our gospel, withdrawing to spend time in contemplation and prayer. Part of this is talking to God, as I’m sure many are doing as they pray for peace in Ukraine. But prayer is more about being present to God, heart open and vulnerably listening. In this we’re not just praying for God to restore peace but praying that God’s peace will flow through us to others. As I pray I let down my guard, like Moses when he drops the veil to go before God. Over time I learn to set aside my agenda and simply listen to the voice of God at my heart. It’s often not profound. Mostly I’m overshadowed by a cloud of my own chattering ego. But with discipline, watching and waiting like Howard Thurman in his boat, there are times when there is a sense of presence, a gift of communion that while personal is also beyond it, holding not just me but all things in love. When I leave my time of prayer, even if it was mostly spent setting aside one thought after another, I feel more open to God’s presence of love around me, more aware of signs of hope and peace, in the buds on a tree ready to open come Spring, someone holding a door for a parent struggling with a stroller, or in our present context, Indigenous peoples showing solidarity with Ukraine by wearing kokum scarves on social media, the floral scarves first given to them by Ukrainian settlers when they came to Canada. And because prayer isn’t an end in itself but a practice that changes my heart, I also end up more open to share God’s hope and peace in what I do. Both in prayer and action we learn that God’s peace comes not through power wielded over others but when it is shared with and for others, including being willing to sacrifice for them as Jesus did. Through the open-heartedness fostered in prayer we both want to encourage the thousands of Russians risking everything to protest the war, and do our part as heavier sanctions on Russia impacts our economy too.

The path Jesus revealed atop the mountain runs counter to the way of our world. It makes little sense that the victory of God’s reign of love and peace comes not through power but through powerlessness. But this is the paradox of the spiritual life. The glory we seek in God comes as we let go of personal glory, the new life we pray for is only possible through the scandal of the cross. We symbolize this each year at the start of Lent as we take last year’s palm fronds, signs of victory, and even armed struggle, once a symbol of the Maccabees after they triumphed over the Greeks, and burn them so they are effectively compost, a reminder traced as a cross on people’s foreheads that the renewal we seek comes as we let go in love.

Friends, may we take this to heart this Lent, standing on a threshold not just in the church year but as a world. It may not seem like much but we can dedicate this Lent to peace, praying with one of the spiritual practices that I’ll be teaching each Sunday as part of worship, or fasting for peace as the Pope has suggested, or perhaps taking on another prayer form that you find is meaningful. And should the war end tomorrow, may we keep praying. It’s a school for hearts, helping us model ourselves after Jesus. He continued from the mountain to Jerusalem, not for glory but to give his life in witness of God’s peace. May we do the same, not clinging to power but sharing it in love. Then God’s peace will come. Amen.