

St James United Church



Message for March 1, 2026 Second Sunday in Lent

“Called to Decrease” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Genesis 12:1-4a; John 3:22-30

I am sure that many of you watched the news yesterday with alarm as Israel and the US made a pre-emptive attack on Iran, with Iran retaliating on Israel along with several Gulf states. Though I am no fan of Iran and their actions in the Middle East, it all risks further destabilizing the region. From a scriptural view, it feels like a series of “I must increase and others decrease” actions, the opposite of what we heard John the Baptist say about Jesus. What’s happening is a reminder of why we need a season like Lent, a time of self- reflection as we seek to put our egos in check.

To an extent it highlights the more traditional explanation of Genesis 3 which we reflected on last Sunday. As much as we are created in God’s image, we do harmful, sinful things. Perhaps the story of Adam and Eve eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil helps us understand that tendency as much as it’s a story about coming to self-awareness and gaining the knowledge that our actions have consequences. The story points to another way sin comes into the world beyond disobedience. We start to see our-selves in contrast to others, revealed in what happens after God confronts our first parents: Adam blames Eve who blames the serpent. Then in the next narrative, Cain kills his brother Abel and God marks him so others won’t do the same. It all points to the good-and-evil, us-and-them binaries that make the events of this weekend possible.

But it doesn’t need to be this way. Again, Lent is a time for us to reflect on who we are and who we want to be, consider how we can live in alignment with God, with the unity experienced prior to the fall. John the Baptist seems to be aligned as he tells his disciples he needs to step back and let Jesus’ ministry take over. John is self-aware, unlike his disciples who see Jesus as competition. Their concern is more ego driven than I’m sure they would like to admit, the need to protect John’s reputation tied to their own desire not to be part of the “losing” team. For John there are no winners and losers, just an aligning with what God is up to in Jesus and the way of compassion, acceptance, justice and loving service that he is teaching in word and action.

Abram and Sarai also seek to align with God’s call as they are told to leave the home of Abram’s parents and head to a land that God will show them and through which their descendants will be blessed. The events of this weekend are a reminder of how this promise is viewed literally by many. That approach certainly informs the claim to Israel by many Israeli Jews, understandably also motivated by fear of another Holocaust. It also is echoed in the claim to the same land by Muslims when tied not just to historical occupation by Palestinians but *Dar al-Islam*, the belief

that once a land has been under Muslim rule it must remain so. This viewpoint among others, certainly informs Iran's anti-Israel rhetoric. The biblical narrative is more complex than such claims. Alongside Genesis 12, Leviticus 19 calls Israelites to treat foreigners as kin with right to inherit land, suggesting that the land was always to be shared, not monopolized.

I suggest we look beyond literalism regarding the blessings that God promises and consider the context of their journey. Abram, Sarai, Lot and their households leave Haran after a series of deaths in the family. Abram is stripped of his heritage and the status it brought, unable to regain it through children because Sarai can't conceive. What if the blessing they're to receive comes not in spite of their being stripped of their heritage but because of it? They have to rely on God, and not just in the eventual divine intervention that brings about Isaac. Heritage as a marker of identity can be ego driven, tied to externals. But our identity ultimately is to be rooted in God and the relationship we share. Remember, before the story of the fall, the first humans were breathed into by God. That is our foundational identity. Over time other identities gain importance as we see ourselves through accomplishments, inheritances, allegiances to community, tribe, nation. But that foundational identity remains. Seeing that is the real blessing, more than a plot of land.

The spiritual path helps us find that again, our ego identities decreasing so our identity in God, in Christ, can increase. The traditional practices of fasting and prayer help in this. We fast not to tame ourselves. In our hunger, we begin to let go of ourselves, our comfort. It helps us see how much we identify with these rather than God. And as I touched on last week, as we fast, we turn to God in prayer. I recommend not just verbal prayer but non-verbal as we seek stillness at our centre. As thoughts come, we see our attachments, see that below these our truest self rests in God. In that resting, we know we're loved, our primary identity as we also explored last Sunday. God's love cuts through the independence and separation at the heart of the fall, and we rediscover unity in and connection to God, connection through God too as we discover that we're not alone in God's love, that God loves our neighbour, loves the foreigner, loves our enemy. That cuts through the binaries, the tendency to make others into a them, invites us to reach out rather than judge, the heart of the third practice of Lent, almsgiving, sharing what we have with others. Communion ties into this too, a sacramental sharing that connects us to Christ and to each other. Fasting, prayer, almsgiving, sharing, powerful practices to help us grow in God. No wonder they're not just Christian but the main spiritual practices of Ramadan as well.

It is such a shame then that at this sacred time of year, three faiths are party to a war as the US and Israel spar with Iran. The motivation is not religious, even as leaders in all three nations use religious rhetoric. They do it because religious people have not always echoed John the Baptist's words. Instead we've been more like John's disciples and seen others as competition.

Thankfully, while political leaders may not be willing to decrease, we still can, in these days embracing practices like fasting, prayer, sharing to help us draw near to God in Jesus. Through grace we'll decrease. His way of love, justice, compassion increase. It has to. It's the only way our world can survive. Amen.