

St James United Church



Message for November 5, 2023

Remembrance Sunday

“Only One Thing I Know” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: Micah 3:5-10; Romans 8:31-39

Last year as we marked Remembrance Sunday I was unsure how to feel as war raged in Ukraine. This year I feel doubly unsure as the war in Ukraine continues and now Israel wages a war in Gaza, not just responding to the murder of fourteen hundred Israeli civilians and the kidnapping of two hundred and forty more, but trying to break Hamas for fear that otherwise they will strike again. But like the conflict in Ukraine, civilians are the real victims. It's there on the news, and so our hearts break for Palestinians enduring a siege, more than nine thousand people killed so far, likewise our hearts break for Israelis, traumatised by the largest loss of Jewish life since the Holocaust. And the conflict is spilling over, not just to Lebanon but around the world with a rise in both anti-Semitic and Islamophobic incidents. I'm sure you watched with alarm as Dagestanis angrily went to their airport searching for Jews who may have arrived from Israel. I found that so frightening. I'm left anxious and unsure as we mark this day.

For the first time, I am shaken from my usual stark “peace at all costs” sentiments. I've reached out to both Jewish and Muslim friends, to Arab friends, and their fear, their hurt, their anger has left me unclear about the right response. As we pause to remember the soldiers and civilians caught in previous conflicts, especially the World Wars, I also pause in prayer, wondering what Jesus' response would be. I reflect on how the same man who told his disciples, “blessed are the peacemakers”, who counselled them to love their enemies, also raged in the Temple, flipping tables and driving out the money changers, later advised a follower to sell his cloak in order to buy a sword. I just don't have a clear answer.

I once had. Thirty-five years ago, I wrote a paper analysing whether the Second World War was justified according to Just War Theory. I argued it couldn't be because, among other concerns, civilians had been directly targeted. I still remember how confused my professor was by what I wrote, because Allied victory had brought an end to the Holocaust. I rebutted that they didn't declare war to stop the genocide, the refusal to welcome Jewish refugees underscoring my point. I saw things in stark either-or categories then. But I'm now the age my professor was and sympathise with his reaction. While still critical of the layers of policy decisions that led to the First and then Second World War, among other wars like right now, I

also understand how sometimes we need to act, even if when our decisions are analysed later we may be condemned as much as be commended.

It's the risk we take as we make decisions, be it eighty-four years or twenty-eight days ago. As our reading from Micah reminds us, there will always be consequences. Everything happening now speaks to that. Which leaves me in my feelings of uncertainty but with one thing that is clear. As we discern what to do in whatever situation we find ourselves, we need to avoid harm as much as possible, preserve life as much as possible, keep as our aim a future of flourishing for everyone as much as possible. Now we know it doesn't always happen. Like the prophets announcing peace or war depending on if they get fed, if they get paid, we all can get locked into our agendas. But that's not where we stay when we realize it. At that point we need to pause, to pray, and to seek clarity as to what values guide our decision-making.

Ultimately, the foundation of our decisions needs to be love, and its source is God. Paul writes that nothing can separate us from God's love in Christ, not powers or authorities, hunger or sword, past histories or future strategies. I'm consoled by that. I'm consoled because even though my decisions may end up being mired in bias, hurt, fear, rather than love, I know it's not all down to me, to us as humans. Rather God's love will find a way, has been finding a way over history, and in the immediate, God's love is with whoever is struggling, regardless of side. That's what God's coming in Jesus reminds us, that God is always with the one who is suffering, strengthening them in love.

As I began this reflection I shared how unsure I feel this Remembrance Sunday. That is still true. But there is one thing I'm sure of, I'm sure of God, present in love, with us, even despite us. On that we can rely. Amen.