

St James United Church

Message for March 13, 2022
Second Sunday in Lent



“The Strength of Compassion”
- Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: Genesis 15:1-18; Luke 13:31-35; Excerpt from Julian of Norwich’s *Revelations of Divine Love*

Thank goodness our new Social and Eco Action Committee put together an awareness calendar for Lent. In this time of global crisis, it has helped me to do small things to make the world a bit better, even if not directly about the war. That’s how we feel in a crisis. We want to respond, and I’ve been heartened by the creative ways people have done just that, like booking a few nights at Air B&Bs in Ukraine to send money. It brings hope when it’s so easy to fall into despair given how powerless we feel. We did the same two years ago at the start of the pandemic as people sewed masks, made grocery runs for neighbours, put up rainbows to support frontline workers.

As much as we want to actively respond, our readings offer a caution, and present an equally important approach. Let’s look at the Genesis reading. It’s a story of covenant and blessing but also crisis. God promised Abram that he’d be a great nation and bring blessing to the world. But in the reading Abram is having none of it. He and Sarai are still childless, and Eliezer will be his heir. This was no-go because Eliezer, an enslaved person, is viewed by Abram as unworthy of support or affection. The push-back seems to work. God covenants with Abram. But in a portion omitted in the lectionary, Abram learns his descendants will be enslaved for four hundred years. I’m not saying God was punishing Abram for judging Eliezer, but sometimes our actions can have unintended consequences, inviting us to pause and reflect before pushing through.

Despite that, we culturally tilt toward active response. In our gospel, Pharisees alert Jesus to the threat from Herod. They’re doing something. We like that. But Jesus chooses to stay the course and affirms that he’s continuing on to Jerusalem even if his fate, like other prophets, is death. He trusts God will bring blessing through it even if he doesn’t see how. This response feels passive. We acknowledge this, calling his suffering, death and resurrection, his “passion”. The root word, *pati*, means to wait or endure. But we reveal in the West, that we prefer to move rather than wait. Initially the celebration of Easter was about Jesus’ death as well as his resurrection, the focus on his crucifixion connected to Passover and the sacrifice of lambs. Christians were persecuted and saw their suffering as being joined to Christ, finding new life in him as they died to self will, their “passions”, and trusted God in Christ would bring blessing through them.

But after Christianity became the religion of the Roman Empire the emphasis shifted to action. Christian use of the Passover motif focused on crossing the sea from slavery, or sin, into freedom, that is grace. It was all movement, spiritual growth not gained in sacrificing for each other in this life but ascending to the Promised Land of heaven through religious practice. An

active-movement focus continued through Church expansion as various peoples and tribes converted to the faith, by the sword if necessary. While not a “religious” conflict, some of this seems at play in the current war, for the West as well as for Russia. And we have quickly applauded President Zelenskiy for staying behind in Ukraine to fight back. In the face of the invasion this is admirable. But how would we view him if he’d chosen to concede, to back away from NATO and the EU, at least for the time being, to spare Ukraine the devastation we’re witnessing? What if he’d chosen to wait? Would we applaud him just the same?

I’m not making a judgement. History will determine what was the right course of action, just as it will regarding the choices made about the pandemic. But in all this I look to Jesus’ response to his coming “passion”. Beyond his trust in God what stands out for me is his compassion for his people, including the leaders who would have him crucified. It’s no coincidence that compassion and passion are related. Jesus moved toward his death with the same acceptance that defined his life. If we are attentive to the narrative, we don’t see a rush toward Jerusalem to achieve a higher goal. Instead we see him in Galilee, walking with people in their pain, knowing it only lifts as we pass through it. Jesus reached out in love, heard their stories, nurtured relationships and formed supportive community as people accompanied each other in their struggles. In that they could also imagine a world without the situation that led to suffering in the first place.

As church we’re at our best when we live out what Jesus began, making space to listen, reflect and discern how to act. It’s all we can do in this moment: wait, pray, be present with compassion to Ukrainians and Russians in St. John’s. We’ve done it before. Consider the years leading to ’88. Those of us who identify as LGBTQI+ were unseen, and so unheard, making it easy to ignore our suffering caused by prejudice and exclusion, including in the church. But in supportive spaces in some church circles, we shared stories and friendships grew, and the church as a whole voted in favour of inclusion. Affirming ministries like ours still offer space for gender and sexual minorities, and other marginalized groups to be seen, heard and empowered to advocate for needed change.

I hesitate to say this given it was just International Women’s Day, but the approach I’m speaking about feels maternal. I guess it shouldn’t be a surprise given Julian of Norwich’s prayer experience of Jesus as our mother. Women like to solve issues as much as men, but unlike many men, me included, who faced with someone in pain want to fix the situation, in my experience women seem more inclined to sit with them, listen, and wait for solutions to reveal themselves. There’s action in this but it feels more open to what is, rather than pushing for what could be. As the war in Ukraine continues, as we increasingly experience economic pain as a result, as beyond this we potentially face new waves of COVID, and who knows what other issues may need our attention, we want to respond but need this more accepting approach too, waiting in solidarity and discerning the best way forward.

As much as I want to respond in some way to the crisis we face, Jesus reminds me that waiting is a response as we first take time to listen, build trust, and nurture community. We may want to act but the way of patient compassion is also our call, trusting that God is bringing blessing even if we can’t see how. Amen.