

St. Paul's Congregational Church
March 17, 2019: Lent 2
Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18; Phil. 3:17-4:1; Luke 13:31-35

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

On Friday night I took a break from the computer and all the news of the week and with some good friends, saw "Green Book" – while that crazy lightning/thunderstorm raged outside. I highly recommend the movie if you haven't seen it – it was haunting, though – took me back to a time when I saw a sign on a water fountain in Virginia – "white only." I remember those days – some of you do too – others have only read about them – and I remember thinking, "who will be the "other" we fear in the future. Will we ever look upon each other as brothers and sisters, all children of God? How far have we really come since the days of the 60s?

Now we're all reeling over the violence in New Zealand – 50 people killed, at least as many injured in the mosque shootings. So much talk of white nationalism that seems to boil down to white supremacy based in a deep sense of fear. Someone posted on our facebook page a comment when I shared a post from the UCC – I'd so saddened and shocked. Why? What purpose?

Haven't we all wondered exactly that – but I fear the answer to that is known only to God. Of course we send our thoughts and prayers: as I told the children last week, Lent is a time of praying. But today our message to the children is Lent is a time of growing. How are we growing in our attempts to follow Jesus – to become the peacemakers we are called to become? To offer hospitality, to care for the "other" who we encounter, to love each other as God loves us. When is enough enough?

We all go through a variety of crises in our lives, don't we - they keep us awake at night, they make us afraid and anxious, we

can feel so alone, so vulnerable, so out-of-control, so angry sometimes. Life feels so like a roller coaster sometimes, so overwhelming: I think there are times when we all have the “what’s the use” feeling, when we’re tempted to just go back to bed, pull up the comforter, and escape for a while. Of course, that doesn’t change anything but it surely sounds good at the moment.

Last week we talked about how Jesus knew temptation, how Jesus walks with us through our temptations - how Jesus is with us, understands us, knows about real life problems and joys. Our journey through Lent continues - our journey that hopefully will help us, all of us, open ourselves to the presence of the One who is with us always.

In our gospel lesson, we gain an amazing glimpse into the inner life of Jesus at a critical time in his life. There is a price on his head - Jesus is close to looking death square in the face. What seems to be friendly advice comes from an unlikely source, from a Pharisee - “Get out of town. Herod wants to kill you.”

This would be enough to get my attention - would that do it for you?

Chances of any one of us having to go through this particular crisis are remote - but we will go through some dark valley sometime - somewhere - someday. It may be the loss of someone we love, a life threatening illness, the breakup of a relationship or the loss of a job. Or being disturbed to our core by unending violence, hatred, racism, bigotry. The question isn’t *will* crisis hit, but *when* will crisis come and how will we handle it? What will ground us, give us hope and courage!

Once again the “good news” is that Christ has been there. He is with us *in the thick of things* and very much in touch with the depth of our struggles. Not only was there a price on Jesus’ head, he knew that storm clouds were gathering and he knew for certain that he was headed for a confrontation with death. How does he handle it? If you and I can get in touch with and develop the principles Jesus used to get through this toughest of times, we can put them into practice in our own lives.

So, how did he do it?

1) Jesus was inner directed and not outer directed.

Have you ever noticed how all kinds of people have ideas for your life? You find yourself in the midst of personal anguish and it seems as though everybody has an opinion. “My Aunt Mary went through *exactly* what you are going through and she.....” Or, the “experts” in your life who have exactly the answer for you. And, so often - the *shouda, woulda, coulda*’s we hear from others -

It’s precisely at this time when we need a strong sense of inner direction. When the Pharisees came with the message, Herod wants to kill you, Jesus responds with the fact that he intends to finish his work. The outer circumstances of his life were powerful and difficult. Yet, the power of his inner life was stronger. His direction came from inner work of the Spirit of God - what the Bible calls, “the still small voice.”

No matter how hectic and troubled our outer circumstances may be, we gain strength when we take time to develop our own inner lives. The press of duties and overloaded schedules conspire to keep us from giving attention to that “still small voice” that speaks in every one of us. Let’s take time to seek that voice - to make conscious contact with God a part of our daily living. If we trace Jesus’ steps through the gospels, we find him regularly taking time out for contact with God.

Our inner life grows and matures by disciplined development. Even a beginner can start to make daily conversation with God a priority - talk to God about anything and everything. What matters is that you build a sense of the presence of God in each moment. The thing is, when times of crisis come and we need to call on our inner resources, only what we’ve developed will be available.

In one of the confirmation classes, the students were asked to tell about a time when they were really aware of the presence of God. Their responses centered mostly around times when they were afraid, when their family faced the death of someone close - usually a grandparent but not always - but there were times when

they spoke of sunrises or sunsets, when they succeeded at things they didn't think they could, when they were surrounded by family or friends at a joyful time - these are 7th and 8th graders - it's encouraging, isn't it, to see them beginning to develop those inner resources. And that's a process that continues all our lives. But we have to work on it, to stay in touch with the greatest teacher of all. Think about a time when you were really aware of the presence of God - and nurture that. Help others to nurture that - strengthen the resources that are there for each of us.

