

This week was one of those weeks. Unlike Nick I need to have my sermon written down - I feel like I babble otherwise. So I went into the office on Saturday morning to do some final touch ups of my sermon and before I began I read the devotional of the day from Diving Deeply. And I was stopped short. I shed some tears and decided to start my sermon again.

Here is the devotion.

Being Resolute - "He set his face to go to Jerusalem. And he sent messengers ahead...they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. Luke 9:51-53

The signs had been subtle and had been missed, and so she was dying. Cancer. They all knew it. A family focused woman of intellect, grace, poetry, and music, was dying. Her husband John, a skilled craftsman, who loved to laugh and who was nuts about her, became her caregiver. He who could build anything let her teach him to create a meal. He learned to help her in and out of bed, to change her, to nurse her with gentleness.

Her desire was to die at home with him and her family around her. And in time, she died surrounded by love. John now lived alone for the first time.

His family and church were loving and supportive; they had been with him through it all. but, his life had been changed in ways that he had never anticipated. He wept for her. He wept for himself.

Yet this 'man's man' let himself be changed by this experience. He learned to share feelings and heartfelt thoughts. He realized that what was important before was even more so now. He started working for a neighbour and enjoyed being outside and useful. A smile returned to his face. When there's been a death, life never truly returns to normal. It can't. But healing happens, a new routine emerges, and we live in new ways.

He called to say that he had cancer. Everyone was devastated. Yet, no one better than he knew what was ahead of him; he didn't want his family to have to care for his growing needs; he didn't want to die at home.

Before surgery, he sat with his daughter, the string of love holding them as one. He turned to her and said, "It isn't supposed to be this way." With a lump in her throat, she said, "I know, Dad." Just then the nurse called his name and he followed her to the O. R.

Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem. Did he really know what was going to happen there? Did he know he was facing his own death? Did he foresee everything involved? It doesn't matter...because he went. He went forward even though "It wasn't supposed to be this way."

What gift. What courage. What fortitude. What an example. Lent is a time for us to set our faces to Jerusalem, to face whatever it is in our lives that frightens, hurts or saddens us. It is a time to face these things with the knowledge that the Christ walks this path with us now. We are not alone.”¹

Today's scriptures speak to these moments of struggle and faith. It's true that this Devotion hit home for me because on Tuesday I sat with a friend who told me she has a recurrence of Cancer, and only a couple hours later I learned my cousin died of cancer that afternoon. And I don't need to tell you that there are folks in our midst struggling with Cancer. So how do we hear the words and themes of today's scriptures.

“Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.”

Do not be afraid. I am with you?

I have no desire to give you a trite answer because fear can actually be a healthy motivator. And fear is real, and necessary at times. And yet fear is also a powerful force. It often causes us to be reactive, to make decisions before we think them through. To question people we used to or should trust. When we allow fear to move us we close our eyes and minds to possibilities, hopes and promises.

Look at Abraham. The Divine presence says to him. “Do not be afraid” and Abram says ““O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, ... “You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.” He wrestles, and questions and refuses to trust the God he claims to speak with and believe in. And we consider Abraham to be a father of our faith. Not only our faith but Judaism and Islam are also Abrahamic religions, and several others including Bahai. So this is one of the faithful who feels like God is speaking to him and he still feels hopeless, he still fears.

It doesn't get any better for Jesus who says “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!”

Fear, Fear is a powerful force. It causes us to be defensive and destructive, it can cause us to run and hide, when we don't even know what we are afraid of. I've seen it over and over in my life and in the life of clients I counsel. My friend Donna Dinsmore would say that fear is the thing that keeps us from freedom and new life.

¹ Diving Deeply, Day 10 Saturday.

Perhaps fear keeps us from true Salvation because if we fear we cannot trust and if we cannot trust we cannot be free. We push away the very God who longs to care for us. Let alone the people who are trying to do so.

I think it is the knowledge of that destructive force that causes God to covenant with Abraham so that he has some assurance, and even more so that brings Jesus to use the image of a ‘mother hen.’

What an interesting metaphor for Jesus to use. “God trying to gather God’s children together just as a hen gathers her brood under her wings. A hen is probably not the first thing that comes to mind when we think of a protective animal. We would sooner imagine a lion or a fierce bird of prey, something with fangs or talons. Yet, the lowly chicken is the image that Jesus chooses to demonstrate this relationship between God and us. God, the mother hen, calls us to the safety of the nest, underneath those downy wings, behind the heart that beats beneath her vulnerable breast. There is power in this image. Power tied to Abram’s covenant with God. Power tied with strength in vulnerability and with relationship.

