

Order of Service for November 15, 2020 - Pentecost 24

GATHERING

Gathering Song - 710, Let Streams of Living Justice

Let streams of living justice flow down upon the earth;
give freedom's light to captives, let all the poor have worth.
The hungry's hands are pleading, the workers claim their rights,
the mourners long for laughter, the blinded seek for sight.
Make liberty a beacon, strike down the iron pow'r;
abolish ancient vengeance: proclaim your people's hour.

Your city's built to music; we are the stones you seek;
your harmony is language; we are the words you speak.
Our faith we find in service, our hope in others' dreams,
our love in hand of neighbor; our homeland brightly gleams.
Inscribe our hearts with justice; your way—the path untried;
your truth—the heart of stranger; your life—the Crucified.

(Hymn lyrics printed under CCLI Licence # 11411292)

Greeting

P - The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God,
and the communion of the Holy Spirit, be with you all.

C - And also with you.

Kyrie

P - God of creation, we confess our incessant desire to take from your world. Lord, have mercy.

C - Lord, have mercy.

P - God of life, you come to heal us *and* your world. Christ, have mercy.

C - Christ, have mercy.

P - God of presence, show us how close you are in all our interactions, that we might be bearers of your compassion. Lord, have mercy.

C - Lord, have mercy.

Prayer of the Day

P - Let us pray. Righteous God, our merciful master, you own the earth and all its peoples, and you give us all we have. Inspire us to serve you with justice and wisdom, and prepare us for the joy of the day of your coming, through Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord.

C - Amen.

WORD

Hebrew Scriptures Judges 4:1-7

The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, after Ehud died. So the LORD sold them into the hand of King Jabin of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor; the commander of his army was Sisera, who lived in Harosheth-ha-goiim. Then the Israelites cried out to the LORD for help; for he had nine hundred chariots of iron, and had oppressed the Israelites cruelly twenty years. At that time Deborah, a prophetess, wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel. She used to sit under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim; and the Israelites came up to her for judgment. She sent and summoned Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali, and said to

him, "The LORD, the God of Israel, commands you, 'Go, take position at Mount Tabor, bringing ten thousand from the tribe of Naphtali and the tribe of Zebulun. I will draw out Sisera, the general of Jabin's army, to meet you by the Wadi Kishon with his chariots and his troops; and I will give him into your hand.'"

The word of the Lord.

Sermon

Did you hear or see that Lunenburg made the CBC this week? A story about Lunenburg was broadcast on the Halifax morning show on the radio, and later the town was on the CBC Nova Scotia web page.

Unfortunately, it was not for a good reason.

The story is about a man by the name of Stephen Labrador, who lives just up the street from us. You can literally see their house from the front porch of the parsonage.

In June, Stephen's son had received a nasty message on his cell phone from a person whom he had recently met through a mutual friend. It seems there was some kind of issue between them, but nothing to justify the nastiness of the message that was sent.

Shortly after that, Stephen's *wife* got an abusive message from the same person; this time, it was completely out of the blue. It was a hateful message, filled with all kinds of accusations and profanity. Stephen describes it as "too painful to read."

After this second message, Stephen called the RCMP. He told the officer, over the phone, what had just taken place.

And nothing happened. The officer did not come to the house, did not take a statement, did not look at the message. Nothing happened.

Stephen called that same RCMP officer the next day to ask why. The officer said simply, "I took care of it." Stephen's response was "How can you have taken care of it? You didn't come and take a statement. You didn't even come to the house and see the message."

He called the RCMP later, spoke to a different office, and this one did come to the house.

A couple weeks later, in July, an RCMP sergeant came to the house, so that they could talk about the way the investigation had been handled. Stephen was not happy, and wanted the sergeant to know why. *That same night*, the family was together watching a movie, when a police cruiser drove down Fox St., stopped in front of Stephen's house, turned its spot light on, and shone it through the front window. Stephen ran outside, and the cruiser took off. But a neighbour saw a police cruiser drive by the house several more times that evening.

The CBC has attempted to contact the person who sent the messages, and has received no response. Not a big surprise. They also contacted the RCMP, who said they won't comment on something that is currently being investigated. Again, no surprise. So the story has not ended. That's where we are.

