

**Riverside United Church**  
**September 15, 2024**

**Scripture Lesson:**

**Ezekiel 33: 1-11**

The word of the Lord came to me: O Mortal, speak to your people and say to them, If I bring the sword upon a land, and the people of the land take one of their number as their sentinel; and if the sentinel sees the sword coming upon the land and blows the trumpet and warns the people; then if any who hear the sound of the trumpet do not take warning, and the sword comes and takes them away, their blood shall be upon their own heads. They heard the sound of the trumpet and did not take warning; their blood shall be upon themselves. But if they had taken warning, they would have saved their lives. But if the sentinel sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet, so that the people are not warned, and the sword comes and takes any of them, they are taken away in their iniquity, but their blood I will require at the sentinel's hand.

So you, mortal, I have made a sentinel for the house of Israel; whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. If I say to the wicked, 'O wicked ones, you shall surely die', and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but their blood I will require at your hand. But if you warn the wicked to turn from their ways, and they do not turn from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but you will have saved your life.

God's Justice and Mercy

Now you, mortal, say to the house of Israel, Thus you have said: 'Our transgressions and our sins weigh upon us, and we waste away because of them; how then can we live?' Say to them, As I live, says the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from their ways and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways; for why will you die, O house of Israel?

**Mark 4: 35-41**

On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, 'Let us go across to the other side.' And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great gale arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, 'Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?' He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, 'Peace! Be still!' Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, 'Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?'

And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, ‘Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?’

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 love you call us to live. Amen.

**“How Does the Creature say ... #2 - Woe and Save”**

If you could yell woe - stop - to three things that are happening in your life, or in the world what would they be?

Personal health issues, family situations, issues in the community, natural disasters, global realities. There are a lot of dynamics and realities that may have us affirming the line in the hymn: “Though the wrong seems oft so strong ...”

God of the earthquake, God of the storm, God of the trumpet blast, How does the creature cry Woe,? How does the creature cry Save?

Today, we find ourselves in the second Sunday of the season of creation and as creatures we are led to awe and to praise, but we also know that we are not living in a fairy tale of faith. There are challenges and situations in our lives and world where we cry in grief and anguish or cry out woe - stop the madness, stop the destruction, stop the disintegration of our world.

As I was thinking about the 2<sup>nd</sup> verse of our theme hymn for this season of creation, I was intrigued by the phrase “God of the trumpet blast.” What does that mean? What is that reference?

As I did some biblical research, I found the passage that we heard a few moments ago from the prophet Ezekiel. Ezekiel is one of the major prophets of the Hebrew scriptures, who was at work during the exile time of the Hebrew narrative. Ezekiel is best known for his vision of dry bones and for the wheels a rollin’ way in the middle of the air.

In today’s reading we hear that he describes himself as a sentinel - a guard to keep watch and to offer warning - to sound a trumpet blast. This metaphor speaks of the role of a prophet as a messenger from God. It is hard to know how the wisdom and truth of Ezekiel was heard by the people in exile. It can be hard to know how to hear his words as we read them centuries later.

The dominant interpretation of the exile experience was that it was a direct consequence of the unfaithful behaviour of the Hebrew people. So, how open would they be to hearing their judgement proclaimed? How likely are they to transformed by a trumpet blast?

How do we hear these words of Ezekiel? One commentator describes these words as a reflection

of a “Turn or Burn” theology. We hear from various sources variations of the “repent or go to hell” theology. And in that theology there seems to be a tendency to think that it doesn’t apply to ourselves, but to the sinful neighbour or another group of people who need God’s judgement or maybe God’s grace. How do the words of the prophets like Ezekiel connect to the love and grace of God? How do we understand how Jesus is our judge and our hope?

As we seek to find ourselves in this expression of God’s story, do we identify more with Ezekiel as the messenger, or the exiled people who are trying to figure out what faithfulness means in their context?

