

St James United Church

Message for September 14, 2025
Second Sunday in the Season of Creation



“The Call to Communities of Caring” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Jeremiah 4:11-12 and 22-28; and Luke 15:1-10; “Holy Ground, barefoot” by Andrea Skevington

We live in challenging times right now, like we’re witnessing one historically critical moment after another. That’s certainly the case this week with news from the US of the shooting death of right-wing influencer Charlie Kirk. I am sure we avow political violence and feel saddened by his death, by anyone’s death really. His assassination also feels like a hinge point, although it is too soon to know how things will shift, especially as we learn more of what motivated the suspected shooter.

I raise this, even though we live in Canada, for a couple of reasons. First, we need to be attentive to what is going on with our neighbours. We are called to love them, even when they do things we struggle to understand, perhaps most when they do things we struggle to understand. We are called then to pray for his wife and children, for all of our American neighbours, not just because what happens there will impact us, but most importantly because we want what is best for them. Second, Charlie Kirk’s death and his followers’ threats of revenge tie into a worldview that at first seems reflected in the reading from Jeremiah that Ovie read in his language. Consider the tone of the prophecy as God tells the people that their land will be desolate because they did evil in God’s sight. It is disturbing. It comes across as retributive, God as a punisher, like the dreaded god in Andrea Skevington’s poem, a god without regard for the misery of others. That picture of God is fodder for those who say “they’ll pick up where Charlie left off” as if he’s divinely anointed. In their theology God is the top of a hierarchy in which they feel their place is threatened. Theirs is a twisted dominion theology, God not calling us to responsibility and care for the world but to domination and control over creation, and as it seems, over other humans, especially anyone who is different. In this theology, wanting a just, equitable world, seeking to redress past wrongs, showing empathy, are an affront to how God ordered things, not how they did.

Yet is this really what the reading says? What evil had the people done? Ironically it was failing to seek justice, care for the vulnerable, extend empathy, preferring to trust in hierarchies as they worshipped power, privilege, and prestige at the expense of the caring community that following Torah is intended to nurture, the very things commentators like Charlie Kirk rail against. And nowhere does it say God will be the cause of the desolation. Rather God observes how the land became desolate, the birds gone quiet. Reading that reminded me of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* in which she raises the alarm about DDT. She reveals how interconnected ecosystems are, how an action in one area impacts another. In similar fashion, in Jeremiah’s prophecy the land becomes desolate because the people’s priorities were out of balance, no longer caring for each other, especially the most in need, or for the land, bringing the harm onto themselves.

There is hope though as God says it is not the end, room left in the prophecy for future renewal, the land to bloom again and the people to return. This promise is made explicit later in Jeremiah and other prophets like Isaiah. That promise is part of a more biblically sound theology, one truer to the God we encounter in the natural world around us as well, as God continually brings forth life even when everything seems dead, like when a burned forest begins to grow again or a fallen tree is a nursery for the next generation, as God plants a desire in creatures to continue even against all odds, like the Indus dolphin thought going extinct but back from the brink, or more miraculously, night parrots spotted in Western Australia after forty years with no sighting. Lazarus species speak to nature's resilience, of its capacity for rebirth. We just need to get out of the way, letting the environment return to balance and us with it as we treat everywhere as home.

It is home as we attend to the God who listens to the cry of the vulnerable, not just in Andrea's poem but in our gospel where we hear of God as a shepherd and as a woman, each doing what seems foolish, searching for the lost, be it sheep or coin, their time better spent tending the remaining flock or in the market earning for her family. Those options make better sense to those criticizing Jesus for eating with "sinners" as they try to protect their spot in the social order. Jesus makes it clear their conception of God is unfounded. In their theology, a relationship with God is to be earned, but in Jesus' understanding God is constantly seeking us, yearning to connect, to be in relationship as God keeps widening their embrace, including everyone and everything.

Jesus wanted his first followers and us as well to take on the same viewpoint, to be concerned for the well-being of the lost, the overlooked, the forgotten, not to keep shaping a world that rewards those who already have and give them more, but to give to those who are in greatest need, and to address the conditions of the world that keep them there, a world where we tend to rather than strip away creation. This is not a retributive world but a redistributive and restorative one. Again, it's what we see in nature, more geared toward balance, giving to bring life rather than taking to bring only death. We can learn this again. The shepherd seeking the lost sheep, the woman searching for a coin, are God inviting our repentance, calling us to follow again the path of caring community which includes all life, all races, species, phyla, genders, all that is connected in God's love, rather than the twisted dominion thinking so prevalent in our world. We can let that go, as I shared last week, when we attend to the call on our hearts to lament the harm done to our neighbours, human and other-than-human. That too is God seeking us, our conscience Spirit's echo in our hearts, calling us home.

I trust we'll get there, because God in grace is bringing forth life, planting a desire not just in other creatures but in us to continue against all odds, to step away from the domination rhetoric so prevalent right now and return to the balance of caring community revealed in Torah, affirmed by prophets, modeled by Jesus, seen in creation, to follow again the way of justice, empathy and love. May it be so. Amen.