

St James United Church

Message for April 3, 2022
Fifth Sunday in Lent



“Conflicting Visions”
- Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: Isaiah 43:16-21; John 12:1-8; Bernard of Clairvaux, “Sermon 83 on *the Song of Songs*”

It's early April and it's still Lent. It feels odd. Most other years today would more likely be Palm Sunday or Easter. It's all down to how the date of Easter is calculated based on the relationship between the cycle of the moon and the equinox. It makes for interesting party chatter but leaves most of us scratching our heads. It's a choice made a long time ago but still has a lasting impact.

The issue of choice is at play in our readings too. Consider the passage from John where conflict between Judas and Jesus takes centre stage. It's all about Mary's decision to buy expensive nard to anoint Jesus' feet. It likely wasn't a difficult choice for her. Recall that the scene takes place in the home she shares with sister Martha and brother Lazarus whom Jesus raised from the dead. In fact, Lazarus is at the dinner table. Perhaps Mary could think of no better way to thank Jesus for having her brother back. From Judas' perspective, her choice was wasteful. In all this is another decision, that of the author to take what in other gospels is performed by an unnamed woman and have it done by Lazarus' sister. A foreshadowing of Jesus' death in Mark and Matthew turns into something more pivotal, especially when you remember Jesus at the tomb of Lazarus saying that he is the resurrection and the life and all who believe in him though they die will in fact live.

This shifts Isaiah's “Behold, I am doing something new” for me to a future reality as I am reminded of Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians and of Revelation. We're made new in Christ says Paul while John affirms that God will create a new heaven and earth. As much as Isaiah's desert made lush and green points to the exiles returning from Babylon, a much more profound transformation is on the horizon if we begin to trust in God's leading, a coming renewal of heart and mind that will bring healing to the world's nations, a communal resurrection that will restore the vision of Eden where everyone and everything has a place in the web of creation, and justice and peace are finally restored.

This is the context in which I hear Isaiah tell the people to “No longer consider the ways of old.” It's like they're given a choice to walk a path that leads to healing for all of life or keep the status quo even though it brings ongoing injustice and death. It reminds me of the seven fires prophecy which I learned about when I was a priest in an Oji-Cree community. It speaks of a future when the people, after being fooled by a message of salvation, will return to the teachings of the elders and usher in a time of renewed community and peace. But there's a catch. The prophecy says at

the same time the light skinned peoples will have to choose between a path that's lush and green or one that's charred. Choosing the second will bring death and destruction to the world.

That stark choice was on my mind as I watched news of the delegation of survivors of residential schools meeting Pope Francis. I was sceptical, waiting so long for the Roman Catholic hierarchy to collectively address its role in residential schools as other denominations have done. It has felt like a contemporary playing out of the conflict between Judas and Jesus. Judas seems good, wanting to help those in need while Jesus appears focused on Mary's gift as he says, "you'll always have the poor with you". But Jesus is quoting Deuteronomy 15 which says that because there'll always be people in need, we must keep choosing compassion and care as prime values rather than indifference and greed. He's inviting us onto the lush and green path leading to a world with less and less need. Mary's act then is not wastefulness but a sign of generosity as we share in God's abundance. In Judas' approach the poor get handouts, but the status quo goes unchallenged. The powerful still hold the purse strings, giving charity to ease their conscience, not to overturn injustice. That status quo world is part of the charred path that brings death.

These conflicting visions have been at play since the abuses in the schools first came to light. I vividly remember sitting at the table over twenty years ago, still a priest, listening to colleagues, including my bishop, complain about the lawyers advocating on behalf of victims. I wanted to scream at them, "Stop fighting in court and do the right thing, even if it means we go bankrupt." It felt like they were emulating Judas, appearing good but only thinking of the bottom line. But then on Friday I heard Pope Francis say, "I am very sorry" and ask for forgiveness not just on his part but on behalf of the Canadian bishops. I was surprised at how emotional I felt. And I'm just a non-Indigenous person who once ministered in First Nations and Métis communities. I can only begin to imagine how Indigenous people across the country felt. And while it wasn't what everyone hoped for, it felt like the pope had finally embraced the vision of Jesus not Judas.

That it took so long reminds me that it requires more than our will to place the needs of the hurt and vulnerable first and share the earth's gifts with respect and care for all. Bernard reminds us that God is there to help us do just that as we seek love's source and draw from it afresh. It's all about grace, Isaiah's transformation of the desert not literal but spiritual, God watering it one heart at a time. It's an invitation into the healing waters flowing from God's throne in Revelation. In baptism we represent this externally, but something else happens as water is poured and we rise to become a new creation in Christ. That grace is always there, if we draw on it, and it is not for ourselves so that we go to some future heaven. We are called to be refreshed in it each day, enabling us to choose the path of Jesus and help to reshape our present in God's love.

Each Lent, however late it is, we reflect on our baptism and the choices we make to embody its meaning, not just in terms of Indigenous-church relations but in all aspects of our lives. To me the choice is simple - to keep following Jesus' path and through grace to turn the deserts of our lives into gardens where everyone is cared for in God's love. I pray we all choose wisely. Amen.