In our context, in September 2024 - how does the creature cry woe? How does the creature cry save? How do the birds of the air, the fish of the seas, the animals of the land cry woe as species go extinct, as fires burn, as storms rage. How do we as humans transform the dominant systems that have dominion over creation through exploitation rather than stewardship?

In this season of creation, we know the changes, the alarms that we see in creation. We probably disagree about causes and solutions, but overall we may be paralyzed by an inability to know what to do.

What if we find ourselves in the story as the character of Ezekiel? What becomes an effective means of speaking truth and motivating transformation?

This summer in Pugwash I went to the weekly farmer’s market on Saturday mornings and each week that I was there, there was a couple who were standing on the side of the road holding up signs saying “Jesus Saves”. Not once did I see anyone talking to them. I thought about engaging in conversation with the question, “what are your hopes and expectations for standing here?” But, I didn’t.

We hear the prophets of our time speak about climate justice, about poverty, about war and conflicts. We may find ourselves expressing rants about that which makes us angry, that which prompts us to yell - “woe, stop.” And yet, what is effective means of change and transformation? Should we take trumpet lessons?

I think that with that sense of paralysis and despair, we may find ourselves in the biblical story as the exile people who are really in need of a re-think of connection and relationship to the Holy, to the source of Promise and Hope. The gift of the exile in the biblical story was that there was a renewed and changed understanding of the covenant with God. God was not back where they used to be, but the covenant of God was within them, written on their hearts. And so they could discover the power of God from within and among and through changing circumstances and realities.

As we live in our time, we live with earthquakes and storms and they are often described as “acts of God.” Maybe it is only insurance companies that use that phrase, but it still permeates in our

societal theology. One of the implications of that is that they are forces which are beyond our control. And it is not like we can find a switch to turn off storms or drought, or steering wheels to shift the path of earthquakes and hurricanes away from us.

There is a still a permeating idea that such storms are punishment, directed to others by God. But, what happens when we are in the path of a tornado? We know the causes of storms - and the variables are not in our control, but maybe we can take more seriously some of the causes. We also know that the earthquakes and storms are not in God's control and yet the Holy is present through those storms.

We can get paralyzed or disillusioned by the enormity of climate changes and effects, and we can do all we can with individual acts of recycling and reducing emissions, and yet we know that solutions need to be more than the sum of individual acts.

So, how do we promote change and transformation? I wish I knew more effective ways for the trumpet blasts of warning to have effect on me and on the policies and priorities of our world.

I wonder how the Holy One is yelling "Woe, Stop?"

As we discern our response and our understanding of how the Holy is known, we are offered another model of faithfulness. We need prophets who will have the courage to speak truth to power. But, we also hear the model of being disciples in the reading from Mark. The disciples are in a boat in a storm. And if there was ever an image for the what it means to be the church, to be followers of Jesus that may be it. The disciples are naturally afraid, and they wake up Jesus - who doesn't seem to share the sense of panic. He speaks a word of peace and calmness returns to the water and to the disciples' souls.

The power of this story is not so much that the waters calmed - because we may have lots of questions about how that happened. The power of the story is that the disciples were afraid, knew that the presence of Jesus was with them and found a peace in their soul.

As we live with our cries of Woe and Save, we are reminded that we are followers of Jesus who lived a vision that transformed those disciples, and countless others. In our storms, in our dilemmas, in our crisis' moments - individually and collectively - it might be tempting to jump out of the boat, but it is the boat, it is the peace and hope that saves us.

We are in exile time as people of faith. We are still sorting out how to be people of faith, followers of Jesus, global citizens called to love our neighbours, and we live with many realities that prompt us to yell "Woe, Stop." It can be hard to figure out our path, but the vision of a world that is called good, a vision of a covenant that is grounded in love - invites us forward with a courage to stay in the boat and to care. And to find ways to live the truth we hold so that in small ways and in big ways, there will be healing and hope, dignity and compassion - amidst the storms. May it be so, Amen.