

"O THAT YOU WOULD TEAR OPEN THE HEAVENS AND COME DOWN!"

THE REV. VICTOR KIM

Isaiah 64:1-9; Mark 13:24-37

(11-29-20) Advent 1

Do not be afraid! Those words form the basis of our Advent theme this year and they certainly seem very fitting given all that has taken place in 2020. Of course, this year has been dominated by one story, the Covid-19 global pandemic. Maybe with the exception of a handful of days around the early part of November when the results of the U.S. election became the lead story in the news, every newscast since the middle of March has led off with some story about Covid-19 and the pandemic. One of the things that Richard Topping said in his thoughts around fear is that Covid is never far from his thoughts but that his experience of it is that it tends to pour accelerant on things that are already happening. I think Richard is very astute in his assessment of the pandemic and its effects.

Even though we know the declaration of the angels to not be afraid, we can't help but feel some level of fear and as Richard has said, the whole issue of the pandemic amplifies the fears we hold. I share the same fears about the welfare of our children that Richard has for his and I know that the employment situation for so many young people is affected by the reality that businesses are just not able to operate as usual and employ people as they usually might. We know that the pandemic has worn people down, through loneliness, through an increasing risk to mental health, through worry about our jobs, about our futures, about our health and the health of our loved ones. As Richard states, it does make us fearful about adding on to the burden that people are already bearing when we feel like we need to speak the truth, especially if that truth might be difficult to hear. James, in the Time with Young Christians, noted that some of our young Christians expressed their worry for the environment when asked about what they feared. And before the virus hit, for many the crisis of climate change and its effects on our planet was the primary fear, for themselves and for the generations that would come after them. Nothing's changed on that front. Even though the issue may not be the lead story on our newscasts, the reality of climate change and its devastating effects on our world hasn't been diminished just because we aren't talking about it like we used to. Some people fear the breakdown of our democracy, that the events of the recent past, and particularly this year, have threatened our trust in democracy as never before. We wonder whether we'll ever be able to recover from the assault on the foundations of our political principles, and not only from one side of the aisle.

But here's the thing. Our fears reflect the fact that we are, mostly, creatures blinded by our connection to our immediacy, to our present situation. Perhaps it's because we live in a time when information is available to us as never before. We are bombarded with information, much more than we can usefully process, information that saturates us in the immediacy of the now.

Studies have shown that excessive news consumption causes stress. According to a survey by the American Psychological Association in 2017, people who kept up with the news cycle reported lost sleep, stress, anxiety, fatigue and other mental health symptoms. More and more people constantly monitor their social media feeds for updates, often doom scrolling, which is the act of consuming an endless procession of negative online news. With such an overwhelming emphasis on the now it can be easy to lose a sense of perspective, a frame of reference by which we can try to make sense of our now. Yes, the pandemic is like nothing that most of us have ever had to face, but if we widen our perspective, if we move our vision beyond only the immediate, we remember that only 100 years ago the Spanish Flu pandemic took over 50 million lives around the world. 500 million people, one third of the population of the world at the time, became infected with the virus. In Canada 50,000 people, mostly between the ages of 20-40, died due to the Spanish Flu pandemic. In comparison 12,000 people in Canada and 1.5 million worldwide, have died due to Covid-19. I am not making light of the numbers today around the Covid-19 pandemic, every unnecessary death and all the suffering are absolutely tragic, but as a frame of reference, our numbers are nowhere near what our ancestors had to deal with only a century ago. We have access to medical care that our ancestors could not have dreamed of when the Spanish Flu hit. The development of multiple vaccines is promising. And the current assault on democracy is nothing new. Even the Athenians, where democracy originated, complained as far back as the 5th century B.C. that their democracy wasn't what it used to be.

When we lose that sense of perspective, a broader frame of reference from which we can assess our current, immediate situation, is it any wonder that today always seems to be worst? And we aren't alone in thinking this way. The prophet Isaiah, thousands of years ago, captured so powerfully the similar feelings of the people of Israel. The people of Israel, God's chosen people, had been destroyed. They had been defeated by the armies of Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon. The people of Israel had been dragged off into exile. Most scholars agree that these last chapters of Isaiah were written in the period just after the decree of Cyrus, the Persian king, which allowed the exiles to return to Jerusalem. But what did they return to? Though they had been allowed to return home, they were still subject to foreign powers. The leaders who led the return from exile found that rebuilding was not as easy as they might have thought. Hope was hard to find among the ruins, unity among the people as scarce as finding an intact pillar among the devastated temple ruins. The taunts came from all directions. Where is your God? Why doesn't he come and rescue you? And in the anger and pain of it all Isaiah sums up the frustration of God's people. ***O that you would tear open the heavens and come down... why don't you tear open the heavens and come down? Look at us, look at what's become of your people, of your nation, of your temple. Our enemies mock us, they say our God is powerless. Why don't you tear open the heavens and come down? How much more must we suffer? What are you waiting for God?***

