



***Celebrating
175 Years***



Melville United Church

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Melville United Church, Fergus Ontario
Sunday August 2th 2020

Worship prepared today by
Ruth Cooke

Welcome

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. We acknowledge our responsibilities to treaty people.

The Christ Candle Is Lit

Call to Worship/Prayer of Approach

Gracious God, we pray for your blessing on the church in this time and place. Here may the faithful find salvation, and the careless be awakened. Here may the doubting find courage, and the anxious be calmed. Here may the tempted find help, and the sorrowful be comforted. Here may the weary find rest, and the strong be renewed. Here may the aged find consolation, and the young be inspired. Amen.

Hymn: Spirit, Spirit of Gentleness **VU 375**

Epistle Reading: Hebrews 12:1-2; 14-17

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

Pursue peace with everyone, and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble, and through it many become defiled. See to it that no one becomes like Esau, an immoral and godless person, who sold his birthright for a single meal. You know that later, when he wanted to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, even though he sought the blessing with tears.

Ministry of Music: A Summer Song (*Suzanne Flewelling, Barry Rawn & Rene Crespo*)

Meditation: Running the Marathon

Would you pray with me and for me, please...

May the words of my mouth, the meditations of all of our hearts, and the actions of all of our lives be acceptable in your sight, O God.

In the first Lord of the Rings movie, The Fellowship of the Rings, the hobbit Frodo says, "I wish the Ring had never come to me. I wish none of this had happened."

Like Frodo, we are living in momentous and unprecedented times. There have been other global pandemics before, but none in our lifetime have been this widespread. The last pandemic of this scale was the flu pandemic of 1918-1920, when an estimated 500 million people became infected, and an estimated 17 to 50 million people died. In other words, about one third of the entire population of the world at that time became ill, and up to three percent died. The death toll of the flu was between 2 and 6 times greater than those who died or went missing in WW I due to combat.

The first wave of the flu was complicated by the fact that every nation except Spain refused to make public statistics and other news relating to the pandemic, lest it cause panic amongst the populace. Even so, the first wave was much less deadly than the second and third waves, during which people refused to self isolate or wear masks. They had become tired of such measures. They were worried about the economy. They wanted to celebrate the end of the war. They wanted to attend parades. One single parade, held in Philadelphia on 28 September, 1918, resulted in twelve thousand deaths.

People had become tired of the fight against an enemy they could neither see nor understand. They became angry at the government restrictions imposed on them. They were more worried about the economy than they were about getting sick or dying. They wanted life to return to "normal."

This all sounds terribly familiar, doesn't it?

Like Frodo, we're afraid. Like the people who lived through the flu epidemic of 1918 to 1920, we're tired, and some of us are a little bit angry.

And like them, we have other things than the pandemic to worry about. While there are no worldwide wars going on at the moment, relations between many nations were strained going into the pandemic and have remained tense to this day. The injustices handed to our Black citizens, our Indigenous peoples, and other people of colour continues, and their anguish has boiled over to civil unrest. Refugees and the homeless have had their rights diminished or even obliterated during the pandemic, and remain at particularly high risk of infection.

Those of us who care about their causes are beginning to face the reality that if justice is ever to happen, the world CAN NOT return to "normal," because while what was normal in the past may have been beneficial to a few of us, those benefits came at the expense of many, many others.

But some of us are tired of hearing about Black Lives Matter and the rights of Indigenous peoples, and we just want it to be over.

Like Frodo, we wish it had never happened in our time.

Frodo says this line to the wizard Gandalf, and Gandalf's reply is as appropriate to us as it was to Frodo: So do all who live to see such times, but that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to us.

Our reading from Hebrews this morning is a letter written to a Jewish Christian community in the first century of the common era. The members of this community have endured persecution including imprisonment and loss of property due to their beliefs and faith, and they are *tired*. And that tiredness is causing some of them to lose hope, and to slip back into the old ways. They are starting to give up.

The writer of Hebrews is trying to build them up. Don't give up, he says. Don't slip back into the old ways of simply following the law because it's easier than loving one another and much easier than being persecuted.

The writer compares living a life of faith to running a race. It's an apt comparison.

Running a marathon is about much more than being physically fit. It's about being mentally fit as well.

A marathon runner is faced with many hurdles, and each one presents an opportunity to quit the process altogether. It takes energy and determination to get off the couch and train every day. There are points in the race itself where pain and boredom and exhaustion can be so overwhelming that the runner may think, "I can't do this. I'm going to fail. I might as well give up."

The Hebrew Christians must certainly have felt this way, as we do now.

This is too hard. I'm tired. I don't want to hear about it anymore. I'm afraid. Nothing's going to change. Everything's going to change.

Marathon runners who succeed recognize that the mental training is as important as the physical training. They retrain their inner voice to say, "You've got this!" instead of, "I can't do this."

They face and name their fears, and admit that they might happen.

They visualize the hard parts of the race, and practice in advance mental strategies to deal with them.

They meditate.

They focus not only on the goal, but on each part of the race that might trip them up.

They rely on habit when training rather than will power.

As Christians, we can use these strategies to run the race set before us as well.

We can face our fears, knowing as we do so that whatever happens, God is with us. We can develop strategies to cope in this new world that will enable us to be part of the solution, rather than part of the problem.

We can focus on the race itself, rather than pretending that nothing we do in life matters because in the end we'll all be with God anyway.

We can make Christian practices a habit, rather than relying on fickle willpower and circumstance to dictate our actions.

With regards to this last point, one of the most interesting statistics I've read in the last little while was a survey of Christians about how attending online worship impacts mental health.

Christians who have attended online worship services in the last few months report feeling significantly less anxious and less depressed than those who have not.

Even before COVID, a US survey found regular churchgoers in the 18 to 35 age group to be 10 percent less likely to suffer from anxiety than their non-churchgoing peers.

The habit of attending church, whether you do it online or in person, can significantly strengthen you to cope with the troubles of the world.

No one wants to live during troubled, uncertain times. But as Gandalf says, we don't have a choice of when we live or what happens during that time.

All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to us.

We alone decide whether to give up or to stand firm. We alone decide whether to act out of selfishness, or to act out of love. We alone decide whether to follow Christ, or to follow the ways of the world.

Amen.

Hymn: Bless Now, O God, the Journey **VU 633**

Prayers of Confession & of the People:

God of All Creation, you set our lives on a planet where both beauty and danger are found. Hear our prayers for those who have been overcome by this pandemic all around the world. Strengthen with your presence all who are numb with fear and distress. Calm those who are overcome with anxiety. Be near those who are ill or dying, and bless them with your healing peace. Stand beside those who minister to the sick and the dying in this time of global disaster.

Liberating God, you see works of violence and weep. You see the suffering of our Black and Brown and Indigenous sisters and brothers. You hear their cries for justice. Enfold them in your love, your protection and care. Keep all of us safe from the poison of hate and prejudice, and give us hearts to work for justice for all, and thus be makers of true peace, where every person has enough, and every person is free to grow and be themselves in freedom and safety.

This we pray in the name of the one who taught us to say as we pray:

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 sins as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the Kingdom, and the power, and the glory,
Forever and ever. Amen.

Blessing

Be strong and of good courage, do not be afraid; for it is the Lord your God who goes with you,
God will not fail you or forsake you. Amen.

Musical Commissioning: May the God of Hope Go With Us **VU 424, v. 1**