

St James United Church

Message for August 7, 2022

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost



“Led from Fear”

- Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: Isaiah 1:10-20; Luke 12:32-40

I'm a fan of fantasy and science-fiction and one of my favourite books, Frank Herbert's *Dune*, combines both. I recommend reading the book rather than watching a movie version, although I am biased in that based on David Lynch's 1984 film. I share this not just to reveal my geeky side (although I have just done so), but because the narrative offers a wise insight about fear. It comes from part of a litany adopted by the religious order of women in the *Dune* universe known as the Bene Gesserit. It begins this way: “I must face my fear. Fear is the mind-killer.”

Fear is the mind killer. That strikes me as very true. It's a very primal emotion, isn't it. We may flee if we are afraid, perhaps freeze in place, as much as be moved to fight. Fear of rejection can cause us to withdraw from those we love. Fear of finding a new love can keep someone in an unhappy marriage. Politicians too often lead from our fear to stay in power even though it harms society. We see this when they turn immigration into a hot button issue, tapping into a fear of strangers that we learn in our formative years, and distracting us from the real issues. The cost-of-living crisis works in energy companies' favour as they use our fear of high costs to double down on fossil fuels rather than invest in “riskier” alternatives. We see this in play globally, Putin banking that rising inflation will undermine Western support of Ukraine.

Fear can hamper us as faith communities too, especially in these “near the end of COVID” times when, regardless of denomination, people haven't returned to worship in the numbers many of us expected, revealing the extent of church decline we were facing collectively before the pandemic. In times like these it's easy to draw back, afraid that we won't have enough funds. This looks at our situation as the world does, through a scarcity lens, and forgets that everything we have comes from God. Feeling limited, we hold on to what we have rather than share it. We're tempted to contract our purpose to just worship at 11:00 am on a Sunday, failing to heed Isaiah's prophecy that God's desire is service more than sacrifice, and so for us to extend Jesus' ministry of compassion and justice in our neighbourhood. Worship, like the sacrament of communion we share today, is intended not as an end in itself but to feed us so we can go into our community to defend the “orphans” and plead for the “widows” of our local context, as well as to partner with others in our community doing good and rescuing the oppressed, God with them in their work as in ours.

In this I'm reminded of an interview I saw recently as part of a virtual summit of spiritual leaders and innovators. Rev. Amy K. Butler, recently the lead minister at Riverside Church, the first female lead minister at this prominent pulpit not just in Manhattan but across the US, spoke to

how the fear of letting down our spiritual ancestors can impact us. At times I see that at play at St. James. We look around, don't see full pews, the mess of kids that were here twenty years ago, and fear that we've let down our charter families. The temptation then is to focus on the building, and programs within it, to double down on what worked before, and expect church life to bounce back. In doing so we forget how the neighbourhood and people's attitudes have changed. We forget too that the average congregation lasts about eighty years. It either reinvents itself to find new ways to reach out with God's love to the neighbourhood and to the world, or it finds ways to share its resources with others who will.

Those prospects can be frightening. Or we can be excited for what God has planned. I tilt toward the second, taking to heart Jesus' words: "Don't be afraid, little flock. It is your Father's desire to give you the kingdom." These words are offered as part of a wider teaching about trust, as Jesus points to how God looks after ravens and lilies. In this I hear an invitation to not simply focus on the church but on God's Reign, to go and help resolve issues we're rightfully frightened about, to confront those using fear to manipulate, to offer an alternative to fear by lovingly sharing from our resources, that is God's resources, from God's great abundance.

We're to be "dressed for service", "ready for action" or as traditionally rendered to have "girded one's loins". This was to hike up your robe (good job I'm wearing one today), then tuck the hem into your belt and turn it into "shorts" so you could fight or work or serve. It helped you move more easily, be more limber and responsive to present needs. We can do that, flexible in our approach to church, focused not on what was, but what's before us, to speak with neighbours, hear what is on their hearts, respond to their fears, and help shift how we're coping with our own, individually and as a congregation. This may lead us to try new ministry approaches, even do what may not have seemed like "church" when this congregation was planted 60 plus years ago, but doing so in response to issues our neighbours are facing right now. We may fail, but don't need to be scared of that. Instead we learn from the experience as any person engaged in a new venture does, and keep adapting for the next iterations of ministry.

Despite the decline we see for the church, it's only a decline of what's been, and really only of church as it's been for two hundred years at best. It certainly isn't a decline of the gospel. God still calls us to live the good news, and share it. And there are those waiting to receive it. To paraphrase our incoming moderator, the Rev. Dr. Carmen Lansdowne, we need to remember that although much of the world is out of balance, hence how easily we give into fear or are led by those exploiting it, we're still an Easter people, called to live in hope, not afraid of decline but trusting in the resurrection. As we do, we live into the world we imagine. If we only see reasons for fear, that's all there'll be. But when we live in hope, we're more creative, more able to solve problems, more willing to try new things. As we do, we keep trusting in God's leading.

Fear is a mind-killer, but only when we insist on being in control, relying on ourselves and end up withdrawing from others, and from God. We don't need to be afraid. Instead may we trust. Christ is leading us, leading us as disciples rooted in his love for all, leading us from fear into hope, leading us from the world's fear of scarcity into the shared abundance of God's reign. May that be the narrative we live. It's the narrative that brings new life. May it be so. Amen.