

“Winds of Truth and Love”

December 10, 2017

Scripture Lesson: Ezekiel 37: 1-14

Prayer of Illumination:

God of Life, may the words of my mouth,
and the meditations of all our minds and hearts,
lead us to deeper understanding of you,
and the peace you call us to live. Amen.

I spent this week in Nova Scotia and had a great visit with my mother. One of the reasons for going this past week was to take part in some of the events commemorating the 100th anniversary of the Halifax Explosion. My grandfather served as minister of United Memorial Church in Halifax in the 1940's and 50's. This church was built out of the ashes of Kaye Street Methodist and Grove Presbyterian in 1921 - 4 years after the explosion and 4 years before church union that brought into being The United Church of Canada. Many in the congregation were survivors or descendants of survivors of the Explosion.

On Wednesday, I spent most of the day with friends I have known since childhood - actually from before that - as our grandparents were friends, and our parents had been friends. Their grandmother was 8 at the time of the explosion and survived with her father and brother, but her mother and 3 other siblings died in the house fire triggered by the stove turned over due to the power of the explosion. On Wednesday morning, we stood in the pouring rain for the commemoration service which included a minute of silence at 9:04 a.m.. It was a powerful experience of remembering the reality of 2000 who died, 9000 who were injured and 25,000 who were left homeless. As we stood on Fort Needham hill we could see the peace of the harbour and yet imagine the chaos of 100 years before.

On Wednesday afternoon, Mom and I went to Halifax City Hall to see a display of various explosion artifacts. One item that intrigued me were the minutes of the City council meeting held at 11am on Dec 6, 1917, less than 2 hours after the explosion. City councillors who could get there gathered and agreed to meet again at 3pm. I didn't read all the pages of the minutes, but I wonder if anyone at the at meeting asked, "Can these bones live?"

The image from Ezekiel was in my soul as I looked at all the pictures of flattened, shattered city. A blizzard the next day added to the bleakness and devastation of the north end of Halifax. Can these bones live? What will rise from the ashes?

In another display, the Rev. William Swetnam - minister of Grove Presbyterian Church said upon looking at the wasteland that had been the neighbourhood of Richmond said, "If I thought this was the work of God, I would tear off this clerical collar."

Today, on this 2nd Sunday of Advent, we hear prophetic words from Ezekiel, we know that devastation of community is a reality known in too many places in history and in our world. The

Israelite people have been sent off into captivity in Babylon and their sense of faith and hope is running very low. So, Ezekiel offers them a vision - a vision of a valley of dry bones coming to life again. Can these bones live? Yes, Yes, Yes.

Today the candles of hope and peace shine in our mist as we live in this season of Advent. We prepare for the coming of God - in the eternal story of the birth of Christ in Bethlehem - but the call of advent is not just to remember the past, but to anticipate the coming of the Holy in the present and into the future. That is not easy to do because we live with such a mixture of realities and understandings. We live in the wilderness of conflicts, of varying traditions, of limited vision and so how do we imagine building a highway for God amidst such unlevel and unstable territory. The hymn that we sang at the beginning of the service - which is a paraphrase of Isaiah 40 - speaks of building a highway for our God.

That is an intriguing phrase because who is included when we sing “our God”. If we limit our God to our tradition, to our congregation - than we might be able to determine what that would look like. But, is that a large enough vision. Is any vision less than “our” including all of creation - too limited?

We know that much of the conflict and strife in our world is the result of people competing and fighting for whose vision of God is superior. In such shadows of insecurity, arrogance, and self-righteousness, the candles of hope and peace burn very low.

As I was preparing the bulletin for this service, I was reading the Anglican Journal, the national newspaper of the Anglican Church in Canada, and I was reading the Primate - Fred Hiltz column. In his Advent message, and in it he says, “Our world is too big for anything but truth, and too small for anything but love.”

Today we have baptized Owan and baptism is an act of truth and love. It is a declaration of hope that life is sacred, important and filled with grace. It is a promise made by all of us to nurture a home, a community of faith, a world of peace, of care, of dignity and worth.

As we think of the promise and gift of peace, it can be overwhelming especially when we watch the news which is always led by the stories of mistrust, violence and destruction. In a world too big for anything but truth, we need the stories and the visions that invite us beyond ourselves to know that beyond the discord there can be, there needs to be a larger vision of truth. And with great humility we seek that truth and recognize it is expressed and known in a variety of ways.

Part of the larger story of truth of the Halifax Explosion is that it was not just the white neighbourhood of Richmond that was devastated by the Explosion. It was only a few weeks ago that I heard that there was an indigenous community - Turtle Grove - on the Dartmouth side that was totally wiped out. In all that I had read about the explosion over the years, I had never heard of that story - or never noticed. The Explosion also devastated the Black village of Africville and that community did not get the same level of relief support or recognition.

Mom and I went to play called Lullaby which imagined three characters - finding themselves brought together in the moments after the explosion. The characters were a Mi' kmaq young woman, a black man from Africville and a nurse from the Protestant Orphanage. As they came together, the stereotypes and prejudices learned affected their interaction, but they came to know one another and care for one another.

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When I arrived at the airport on Monday afternoon, we met Jerry Jackson - a man we knew from my home congregation. He was waiting with great anticipation for the arrival of 40 some members of his extended family coming from California for a Jackson family reunion. Over 40 members of the Jackson family had died in the explosion and one of the family fled the devastation to go the United States. 100 years later these family members were returning - having never met the Nova Scotia relatives. I saw Jerry again on Wednesday morning and again at something else on Friday morning and he found it hard to put into words what a wonderful week it had been for their family.

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We may be tempted to despair when we think of peace in our world, but the promise is that these bones can live. The winds of truth and love are at work - maybe frequently enough that it doesn't make the news. As this sermon has been percolating in my mind and soul, one of the phrases that has come to mind is from a litany that we often use at the Easter Sunrise service. It is "There is no such thing as a hopeless situation."

That is a bold statement of faith and it is a conviction of Advent.

One more Explosion related story. On that fateful day, 100 years ago, Vincent Coleman was working as a railway dispatcher at the harbour front. He saw the Mont Blanc on fire and in the moments before the explosion, he sent a telegraph message to the train with 300 some people approaching and told the train to stop. He acknowledged in his message that this would be his last message.

At the Memorial service on Wednesday morning, his grandson Jim Coleman spoke on behalf of the descendants of the explosion. He referred to Michael Bird's book on the explosion entitled, The Town that Died. He said it was a good description of what happened, but the title wasn't appropriate, because the town rose again from the ashes. One of the themes in the speeches on Wednesday morning was the resilience of the human spirit.

Can these bones live? Absolutely for the promise of Ezekiel, the promise of baptism, the promise of God is that I will put my spirit with you and you shall live. And you shall know that I the Lord had spoken and will act."

The winds of truth and love are not in the business of punishment or division or war - but are in the work of restoration, resurrection, hope and peace. That is the work of God. Amen.