This is how Lunenburg made the CBC news this week. Not how we want it to happen.

So. Why bring this up? If we didn't send those nasty messages, if we didn't ignore someone's request for help, why are we spending time thinking about this in our worship today?

Well, partially because this is something that happened in our community, and we need to be aware of what's going on with our neighbours, even if we don't know them personally. Partially because this is about our community's police force, and we as citizens are responsible for how we interact with them, and how they interact with us. It needs to be a mutual process, so we need to be aware.

But there is one more, very important reason why we need to be aware of this story. And that reason is pointed out in the story from the book of Judges which was read this morning.

The people of Israel had been freed from slavery in Egypt. God had led them through the wilderness, and they were finally living in the Promised Land. But they were still trying to figure out how to do this. How do you live in a country when you aren't a country? There was no standing army, there was no government bureaucracy to run things, there was no Prime Minister to inspire the nation, or to blame when things went wrong! They were making it up as they went along, which as we know from our current pandemic experience, can be a pretty stressful way to live.

The book of Judges tells the story of those early days in the Promised Land, and the difficulties they faced. There is a definite pattern to these stories in this book.

First, the people behave badly.

Second, they are punished by God, who gives their neighbours power over them, and the neighbours use their power to oppress them.

Third, they repent and cry out to God.

Fourth, God raises up a leader who is called a Judge. This is frequently a military leader, but not always; sometime it is a person who is literally a judge, someone who makes judgements when there is a disagreement.

Fifth, the Judge tells the people what to do so they can be God's faithful people in this particular situation.

Sixth, the people respond, and God frees them from their oppressor.

Seventh, the people enjoy their freedom again. Until the Judge dies and they forget when they were told.

Rinse and repeat! The cycle starts all over again.

Today's story is one example of that pattern. But *this* story has one detail that is *very* different: the judge is a woman, whose name is Deborah.

This is significant, because in a patriarchal, male-dominated society, women were almost always in the background. In that kind of setting, the stories were always *told* by men, the stories were written *down* by men, the stories were always *about* men. *That* was considered "normal."

So the fact that we have a story about a *woman*, who plays the leading role, is remarkable in itself. But the fact that she was recognized as a *prophet* (someone who speaks God's word), that she was recognized as a *leader* in the community, *and* that she was recognized as a *judge*, is really exceptional. Deborah is the only female judge recorded in the book of Judges. She stands out because of that.

This story is a great reminder that God doesn't always do things according to our sense of "normal." God is free to do anything and everything outside of what we expect. *All* of God's people are capable of being used by God for the benefit of the wider community.

This sounds like a no-brainer, doesn't it? It's obvious. But in the heat of the moment, responding to an "outsider" can be a pretty hefty challenge. We get so used to our "normal" that we frequently don't even *see* the outsider, the stranger, the one who is different or unexpected. And as challenging as it is to hear, we, *too*, need these reminders over and over again. Because, like those Israelites newly living in the Promised Land, it's too easy to forget.

Fifty years ago, we Lutherans had such a reminder. In 1970, a woman named Elizabeth Platz was ordained as a Lutheran Pastor. She was the first woman to be ordained in any Lutheran Church in North America. It seems difficult to believe now, but her ordination was massively controversial. We hadn't done that before. It was not what we were used to. It wasn't "*normal!*"

But stories like the story of Deborah reminded us back then that God is not bound to our "normal." God can do new things, even with, or maybe more, *especially* with people who are "outsiders," who aren't part of our usual routine. God frequently comes through those who are *outside* the power structures, *outside* the expected, *outside* what we have grown comfortable with. In fact, God

often has to **make** us uncomfortable, so that we start to pay attention, so that we see things that we need to see, hear things that we need to hear, learn things that we need to learn. And for those things to happen, God, time and time again, will use people whom we haven't even seen, or whom we have intentionally ignored.

And **this** is the reason we need to pay attention to why Lunenburg made it to the CBC this week. Because Stephen and his family are outsiders, are different, and have, up until this week, just been in our background. But no more. Stephen Labrador and his family were attacked and harassed and received threatening messages... because they are Mi'kmaq.

We like to pretend that racism is a problem somewhere else. We like to pretend that hatred is not a problem here. We like to pretend that we are friendly to everybody.

