

St James United Church

Message for December 22, 2024

Fourth Sunday of Advent



“Mary’s Song of Justice” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Micah 5:2:5a; Luke 1:39-56 (Luke 1:46-55 sung as per “Canticle of the Turning” by Rory Cooney)

“And the world is about to turn.” Those are words of hope, what we have been reflecting on this Advent, and more specifically on this last Sunday words about its goal. We think of Christian hope in terms of Jesus whose birth in Bethlehem we are about to celebrate, but our hope is not just about him, but what he makes possible, God's Reign, the divine community of love and justice Mary sings about. And Luke agrees. How do I know that? Because of how he structured this part of Jesus’ story. He uses a biblical sandwiching technique to show what’s most important in his narrative. And that’s Mary visiting Elizabeth, his focus not on the annunciation about John or Jesus, nor either of their births, but what’s between those couplets, this song which lifts up what Jesus’ birth sets in motion, God’s preferred future for us when we participate in it.

That future is not the status quo of power and privilege but a world where “the hungry poor shall weep no more for the food they can never earn; [where tables are spread, every mouth [is] fed, for the world is about to turn!” Mary’s words are hopeful but challenging as we also sang how tyrants must be deposed. That's an interesting twist in her prophesy because her words echo an earlier prayer, one Hannah offered when she dedicated her son Samuel to God’s service. He was the last of Israel’s judges, ad hoc leaders before the people opted for kings though he rightly predicted they’d mostly bring oppression and heartache. But Luke suggests in drawing on that verse, that Jesus’ birth begins the undoing of that and the coming of a time when we trust not in kings and their focus on power and privilege but in God and their way of justice, peace and love.

How we live into it is hinted at in the detail of preborn John leaping for Jesus. It’s a reminder of an earlier story when twin brothers Esau and Jacob leapt in their mother’s womb as they vied for dominance. If you recall the story, Jacob the younger tricked elder Esau out of his inheritance as well as their father’s dying blessing, resulting in Jacob getting the divine mandate to carry on Abraham’s legacy rather than Esau. Sadly, this one-over-the-other, better-and-lesser mindset is what politicians and other leaders use to further their agenda, fueling one conflict after another in our world, evident when one country seeks to enlarge itself at the expense of its neighbours, even bragging that those neighbours would rather be part of them than independent.

This Jacob-Esau rivalry is playing out right now as far-right politicians in the Israeli government use the deplorable massacre by Hamas as cover to resettle at least the north of Gaza. I don’t

say this to criticize Israelis. I've long been a supporter of Israel as a homeland for the Jewish people. But there is ideology at play in some quarters, propagandists effectively equating Palestinians with Esau's descendants to biblically justify the devastation. There are some on the Palestinian side who use their faith similarly. And before we get self-congratulatory, Christians have used the same argument to impose our faith on others, assuming we are the new Israel and so God's new favourites. This was disastrous, especially as we became a frontline of European colonialism. And we see similar attitudes in Christian nationalism, the gospel made a vehicle to grab political and cultural power.

But as I said, the solution is in John leaping for Jesus, in the connection to Esau and Jacob. All the above situations forget key parts in the story. First, they are brothers. The hurt between them obscured them acknowledging that but they're siblings just the same. And while initially Esau was so angry Jacob had to run for his life, by the time they met again Esau had forgiven Jacob. Plus, God didn't play favourites. Before Isaac died, he blessed Esau and so just as Jacob had found fulfillment, so had his brother. When they parted, they did so reconciled. That is the future God wants for us, where we see one another as siblings, and really live out what that means.

To get there we need to do some of our own reconciling in how we view the other "twins" of John and Jesus. We tend to place Jesus over John, or more to the point favour softer qualities of Jesus, like healing, welcoming, a call to turn the other cheek, but these qualities over used prevent us from living into what Mary sang. We appeal to some of John, like his call to repent, and do so because Jesus said that too. But we focus only personal repentance. And it is needed. I believe in soul-searching, in making amends as needed. But personal repentance can be part of wider change as we repent of hurtful "better-and-lesser" thinking that maintains the status quo and blocks us living as siblings. We engage in self-reflection so that our activism doesn't do more harm, undermined by bias or anger. But then we take on the other part of John that Jesus channels, his call for communal repentance, for social change. John may call out leaders as a brood of vipers, but doesn't Jesus say they're white-washed tombs? Like them both, we're called to raise our voice as we stand in solidarity with our siblings, especially if their voices are more likely silenced. And like them both we can't just be angry but need to offer practical ways to live more justly. We need Jesus who with forgiveness and love heals what blurs our ability to recognize others as siblings, and we need John who challenges the status quo so we can live as siblings, embody the divine community of God's justice and love.

To these ends I'd like to close with a song. It takes a familiar Christmas carol and reminds us of the true cost of war. You may not agree with all that he sings but I invite you to remain open as he uses his gift for lyrics in aid of God's Reign. "Away in Bomb Shelters" by Martin Kerr.

Play the video.

I find his words to be prophetic like Mary's, compassionate like Jesus', and challenging like John's. May we too raise our voices for our siblings, for a world where that's what we are. Amen.