

Melville United Church
March 22, 2020
Lent 4

We acknowledge with respect the history, spirituality and culture of the Indigenous peoples with whom Treaty 4 - also known as the Haldimand Tract - was signed and the territory wherein our church resides, and we acknowledge our responsibilities as treaty members.

Sharing the Light (*take a moment to light a candle and centre yourself to prepare to enter in to a time of worship and prayer. As you light the candle repeat the following words*)

I light a candle
in the name of the God who creates life,
in the name of the Christ Presence who loves life,
in the name of the Spirit who is the fire of life.

Centering words: Psalm 23

God is my shepherd,
there is nothing I shall lack.
You, God, make me lie down in green pastures,
you lead me beside peaceful waters;
you revive my spirit,
you guide me in right pathways
for your name's sake.

Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil, for you are with me,
your rod and your staff are my comfort.
You spread a table for me in the sight of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil; my cup is overflowing.
Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in God's house my whole life long.

Call to Worship:

Between us and all that would truly harm,
the Good Shepherd is ready to stand.
Between us and the terrors in the night,
the Good Shepherd is ready to stand.
Between us and the fear mongering all around
the Good Shepherd is ready to stand.
I open my heart to the presence
of the Good Shepherd who stands with me now.

Opening Prayer:

God of our hearts, we know that we do not see clearly with our own eyes, nor do we hear clearly with our ears. What we feel with our skin may not guide us as well as we would have hoped, and that which we smell or taste may bring us pleasure or disgust. But you are in, around, and through us in miraculous ways that offer us a chance to know your endless love for us. Help us to experience your love and share it with all creation. Help us to feel you close in this time of challenge. Amen.

Scripture: Exodus 17:1-7 Water from the Rock

1 From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as God commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. 2 The people quarreled with Moses, and said, "Give us water to drink." Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the God?" 3 But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" 4 So Moses cried out to God, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." 5 God said to Moses, "Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. 6 I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink." Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. 7 He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested God, saying, "Is God among us or not?"

Message:

The following message was written by Ruth Cooke. I felt that her words expressed what I was thinking rather well and so I share them with you here. - Rev. Marion

Don't Panic! Written by Ruth Cooke

A good many of us are probably glued to our news feeds these days, whether it's the television news or Facebook or whatever shows up on Google. We've gone from hearing about a new disease being identified in a country on the other side of the world, to seeing the disease quickly becoming endemic and whole cities in China being shut down, to watching as Europe quickly succumbs to the pandemic, to hearing about cases being identified in North America, to being told that church is cancelled and we should stay home and keep our distance from others until the worst is over. And we don't know when that will be...

COVID-19 has been officially declared a pandemic, with cases on six continents and in 148 countries and counting.

We're afraid. That's human nature.

But it's at times like these when we realize that the Bible and our Christian faith has much to offer not only ourselves, but the world.

Moses and the Israelites wandered around the desert for forty years, waiting to be led to the promised land. It wasn't always an easy journey. Feeding a crowd is difficult, especially in the desert. They got hot, they got tired, they got cranky. At times, they appeared ready to revolt and kill Moses.

But Moses never gave up. His faith in God was tested to the limits, but it never broke. At each new crisis, instead of trying to solve it himself, he spoke to God and asked for help.

And help was given.

Later on, new Christians faced test after test of their faith in God.

First Jesus was crucified, dead, and buried. They thought they were done. They hid behind locked doors out of fear. Then Jesus appeared with words to quiet the fear. "Peace be with you."

The words of the prophet Isaiah speak down to us throughout the ages: "Do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand."

It has been suggested that the reason Christianity spread so quickly throughout the Roman Empire, an empire founded on military might and enamored of other gods, is that our Christian response to times of uncertainty and fear is different from the usual panic of surrounding communities.