Today, fear is our fuel: fear of those who are different, fear of death, fear of our own shortcomings, and fear that the things we value will be taken away from us. In response, we write contracts: contracts for services, contracts for jobs, prenuptial contracts, and, as wonderful and helpful as wills can be, they too, are contracts to make sure the people and things we value will be cared about in the way we want them to be when we are gone. Contracts are about legal protection within relationships.”²

Even we as two Christian congregations want to ensure we sign contracts to make sure we get what we want. Yes. We do it because it is wise and we do it with knowledge of past experiences (mostly of others). But we can get really tied up in fearing the other rather than loving because we are afraid perhaps we will lose our identity, or our way. I’m not convinced a contract will protect us from that.

A covenant on the other hand is something quite different, especially a covenant with God.

When Abram creates the covenant with God in our reading today, he is executing an ancient practice. *Their covenant* is all encompassing. . . *if we were to make such a covenant with a friend* it would mean that everything that belonged to them also belonged to us and vice versa. If your best friend happened to have a mansion and

² <http://episcopaldigitalnetwork.com/stw/2016/02/01/loving-like-a-mother-hen-lent-2c-2016/>

a heap of creditors hounding them, guess what? You've got that, too. A contract would protect you from the bad, but a covenant guarantees that you are in relationship and if one goes down, you both go. On the flip side, that also means if one succeeds, so does the other.

God is in the business of covenant. God is in the business of all encompassing connection. Covenants are acts of faith that go much deeper than any contract or set of rules. That is why in the United Church even the minister and the church are said to be in covenant with one another. We begin our relationship with a 'covenanting service.' (Perhaps that is a bit like the service St. John's will have with Nick and the Bishop in a couple months). The purpose is that we will work together, build together, lift one another up while we trust and love the other to do the same.

Interesting enough we as congregations made a covenant together our first service. Do you remember? We said "We remember today promises made at baptism to support one another as we grow in faith. We want to honour and fulfill these promises. We promise to encourage each other, to support one another, to join in our journey of faith. As we pray, learn, study, play and grow together. We will share with each other our experience, insights and faith." We continued "We commit ourselves to the joy and task of following Jesus - ministers, learners and teachers, every one."

In the lenten season we are called to with Jesus turn our face towards Jerusalem. Knowing we are in covenant with the God who never leaves us alone. Reflecting back to our Gospel we see Jesus protecting us.

"If you are familiar with what happens when a fox gets into a hen house then you know that most times the mother hen herds her chicks under her wings for protection and bares her breast so that the fox must kill her first before it can get to her chicks. It is the only defence she has. Later, there will be a flutter of feathers and motherless chicks running around but at least they are alive, though their mother may be dead. They are given the chance to live. This is the image that Jesus chose to bring to us: our covenant with God means that everything of God's is also ours"³

Lent can be an invitation to change our lives in meaningful ways that go beyond these 40 days. Perhaps we can make a change, even create a habit in our own lives

³ IBID

to love and trust before we fear. Perhaps we can choose to live in the shelter of God's love like chicks under their mother's wings. Perhaps when we do that we will begin to trust God, ourselves, and one another more. Perhaps we will begin to make covenants rather than contracts with one another. Perhaps we will be able to be there with those who are facing real, life threatening fears so that they will know they are not alone.

Karoline Lewis wrote in her reflection this week wrote "We need to be a community of love and belonging." ... just as a hen gathers her brood under her wings...Communities of love and belonging are beautiful yet rare; necessary, yet elusive; desired, yet seem always met with stipulations...Communities of love and belonging are those places and spaces of gathered folks that give you life, that nourish your soul, that remind you of who you truly are. Because there is no love and belonging when there is no regard and respect. There is no love and belonging when you are overlooked and dismissed. There is no love and belonging when you are told you don't measure up, don't meet expectations, or that you are not enough.

We have an opportunity right now as individuals and congregations to create vibrant, loving community. "This is Jesus' wish, Jesus' invitation -- a community of love and belonging under Jesus' wing; knowing the safety and protection of such a place which then invites you to imagine and live into the person God has called you to be.

...I sense that this is Jesus' call this week. Calling all of us *out of fear* into the security of God's love so that we might know we are safe as well. Safe from the harm of ridicule. Safe from the harm of rejection. *Safe from losing who we are...* Jesus envelops us, brings us under his wing, protects us. Why? So that we can *live and love even when it's hard...* So that we can live into our authentic selves even though so many will continue to say you need to be someone else."⁴ So that we can live into the person, and congregations God has created us to be.

Are we ready to place love and life over fear? Are we ready to trust? Are we ready to allow the spirit to blow where it may? Are we ready to accept the covenant God has given us? Are we ready to accept we are loved and sheltered and protected?

May it be so.

⁴ <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=4530>

I'm going to invite you to pause in a sung prayer for a moment with me. If you know it and would like to join in please do so.

May God's sheltering wings, her gathering wings protect you. May God's nurturing arms his cradling arms sustain you, and hold you in his love. And hold you in her love.