

Reflection, March 19-20, 2022, 3rd Sunday of Lent

John Rietschlin

A few weeks ago, I telephoned my daughter Rebecca who lives in London, Ontario. Opening the conversation, she asked how I was doing. I hesitated as I considered how to respond and then said that that I was “doing ok.” Rebecca noticed my hesitation and the less than enthusiastic tone in my voice and she asked, “what’s up?”

As I began to answer, I realised that it was not my immediate personal circumstances that gave me pause. I felt grateful for the many blessings received in my own life, my immediate family, and close friends—for the most part all was going well. But surrounding these more intimate circumstances, the larger body of humanity seemed increasingly bent on self-serving behaviour, destruction and even causing death.

From conversations with many of you and with others I know that many people share this sense of unease, confusion and even fear. Only a month ago, the truckers’ convoy was removed from our downtown streets but the civil unrest underpinning it remains. The horrible invasion and bombing of Ukraine continue, displacing from the news ongoing killing and conflicts in Yemen, Syria, Afghanistan, Ethiopia, and other places. Wholesale destruction of the natural environment on which we all depend intensifies. Systemic racism against Indigenous people and others afflicts our society. And, then there’s Covid-19...which almost feels like yesterday’s news...though the virus is still so very real and present.

What to make of all of this? Where is God in this darkening landscape?

Today’s reading from the Book of Exodus reminds us that we’re not the first group to suffer a crisis of faith. Only a short time after their miraculous liberation from slavery in Egypt, the Israelite people begin to doubt that God will keep them alive as they journey through the desert. Has God, through Moses, led them here so that they might die of thirst? Moses nearly despairs of their faithlessness, but he entreats God and is rewarded by another miracle as water comes forth from a rock. Through this simple gift of fresh water, the people will live another day. More importantly, their fragile faith has been restored, at least for the moment. The Jewish scripture writers preserved this text for that reason—to encourage faith in God who is present in even the darkest circumstances.

It’s easy to forget that Jesus lived in some pretty dark times himself. The Roman empire governed with an iron fist—destroying those who did not submit. Petty

local rulers like King Herod toed the Roman line and then added another level of oppression. Jewish religious leaders and the Jews could worship Yahweh but only while demonstrating loyalty to these despised rulers.

I will not pretend to understand how Jesus navigated through all of this. One thing seems clear, however. Fully and intimately in union with his Father, Jesus ministered to absolutely anyone who came to him with even a small measure of faith. He saw everyone—Roman officials, tax collectors, simple fishermen, adulterers, beggars, and lepers—as beloved children of the Father. We see a powerful example of this in today's Gospel passage as Jesus speaks to the Samaritan woman.

There can be little doubt that this Samaritan woman was an outcast. As a group, the Samaritans were excluded by the dominant Jewish population of the region. Coming to the well by herself at noon strongly suggests that she was ostracised by the women of the town who would generally come together to draw water in the morning and the evening. Living as a woman with a man who was not her husband would have further excluded her. And, in general, simply being a woman placed her in an inferior social position to men—men simply did not speak to women in the way that Jesus chose to do. The Gospel writer notes that the apostles are quite surprised by Jesus' conversation with the woman—they are still not quite able to understand his mission to bring light and life to all in need.

As the passage concludes, we see that through Jesus' challenging invitation the woman feels not only accepted by him but begins to believe that he may be the long-awaited Messiah. Back in the town, she proclaims this to her neighbors who then go out to meet Jesus for themselves. He stays for two more days, and many of these Samaritans come to believe in him.

So where does this lead me—and all of us—in our anxiety about the global society in which we live? In our community here at St. Joe's we currently have two important opportunities to support one another in answering that question. The Synodality process invites us to gather in small groups to discern where the Holy Spirit is leading us today? The Truth and Reconciliation process invites us to educate ourselves and to explore possible actions toward reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. In addition, our ongoing ministries such as Refugee Outreach, St. Joe's Supper Table, the St. Joe's Women's Centre, and Development and Peace offer avenues to form relationships of support and friendship with some who have been pushed to the margins. Our community prayer and avenues for assistance to the Ukraine and others in war-torn countries unite us in solidarity with those in some of the darkest circumstances.

In recent months, I have taken inspiration from the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a young Lutheran minister who came into his role in the early days of Hitler's rise to power. Bonhoeffer was among a small group of Christian clergy who refused to accept the Nazi government's demand that the church support its programs including the eradication of Jews, people with disabilities and others on the margin. Eventually, Bonhoeffer was imprisoned in a concentration camp and died by hanging just a few days before the end of the war. It doesn't get much darker than this. Through it all, however, Bonhoeffer remained focused and committed to his relationship with Jesus and his ministry to all those who came to him in need. It is said that many of the guards in the concentration camp where he was imprisoned came to him for counsel and consolation. Dietrich Bonhoeffer offered God's love and care amid the darkest of circumstance. His faith might have wavered but, by God's grace and the support of others who loved him, he did not succumb to fear and darkness.

As we begin another week, I invite all of us to join in prayer that we too might discern how we are to bring light in the darkness. To discern how we might act together as a community and with others to create a church that brings the light of Christ to the world. Then let us pray for the courage to join in whatever ways the Spirit may be calling us to act.

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March 20, 2022