In the second century, Rome was hit hard by two virulent plagues. Up to twenty-five percent of the population may have died in those years from the illness. But Christians, having faith in God's love and knowing as we do that this earthly life is only part of our journey, were willing to nurse the sick back to health, even at risk to themselves. One sociologist has postulated that the death rate in those cities with strong Christian presence was half of what it was in other cities.

As non-Christians noted the response of Christians, and as some were restored to health or had family members restored to health by the nursing provided by Christians, Christianity began to grow. People wanted a part of this calmness, a part of this assurance that no matter how bad things get, all will be well.

We live now in a world overcome with fear. People are crowding stores, buying everything they can get their hands on. This is causing shortages for those in our community who are unwell, elderly, or infirm. The unnecessary purchases of face masks and hand sanitizer is causing shortages in the places where they're needed most—our hospitals and health clinics.

People are self-isolating when they don't need to, and refusing to self-isolate when they

should. Social distancing is practiced, except... People seem to be okay with the concept of standing for an hour or more in a crowded place with lots of people they don't know if it means they can buy a year's supply of toilet paper all at once.

The world is panicking, and it is once again up to us to be leaders. We are lucky, compared to Christians in former times. Martin Luther, in 1527 during the time of bubonic plague in Wittenberg, said, "We die at our posts." COVID-19, while being highly contagious, is not nearly as deadly as fear makes it out to be. And with a well-established medical system, even in times of deadly disease, such a response isn't necessarily called for.

But there are things that our faith does call us to do.

First of all, we are called to care for our neighbour. Not just our Christian friends, but all of humanity.

We can best do that in a few simple ways. Much news space has been given over to crowded grocery stores with empty shelves. When fear bids us to hoard, faith calls us to take only the supplies we need for the short term. Hoarding is not a Christian response to crisis.

If you have more than you need for the next week or two, share with those who have little or none. Sharing groups have sprung up on Facebook and the internet, and some food pantries remain in operation, though with limited hours and altered procedures.

Have faith that store shelves will remain stocked.

Practice good hygiene, not only now but at all times. If you are ill, stay home. Cough into your elbow, not your hands. Respect the personal space of others. Be especially careful around newborns, the elderly, and those with compromised immune systems.

WASH YOUR HANDS! Before you handle food. Before you eat. After you eat. After using the washroom. Use soap and water. If soap and water are not available, use hand sanitizer.

Leave the face masks for those who need them most—our health care providers and those who are already ill. Not only does hoarding reduce the quantities available for those who need them, in general, they are of limited or no use in preventing infections when used by the general public.

Keep in touch by phone with those who live alone or are otherwise isolated. I saw a lovely picture this week of a man visiting his father in a nursing home. He could not go in, so he sat outside the window and they talked using computers.

Take this time as a holy time, time set apart for doing those things we are often "too busy" to do. For myself, I've joined an international group called "COVID-19 Cleanup,"

which is exactly what it sounds like. A group of people from all over the world have committed to cleaning up their living spaces in the coming weeks.

Pray daily. Not prayers of lament or complaint, but prayers of thanks. Because we do have so much to be thankful for. We have food, we have shelter, we have health care, we have each other.

Give thanks, too, for the good things that may come of this. The air in China is cleaner than it has been in decades. I'm told they can now see the bottom of the canals in Venice. The slowdown in human activity has slowed down the destruction of our earth.

We live in troubling times, to be sure. But have faith. The message of God is the same to us here and now as it was to the ancient Israelites, as it was to the earliest Christians, as it was to Martin Luther.

Don't be afraid. My love is stronger, my love is stronger than your fear.
Don't be afraid. My love is stronger, and I will promise, promise to be always near.

We are not alone. God is with us. Thanks be to God! Amen.

Take a moment to reflect on Ruth's words. Then ponder the following questions:
What do I need to best care for myself during this challenging time?
What can I do to care for my neighbour while maintaining 'social distancing'?