I think that God is speaking to **us**, right **here**, right **now**, through Stephen Labrador and his family. I think God is reminding us that racism **is** part of our shared experience; it **is** part of this community, **our** community. I think God is showing us that we have work to do.

And the first step in this journey is admitting that we need to listen. To the outsiders. To the minorities. To the ones whose very **existence** calls us to question our "normal." People like Deborah the judge. People like Elizabeth Platz the pastor. People like Stephen Labrador, our Mi'kmaq neighbour.

It's not "normal" for us to do this. But that just might be the point.

May God open our ears to listen to the stories of those who make us uncomfortable. Because that holy discomfort just might be the beginning of the journey toward healing that we all so desperately need to make.

Amen.

RESPONSE TO THE WORD

Hymn of the Day - 778 (WOV), O Christ the Same

O Christ the same, through all our story's pages--
our loves and hopes, our failures and our fears;
eternal Lord, the King of all the ages,
unchanging still, amid the passing years:
O living Word, the source of all creation,
who spread the skies, and set the stars ablaze;
O Christ the same, who wrought our whole salvation,
we bring our thanks for all our yesterdays.

O Christ the same, the friend of sinners, sharing
our inmost thoughts, the secrets none can hide;
still as of old upon your body bearing
the marks of love, in triumph glorified:
O Son of Man, who stooped for us from heaven,
O Prince of life, in all your saving power,
O Christ the same, to whom our hearts are given,
we bring our thanks for this the present hour.

O Christ the same, secure within whose keeping
our lives and loves, our days and years remain,
our work and rest, our waking and our sleeping,
our calm and storm, our pleasure and our pain:
O Lord of love, for all our joys and sorrows,

for all our hopes, when earth shall fade and flee,
O Christ the same, beyond our brief tomorrows,
we bring our thanks for all that is to be.

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Prayers of the People

We offer our prayers to God, trusting that we will be heard, and trusting that God will open our ears as well.

[Short pause]

A - Creator of those we consider outside, we confess that we do indeed draw lines around people. We **do** exclude, we **do** make judgements. Forgive us for denying your image. God who is with us,

C - Hear our prayer.

A - Creator of those we consider other, open our eyes to the ways we shut people out of our circles, out of our gatherings, out of our lives. As painful as it might be, help us be honest with ourselves, and in that process, bring healing. God who is with us,

C - Hear our prayer.

A - Creator of those we consider weak, we acknowledge the mis-use of our power structures, our laws and regulations, which have too often been used to separate your people by gender identity, by race, by wealth, by ability. Strengthen our desire to change, to grow, to become who **you** have in mind. God who is with us,

C - Hear our prayer.

A - Creator of those we consider foreign, fill your church with a burning hunger to break down barriers between people, that we may discover your presence with all. God who is with us,

C - Hear our prayer.

A - Creator of those we consider sick, we remember those who are separated due to pandemic, due to age, due to inability, due to fractured relationships. We especially pray for those we name before you.

[Long pause]

Use us to touch all with your healing love. God who is with us,

C - Hear our prayer.

A - Creator of those we consider less, letting go of our prejudice and our fear is hard work, and we frequently run away from that holy task. Give us faith to trust that you go into these difficult valleys with us, and that nothing will separate us from your love. God who is with us,

C - Hear our prayer.

P - We ask all this in the name of Jesus, who continues to teach us to pray,

Lord's Prayer

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread, and forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial, and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen.

SENDING

Benediction

P - May almighty God,
The Father who created us to live in love,
The Son (†) who died and rose to bring us new life,
And the Spirit who guides us in every moment,
bless us all, now and forever.

C - Amen.

Sending Song - 785, When Peace Like a River

When peace like a river attendeth my way,
when sorrows like sea billows roll,
whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say,
it is well, it is well with my soul.

Refrain

It is well with my soul,
it is well, it is well with my soul.

Lord, hasten the day when our faith shall be sight,
the clouds be rolled back as a scroll,
the trumpet shall sound and the Lord shall descend;
even so it is well with my soul. *Refrain*

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Dismissal

P - Go in peace. Listening to new stories.

C - Thanks be to God!