

St James United Church

Message for March 9, 2025
First Sunday of Lent



“Faces Set Toward Jerusalem” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Isaiah 65:1-9; Luke 9:51-62; excerpt from C.S. Lewis, Chapter 12 of *Mere Christianity*

Today we set our faces toward Jerusalem. We join Jesus as he did the same and began a shift in his ministry from Galilee where he proclaimed to the people that God’s Reign had drawn near, to the capital where he’d reveal to all of us the core meaning of that Reign.

As you can imagine, the cross figures largely in this. Jesus made this clear prior to last week’s text, when before he went up the mountain to pray and his identity was revealed in light, he engaged in conversation with his closest disciples about that same identity. Peter professed his belief that Jesus was the chosen one, the Christ, but like on the mountain when he spoke with Moses and Elijah, Jesus made clear he was going to suffer and die, a fate which in other versions of the story Peter protested and Jesus called him Satan. Luke doesn’t tell us if Peter complained when Jesus told them that not only would he suffer but they were to embrace the cross along with him, but I wouldn’t be surprised. It is a strong statement, one that many Christians avoid, me included.

And yet we can’t avoid it, can’t avoid that there is a cost to following Jesus. He makes this clear in today’s continuation of the story as he uses increasingly harsh rhetoric toward those who said they wanted to follow him, warning one prospect of the nomadic quality of discipleship, telling another that the urgency of announcing gospel is such that you don’t have time to bury a loved one, warns a third that you can’t be half hearted and look back to your life as it was. This echoes his earlier statement that those who fail to deny themselves act as if they are ashamed of him, and if that is the case then he will be equally ashamed of them. It’s all quite strong language.

It has the heaviness of Isaiah’s prophecy as he pointed to the people’s failure to be true to their covenant with God, ignoring Torah and emulating the worship practices of neighbouring nations, even going so far as to ignore dietary laws. It may sound unimportant to us, but if they couldn’t follow symbolic signs of fidelity to God, how likely would they follow the ethical foundation of that relationship? A consistent concern of Isaiah is their failure to care for the vulnerable, for the widows and orphans. And there were consequences for that failure. That is how the people interpreted the attack by Assyria, later on their exile in Babylon. We often think of this in terms of God’s anger, that God caused the punishment. I wonder though if it is more about a mindset. If I fail to look after vulnerable people, what else am I doing? How much do I approach life as dog-eat-dog? As a result, how much is this lived in society and echoed in how that society treats those outside it and there is an inevitable push back?

There's a theory that how we conceive of God directly shapes how we act. So when we worship a punishing God, we're more likely to want to punish others. We see that in James and John who ask Jesus if they should call fire down upon the Samaritans. But as Jesus starts speaking about the urgency of following his way, I hear him suggesting that they've yet again missed the point, projecting their aggression onto a God who is anything but. The God Jesus modelled as he taught about God's Reign was opposite to such anger, reaching out to sinners, eating meals with tax collectors, healing lepers (those on the margins), speaking with women and empowering them as leaders along with the men, engaging with Gentiles. His posture was the opposite of dog-eat-dog as he showed compassion, mercy and love. And when he did get angry, it was directed at those who didn't show compassion, mercy, love, who didn't embody God's Reign.

And this leads us to the cross where Jesus showed us the fullness of what God's Reign is to be in showing us what God is like. As he chose not to fight back, he showed us that God chooses vulnerability over power. As Jesus forgave those who were killing him, he showed us that God is forgiving rather than wrathful. As Jesus lay down his life, he showed us that God is one who gives way for others, letting go to bring forth new life. Jesus modelled self-sacrificing love, modelled giving up for others, not taking from others. Again and again, Jesus told the people that this is what God is like and from the cross profoundly showed them and all of us, showed us too what we're to be like.

As C.S. Lewis wrote, if we trust someone, then we want to do as they ask. And Jesus asks us again and again to follow his way, to carry our cross. To pick up our cross is not about suffering so much as learning how to let go for others, to sacrifice in love for others, to not cling to power but be vulnerable, forgive, show mercy, in other words embody God's Reign. And as we do this, we have a ripple effect in the community around us, helping to shift the culture from dog-eat-dog to compassionate and loving, a shift that extends further to change how we treat those outside our society as we choose peace and reconciliation rather than aggression, anger, punishment.

And though it seems unimportant, this is why we take on symbolic practices in Lent. They help us live into that. In one they are a sign of our fidelity to God's way, like the dietary laws, but I think as importantly they're a training, ways by which we seek again and again to let go of ourselves and turn to God, turn to our neighbours too. It's one of the reasons we've adopted ashes in the United Church at the start of Lent. As I shared earlier, we may associate them as Catholic, but it is an ancient Christian practice, along with fasting, prayer, almsgiving, study, all ways whereby we turn our hurts again to God, turn our hearts again to one another.

However we choose to mark this season, we do it because we are joined to Christ, walking with him, our faces set toward Jerusalem and the cross. As we do so may this time be one that helps us grow in the way of God's Reign, the way of vulnerable, compassionate and self-giving love. Amen.