I think that some of us, maybe a lot of us, feel the way that the people of Israel did those many years ago. How long must we suffer? It's not that we're expecting magic, at least not on the things that are science based. Most of us are pretty sure that God's not going to just wave his hand and suddenly Covid-19 will disappear from the face of the earth. We know that the best way to fight the virus is to keep a safe distance and practice hygiene until a vaccine can be produced and people vaccinated. It's those intangibles, our sense of isolation, our loneliness, our depression, our pessimism; it's these kinds of things that we want relief from, that we need deliverance from. When we cry out, O that you would tear open the heavens and come down... we are voicing our hope, our hope that God will do something about our current situation, that God will help.

But hope doesn't exist in isolation. Hope is a wish for the future but it is predicated on memory. We hope for things that we remember, whether directly in our lives or more broadly in our collective experience. When I hope for an end to my loneliness it's rooted in knowing what it was like to be connected to people. When I hope for better days ahead it's because I know what better days are like because I've experienced them before. In the Advent Bible Studies that we have started this past week, we discovered that the stories of Advent don't stand in isolation, that the birth of Jesus doesn't suddenly pop up out of nowhere, with no context. We looked at the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth, an elderly couple who were childless and realized that their childlessness connected them to the tradition of Abraham and Sarah, and even as God blessed Abraham and Sarah with a child in their old age, so God blessed Elizabeth and Zechariah with a child, John, who is the cousin to Jesus. So the stories of Advent, of John the Baptist and even Jesus are connected in memory to the earlier story, the history of God's saving love for God's people from the very beginning. Jesus doesn't just enter the picture without a reference point. Jesus is the ultimate expression of God's saving love, but it's a saving love that's been around from the very beginning. Our hope is rooted in the memory of what God has already done for us. When we cry out, O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, we must remember that our immediate, our present troubles, our nows, if they are to be remedied and healed, that they find their hope in the memory that God has already come down, that God has already torn open the heavens and has been present in our midst in the person of Jesus Christ, the child of the manger, the babe of Bethlehem. Our fears are often rooted in our lack of reference, our deficiency of memory. Because everything is so now, so immediate, in the urgency of our present, we are tempted to have amnesia about the past; we lose our frame of reference. Our present fears find their healing, their hope, in the memory of what we already have experienced about God and God's love. Our present worries and fears, as urgent as they seem to be because of their immediacy, must be understood in the light of our hope, which is rooted in the memory that God has loved us, the reality that God loves us now and the confidence that God will love us always.

Fear is moderated by the gift of context, the immediacy of the now is put in context by the memory of what God has already done. On this first Sunday in Advent our focus is hope.

Hope is available to us because we can imagine what it looks like, we hope because we know what God has already done, we don't have to guess. How can we hope when there's no reference for our hope? If you've never been loved and have never known what love looks like, how can you hope to be loved? Our hope isn't rooted in something that we cannot imagine, we know what it looks like, we know who it looks like. Mark's gospel reading on the first Sunday in Advent always points us to the return of Jesus, his second advent, but counsels us not to try to guess when, but to live ready, to keep awake. Hope is to live with that alertness, that memory of what God has already done in Jesus so that we can confidently live with the expectation that what God has done, God can and will do again. Hope is to face the issues of today, the challenges of the now, with a frame of reference that broadens our understanding and assures us that God indeed has torn open the heavens and has come down.

Do not be afraid. We've been this way before. Nothing is outside the redemptive and restorative love of God in Jesus Christ. Pandemics, loneliness, financial insecurity, political disruptions, physical fragility, emotional turmoil, whatever it is that our world throws at us, God has been there before and God will be with us now and in the days to come. If Covid tends to pour accelerant on things that are already happening, then let the hope we have in God's care and healing be that which extinguishes the fire and reduces the heat of our present challenges. In God's love, God has torn open the heavens and taken form among us, as one of us. We are the clay and God is our potter, we are the work of God's hands, we are all God's people. Remember. Hope is God, hope in the God who has always been with God's people. God is with you, with us. In Jesus Christ, God has been with us, is with us and will be with us again.

Thanks be to God, Amen.