

Beyond Fear – God’s Presence

Isaiah 65: 17-19, Luke 21: 5-19.

Allow me to say a prayer for us— May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable to you our God, our Rock, and our Redeemer. Amen.

It’s a primal part of human nature. It’s part of who we are to be attuned to danger even to be sometimes hyper-aware of. That’s how we survive because at certain times our very survival is dependent on our ability to recognize things that are dangerous. But that’s not the case most of the time, so we find ourselves in states sometimes where we are, where we are anxious, worried, afraid when there really is not a saber-toothed tiger hunting us down. Now there are certain times when, when, the world does change, where the world is in profound upheaval. We have a couple of windows into such times from our readings today. One is from towards the end of the book of the prophet Isaiah, when there was an explanation of how things had fallen apart for Israel. There are serious issues threatening the society of the time. Its various institutions that have weakened and made it vulnerable to being taken over by other powers. In spite of that fact, because of it, the need for hope was profound. And so, Isaiah acknowledges that, yes, all these things have happened, and it’s been difficult. It’s been awful but it’s not the end. God intends a new heaven, to create new heavens, and a new earth, a profound and complete renewal of all that is.

Isaiah was written several centuries before Jesus’ time as a response to the Babylonian captivity and all of that sort of history and hardship it brought. By Jesus’s time there was a new temple in place, the second temple. It had been undergoing renovation and expansion for a number of decades until, just around Jesus’s time, it was almost complete. And it was beautiful! It was breathtaking! It truly what people anywhere and from any time would recognize as a Temple--the place where God was to be met. It was considered to be so central to the Jewish faith of the time that the people who first listened to Luke’s gospel knew well that the Romans, in response to on-going attempted rebellions, had destroyed that self-same temple. “No stone was left on one another” as Jesus was quoted as saying. In fact the only portion of it that was left is what’s now called the “Western Wall or the “Wailing Wall” which is a particularly sacred site in Judaism to this day. The rest of it had completely obliterated, taken away for other Roman building projects where possible and the rest detonated using the latest military technology of the time. What Jesus is telling his disciples is that those who would listen is that, “Look there are dangerous times. Things are changing and it will continue to be brutal. It will be difficult. It will take everything you have to remember God. To not follow who people say that God sent them.” Generally if people say they’re from God there’s a very good chance that they’re not. Yes, they’ll be convincing. They may well have an air of authority about them. You need to be able to look beyond appearances to understand when leaders are in fact misleaders. It will be possible to discern if they are not taking you where where God, wants you to go but elsewhere. Into paths of destruction instead.

So, there’s that beautiful passage, confounding passage saying that “when you are hauled in front of, when you are called in front of the authorities on my behalf—not if it’s a matter of when—when the authorities call you in front of them because of me, because you do not fit in, because you challenge, because you are not part of them. I will let you know what you need to see.” I must admit that this passage was at best theoretical because I’d venture to say that very few of us have ever been reprimanded and hauled in front of official authorities because of our faith. For most of us it’s no more than the awkward shift a conversation often takes place when we say we go to church.

I was in East Germany for a summer end, and I was able to spend some time with a number of people who were serious about their Christian faith. Part of my family was part of that, so I knew a little bit about what it meant for them to be Christians in that time and place. It truly meant being a set aside, being really seen not only as a challenge and even a potential enemy of the officially atheistic state. Reinhardt Zentner was somebody I met and he had quite a story. It was the late 1940's, just after the end of the war and Germany as other countries in Europe lay in ruins. Borders had shifted and a large part of Germany was now under the influence of (we would say occupied by) the Soviet Union who were installing a new system.

Part of the system that emerged there as well in the rest of Europe included the expectation that every young person do compulsory military service. Reinhardt, who had become a Christian over the course of the war, believed that part of his Christian conviction meant that he could not, he would not bear arms on behalf of the state, not that state, not any state. The authorities were quizzical able to compel him to not serve in that capacity. They wanted to just figure out what was going on with him, what his problem was. So they called him in, an 18 year-old to be questioned. There twelve people in total, at least that he saw. There were members of the military and secret police, sociologists, psychologists, ideologists and bureaucrats. and even embers of the secret police. In total, they had 12 people who interrogated him for an entire day. This teenager, 11 people in front of him, one person behind him tried to determine what his ideological, sociological or psychological problem was. that he would not do his compulsory military service.