Offering:

The expenses of the church (staff wages, utilities and upkeep of the building) continue even when worship is not happening. Please consider making a contribution by one of the following methods:

1. *Cheque: made payable to: Melville United Church - which can be mailed to the church at P.O. Box 41 , Fergus, ON N1M 2W7 or dropped in to the office on Tuesdays, Thursdays or Fridays between 9:00am and 3:00pm OR put in the mail slot beside the parking lot door.*
2. *Donate online through the Canada Helps web-site
<https://www.canadahelps.org/en/charities/melville-united-church/>*
3. *Call Lynda, to arrange Pre-Authorized Remittance payments (PAR).*

Preparation for Prayer: *I am sure we are all feeling the need of support right now and that happens best when we can come together. Because we cannot gather it is all the more imperative to remember that we are not alone - God is there to lean on. So I share the following words as a pre-amble to our prayers.*

Leaning on the Heart of God (Joyce Rupp, *Out of the Ordinary*, Pg 75)

I am leaning on the heart of God.

I am resting there in silence.

All the turmoil that exhausts me
is brought to bear on this great love.

No resistance or complaint is heard
 as I lean upon God's welcome.
 There is gladness for my coming.
 There is comfort for my pain.

I lean, and lean, and lean
 upon this heart that hurts with me.
 Strength lifts the weight of my distress.
 Courage wraps around my troubles.

No miracle of instant recovery.
 No taking away of life's burdens.
 Yet, there is solace for my soul,
 and refuge for my exiled tears.

It is enough for me to know
 the heart of God is with me,
 full of mercy and compassion,
 tending to the wounds I bear.

Prayers:

Holy presence, as we deal with difficult times and the chaos of upset routines and a cloud of confusion let us feel you near. We feel lost and afraid, not knowing what to do. We feel confused about what is happening and are uncertain of what the immediate future holds. Calm our fears. Remind us that this, too, will pass. Remind us that humanity has faced far worse things and survived. Remind us that it is our fear that causes us the most pain and anxiety.

We pray for guidance, for calm, for strength. We pray that goodness and kindness will take precedence over self-preservation and the fear that can bring out the worst in us.

We pray for healing for those who are sick, for stamina for those who offer care, for wisdom for those who offer leadership.

We pray this week for our brothers and sisters of Emmanuel United Church in Waterloo and for so many who are working on our behalf in other parts of our country and the world to bring your love in many ways where it is needed most.

And we pray for ourselves as we open our hearts to give to you the burdens which weigh us down and to share the things in our lives for which we are grateful, for, even now, in these difficult times, we are blessed. Hear our prayers. *(Take a moment to offer your personal prayers to Holy Presence).* Amen.

Lord's Prayer:

Our Father who art in heaven,
 hallowed be thy name,
 thy kingdom come,
 thy will be done,
 on earth, as it is in heaven.
 Give us this day our daily bread,
 And forgive us our trespasses,
 as we forgive those who trespass against us.
 And lead us not into temptation,
 but deliver us from evil:
 For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory
 forever and ever. Amen.

Blessing:

March 17th, St. Patrick's day was this week and so I share the following Celtic blessing I found in a little book called "The Celtic Heart" written by Pat Robson. This blessing was found in the section dedicated to St. Patrick.

Surrounded by God's protection

Circle me Lord
 Keep protection near
 And danger afar.

Circle me Lord
 Keep hope within
 Keep doubt without.

Circle me Lord
 Keep light near
 And darkness afar.

Circle me Lord
 Keep peace within
 Keep evil out.

(David Adam, *The Edge of Glory*)

Prayer of the Week:

God of song and heartache, you know that the most challenging places cause our hearts to sing the prettiest songs. The shadow of death makes it dark in the valley, but in these moments we are like seeds in soil, waiting for the right moment to put down roots and send up shoots toward the surface. Cause our hearts to rest in what we cannot see with our eyes; to hear what the ear cannot decipher, and to love the mystery of your love. Amen.