2) Jesus was very clear about the driving force of his life.

In spite of the fact that Herod has put a price on Jesus' head, he is absolutely clear about the force in his life. Everywhere he went, Jesus brought evidence of God's love. Jesus brought the Realm of God wherever he went - and the Realm of God is wherever God is in charge and where God is in charge there is love, joy, and peace.

The driving force of Jesus' life was that God should be in charge - at all times and in every place. Whether Herod or anybody else was after his life, Jesus was at peace within because where God is in charge, things are going to work according to God's will. Paul says it this way: "we know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose."

Take a little quiet time and ask yourself, what is the driving force of my life? Don't pre-judge or even think too much about what comes to mind. Simply let it come and write it down. If the driving force of your life is something you don't want to tell anyone else, that's OK. You don't have to turn this paper into anyone. When you get the driving force of your life, what is the second most powerful force in your life? and the third? keep going until there are no more answers.

Then, ask "What do I wish were the driving force in my life?" Keep the two lists in mind and simply keep them in your heart during your times of daily conscious contact with God. It will make an impact.

And 3) Jesus stayed focused on the goal of his life no matter what was happening around him.

The driving force and the goal of Jesus' life are closely related: the driving force of his life was to bring the Realm of God to all around him. Listen again to these words:

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it. How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing.”

This is absolute, amazing, mind boggling, unconditional love. The love of God as it plays out before our very eyes in the life of Jesus is a love that persists in spite of rejection. It persists after being scoffed at, hounded, and killed. The ultimate crisis of Jesus' life, his agonizing death on a cross, could not destroy his love...his ultimate goal.

What would you say is your single most important goal in all of life? When all is said and done, when you have lived your life, done your best, and come to the end of the road, what will be the goal you have reached? Crisis will come and go, hard times will dot the road you have traveled; sometimes devastating experiences will press hard on your soul. But what will be that bottom line goal of life you have sought to achieve?

Can there be any greater goal in life than to do this one thing...to bring the amazing, unconditional love of God to someone else? This goal can revolutionize our lives. It will build our inner lives and when times of trial come, it will provide a solid place within. When we have solid ground within, the outer voices that seek to direct our lives will diminish. And we will begin to discover the “still small voice” of God in our inner lives, and realize on what, on whom, we can only truly depend.

There are two images in our readings today that touched me deeply in the midst of the difficulties of this week:

The image of shelter: we see images of refugees huddled in the tents of a hastily built camp, homeless men and women sleeping on grates with cardboard to shield them from the cold,

people running amid the hail of bullets, families staring in shock at the post-tornado remains of their homes. These glimpses of life's harsh realities prompt us to ask upon what or whom we can truly depend.

And we read that God is our stronghold and shelter, one whose very life is pledged in faithfulness to the covenant promise. Like Abraham and Sarah gazing at the stars, like Jesus on the road to Jerusalem, we are asked to live in the strength of that promise with the audacity of courageous faith. What do we depend on, what's the rock in our lives that gives us strength and courage, how do we know in our hearts that God loves us, how do we get to a place where we truly believe that? And standing up for and living out our beliefs! And how do we model and nurture that belief in our young people?

Violence is all around us - but so is the shelter of God's healing love. And it's up to us to extend that shelter, to do our part in bringing the Realm of God to the here and now. There's no easy answer - I know that - and there are those who think it's naive to even believe that there will ever be an end to violence like this, that it can't be stopped. If we truly believe in the strength of the promise of the Good News, then we can't stop trying, we can't give up, we have to take a courageous stand. We make that walk to Jerusalem with Jesus every time we do that.

Abraham looked toward heaven, saw the stars, and believed the Lord. And his reward was great.

And that beautiful image in Luke: that of a mother hen gathering her chicks into the protection of her wings. God's love surrounding us like a blanket, protecting us, giving us strength to live, giving us strength to love.

From an article in the National Geographic magazine: after a forest fire in Yellowstone National Park, rangers began their trek up a mountain to assess the damage. One ranger found a bird, literally petrified in ashes, at the base of a tree. When he gently touched it, three tiny chicks scurried from under their dead mother's body.

The loving mother, keenly aware of impending disaster, had carried her chicks to the base of the tree and had gathered them under her wings, instinctively knowing that the toxic smoke would rise. She could have flown to safety but refused to abandon her babies. Those under the cover of her wings would live.

Being loved this much should make a difference in our lives. Remember that mind boggling love and be different because of it.

So may it be for each of us through our journey with Jesus through Lent and for every day thereafter.

Let us pray:

There is no love like yours, O God, and there is no peace apart from your realm. We are grateful for the witnesses of the word, those messengers of love who have embraced us as agents of your rule. We praise you for the high joy of being called to share the love of Christ, your peace, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit with all those with whom we share our lives, named and unnamed, known to us, and those whose lives we touch when we don't realize it. Make us worthy of your trust, O God, and empower us to become more fully your ambassadors in this world. Amen