He told me that it was just like it's written in Luke – I was given the words to speak to the authorities. I had their rapt attention and was able to share the gospel with them for an entire day! Sure enough they couldn't figure out why he wouldn't serve in the East German/Soviet army. It didn't make sense. It didn't compute. What was clear was that they couldn't make them bear arms. Yet, Christian pacifism wasn't something they could just accept. Since they understood that they wouldn't change his mind, they decided to impose something that was becoming an option in the rest of Europe as well. The "alternative civil service" he was required to do was to care for the profoundly physically and mentally handicapped people in the wake of war. No facilities that were not decrepit. Almost no medical supplies to use. Very little food for them or for him. So, the authorities did what they could to punish him even if they couldn't change his mind. As difficult as it was, he accepted his assignment gladly and it started a life of that type of service. He knew he had done what was in line with his faith in God. That he knew he did the right thing the day of his interrogation and beyond. Starting that day, he understood what it was God who had and would continue to put in the right place at the right time even if few other people would have seen it that way. Reinhardt continued to live this life of Christian service for the ensuing decades.

There are all sorts of other aspects around the wider story, including that the East German State was officially tolerant of churches, but had spies in every congregation. They even created some secular traditions that mirrored, and were intended to replace, those of the church. But it's an example I still think about, especially every time I read this passage. What Reinhardt was able was to be "in the moment" able to understand that God was there and active even in that time, especially in that time, of upheaval and destruction. It was the beginning of something new. No one was sure what was going to happen. He along with other people of faith, knew they played an important role in what was to come. Part of this role was to create a community of faith God, to provide a different option to the German Democratic Republic. Their role was to be God's presence in that difficult time and place that was profoundly hostile to them. They persisted because of a sense was that there was something beyond that "no stone one stone" time There is something that God was developing. That God was making possible. A different way that God intended.

Again we almost never find ourselves clearly in the biblically specific situation that Reinhardt did. Still, using a lens that God intends us to use may come to new understanding around the institutions around us. The economic institutions, the social institutions, the government institutions. Even religious institutions on occasion are, have their own trajectories that may not what God intends. How else can we explain the role of our church in Indian Residential Schools? We can imagine how difficult it would have been to see beyond that moment, to realize what was going on and to provide opposition to it like Reinhardt did. I remember being at the Naramata Centre one summer at the height of the salmon run. Naramata is on a creek where the salmon jump ever closer to where they will lay their eggs. It's fascinating and somewhat tragic to watch and to think about just how that this process works. The salmon were focused on their purpose, exerting themselves against gravity and the flow of the water, likely knowing at some level that it will cost them everything. But jump they did because they had to.

Watching those continued to jump as well as noticing those who had died completing their purpose reminded me of a saying that, "It's only dead fish that swim with the stream." Could it be that we are so immersed in the stream of society that we are being unquestionably swept along with it? We may be missing the opportunity to see what God really intends wants us to do—swim against the stream. Perhaps what God needs us to do is to be aware of life around us, not buying into the beliefs and practices that hurt, exclude and even oppress certain people. Even if we are aware of this, it is easy to be swept along in the pessimism and fatalism that "There's nothing we can do. We can only go with the flow." Other messages say the offer other, better ways to live. In either case, we need to be aware that we maybe we're being a bill of goods that neither comes from nor leads to God. Remember Jesus' warning of false leader, people who say look – follow me? They're the ones who say, "This is all you need to simplify and/or improve your life with this particular product or ideology." If a particular way of understanding or doing things means singling out, excluding and hating people as people, as people of faith we must realize that that's not what God intends. That's it's not God's trajectory for us. That's it's not God's intention for us. That it's a stream we need to swim against. While it's never easy, swim against it we must, as did Reinhardt.

How do we know what is the way "upstream"? I believe it's visible in what scriptures tell us. The image is that of a "new heavens and a new earth." We know that we are doing the right thing, swimming in the right direction, when people are seen, heard, respected and cared for in ways that lead to their healing. When people are brought into community. Ultimately, the whole idea of new heavens and new earth might be best be seen as transformed relationships. An example of the stream of our world is to instantly react to reports of what people have said or done while the swimming upstream way of acting is to instead respond thoughtfully with our faith in mind.

As a community of faith we are here for each other to learn to grow closer to God and to each other. With this in mind, how do we think with God's new heavens and new earth in mind? How do we speak? How do we act? How we do this in the time that that lies ahead for Robertson Wesley is exactly the type of discussion that Rev. Lynn Maki will be continue this afternoon so that we can eagerly move together towards the well-grounded newness that God intends. New heavens and a new earth are, I believe already partly in place in our world, yet also beckon us to more. Into greater depth. Into greater richness. Into deeper relationships. May we as, as a community of faith together grow in the direction that most clearly reflects God's new heaven and God's new earth. Thanks be to God. Amen.