

St James United Church

Message for March 20, 2022

Third Sunday in Lent



“The Crisis of a Crisis”

- Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: Isaiah 55:1-9; Luke 13:1-9; Excerpt from *The Book of Forgiving* by Desmond Tutu

As I shared last week, it’s easy to despair in a crisis like what we’re facing. And I’m sure many of you, like me, feel a mixture of emotions in addition to despair. I for one am saddened by all of the destruction and frustrated we seem unable to move beyond war to resolve disputes. I feel proud of our national response, not just by leaders but fellow citizens, and humbled by the heroic efforts some are making in comparison to my feeble response. And under these feelings is fear. I came of age in the early 80’s and the ongoing Cold War. Not since then have I been as worried that a conflict could escalate into the unthinkable prospect of a nuclear war.

All these emotions are natural. We’re facing a crisis and left with not just feelings but questions about life, morality, politics, theology, just like the people asking Jesus about the Galileans killed under order of Pilate. Operating under a theology of moral cause and effect, they assumed the deaths of their neighbours was a divine punishment. No doubt they were deflecting too. We do that. It’s easier to cope with the random nature of life if we think we deserve our blessings rather than it simply being the luck of when we were born or where we were when tragedy came. It’s in part why ancient peoples offered sacrifices: appease the gods and ensure their anger’s directed elsewhere. We don’t offer animals on an altar but do appease “powers and principalities” in other ways, rarely questioning conventional wisdom of politicians, business think tanks, and the like.

Jesus’ questioners were experiencing a crisis, but he understood it as an opportunity, a chance for them to stop and reflect on the situation, including where they fit in it. This is what it means to repent. The word’s been over-layered with shame and guilt, but it means to turn around, have a change of heart. We hear Desmond Tutu say as much as he calls on his reader to choose a path other than revenge which is a way to avoid facing both pain and personal complicity. The Galileans’ blood being mixed with their sacrifices hints at this. Jesus makes clear they were not being punished by God, but he doesn’t let them off the hook completely. He says “unless you repent, you’ll perish as they did.” In other words, as long as you keep trying to ward off violence with violence, or in our context end a war by going to war, you’ll keep getting more of the same.

Repentance begins with an honest appraisal of a situation, painful as it is, knowing that we may find a more life-giving path than the one we are on. This applies to any issue, but I’d like to look at the war in Ukraine. I’ve been reading various sources, watching a number of videos. As wrong as the invasion is, there’s more at play than “the rash act of a madman” analysts have us think.

Did you know that large natural gas fields were discovered off the coast of Ukraine? Russia is the world's largest producer of oil and natural gas. So, it seems that among other political goals, Putin doesn't want Europe to have a new supplier, and not one allied with the West. Knowing the war is in part over control of fossil fuel leaves me feeling complicit, our ongoing reliance on oil and gas despite decades long calls to find alternatives factoring into the situation. It also has me feeling more cautious of reporting. Analysts have been quick to question Putin's mental state but no one in my recollection called George W. Bush "irrational" when the US invaded Iraq. Some analysts made a link between Iraq and oil and yet it was Saddam Hussein who was demonized rather than Bush. All this has made me pause, questioning the motives not just of Russia but all our leaders, in media, in business as well as politicians. It's quite sobering.

It also brings clarity so that we can seek alternatives. As Isaiah wrote, God's ways are not our ways, God's thoughts beyond our thoughts. This is not to suggest that we are stuck in the status quo. After all, Isaiah invites us to seek God while we can. It's a reminder of how much unspoken assumptions shape our response and so limit our choices. Instead we can draw on a more life-giving narrative than perpetual us-and-thems, with the aims of "our side" automatically righteous, and the choices of "our enemy" the ultimate evil. That script leaves Russians who are opposed to the war stuck at the Mexican border with the US while Ukrainians enter with a flash of their passport. Isaiah offers another view: "All who are thirsty, come to the water! Whoever has no money, come and eat!... Why buy what isn't food and spend your earnings on what does not satisfy?" His words echo Proverbs with Wisdom inviting us to God's abundance where, as Rev. Bob Fillier put it in our Affirm Celebration last week, everyone is welcome to the table, not for scraps but a five-course meal that takes hours to eat. Everything there is comes from God, and so is a gift to be freely shared. God is the host offering everyone forgiveness, mercy and love.

That's what Jesus came to show us, and did so through the way of the cross. We often see the cross as something he did for us, but it's also what we participate in, an example of sacrificing for others. We can only really do this when we die to ourselves, let go of our deflections, of blame, of self-congratulatory propaganda. When we do, we create space for truthfulness, for healing, for reconciliation. It's not easy to do on our own, which is why prayer is such an important part of our spiritual journey. But as we pray, we experience Jesus as the gardener in his parable, tending to us with care, knowing it takes time for us to bear the fruit of repentance. In this he is also, as we heard last week, our mother, helping us to see more clearly, holding us when it hurts to do so, patiently reminding us we're loved even when complicit in the crises we face, offering wisdom to discern how best to live out his way of compassionate justice and inclusive care, not just in terms of the present conflict in Ukraine but in whatever moral or other crisis we face.

As Desmond Tutu reminds us, we're at a junction. As we stand there, may we bring our many feelings and concerns to prayer, pausing to reflect honestly before we choose our path. With God's grace may we all choose the way of repentance, "where hope and wholeness make their homes". It is the path to peace. Amen.