

St James United Church

Message for November 6, 2022 Remembrance Sunday



"A Vision of Peace"

- Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: Sirach 38:16-20; Isaiah 2:1-5

I'm finding these days of Remembrance harder than most years, and I'm not alone. Once a month our Sunday evening worship is planned by a group of 20-to-30-somethings and as we looked to this month, I asked them how they felt as we approached Remembrance Day. They shared how they were nervous. They still want to honour those who died in past wars, but their focus is on the current conflict in Ukraine, including Russian threats about nuclear arms. Their words took me back to when I was their age during the Cold War. Like them, as much as I want to give respect for those who died in past wars, my heart breaks over the present and the loss of hard won peace in Europe.

In this the words of Sirach feel particularly apt. How can our tears not flow for the dead, and how can they not flow for the injured, the bombed out and the displaced? It's right then that we make our mourning worthy of everyone who has been so tragically impacted, including some we may know personally with many Ukrainian families now living in St. John's and area. I had the opportunity to sit down with a family last month and their anguish for their loved ones still in Ukraine broke my heart. Gone are their hopes for their homeland in the grip of an unnecessary war. And ultimately what war is necessary? I say this in no way against the people of Ukraine. We all have a right to defend ourselves. But I don't understand why there was an invasion in the first place, and why, as analysts suggest, that as peace talks broke down, allies didn't do more to bring them back together rather than let the conflict become a proxy war between Russia and the West?

Despite these questions of mine, many question the alternatives to armed conflict. In times like these, people will decry "appeasement", pointing to British PM Neville Chamberlain, who returned from Munich in 1938 proclaiming "peace for our time" only for World War II to erupt less than a year later. They assume that any attempt to find a non-military solution is a show of weakness. Yet this past month was the 60th anniversary of the Cuban Missile Crisis, the closest the world has been to all-out nuclear war. Thankfully, President John F. Kennedy and

Chairman Nikita Khrushchev didn't listen to the more hawkish of their advisors and found a solution through backchannels that let them both save face, and the two nations to step back from the brink of global annihilation. They began corresponding with each other and were looking at a nuclear test ban when Kennedy was killed with Khrushchev ousted soon after.

In all of this, God shows us a more hopeful world, Isaiah 2 picturing a future when weapons of destruction are reshaped into tools of creation. It takes us back to the Garden of Eden when God made us as gardeners, a task that needs us to work together. It's a beautiful vision but so is what precedes it, Mount Zion lifted up as a place of spiritual homecoming for all the world's nations. And so as pivotal as backchannels are, they are preceded by grace, an awakening that makes peace possible. I don't know what motivated Khrushchev, but Kennedy was a person of faith. Perhaps he remembered his catechism, perhaps he recalled that we are all made in God's image, the divine in us and others, binding us as a whole, and so calling us to collaborate with rather than to compete against others.

I believe it was such an awakening that shaped how Jesus lived his life, so that he reached out to those rejected by others, and enabled him to call his followers to love their enemies, to go beyond "an eye for an eye" and instead to "turn the other cheek". This teaching has often been used to suggest we should stand down in the face of aggression but it's the opposite. We need to stand up against aggression, but without mirroring the violence back. To do this one clearly needs to survive, and so defense is needed, but when we match the aggression with equal or increased violence, we end up shedding more and more blood, in turn making it more and more difficult to bring healing between peoples. So Jesus instead pointed to techniques of nonviolent resistance which confront the aggressor with their shared humanity. This to me was key to Kennedy and Khrushchev. They saw that their predicament was shared both personally and nationally. And so I believe it was their willingness to see in the other a fellow leader and not an enemy that helped them step back from the brink. I pray we can have more of that these days, to see past the fear and anger so as to reach for peace.

These are worrying times, but I pray that in grace we can find another path than the one we are on, one where we can learn from the past to seek a more peaceful and collaborative future. It isn't easy. It takes inner strength, the support of others, and grace. But friends, today we share a sacrament that facilitates all three, opening us in love to one another and Christ. And God is also at work beyond this place, opening many hearts to the inner peace that makes outer peace possible. May we pray for this awakening in grace, that held in God's love we may cultivate lasting peace together. Amen.