

## ANNIVERSARIES

Deuteronomy 26: 1-13, 16-18

What are the important anniversaries in your life? What are the important dates that make certain days of the year more significant than others? There are birthdays, marriages, the day of your first date with your significant other, the date each of your children or grandchildren were born. There are special dates that have to do with your cultural background. There are religious and national holidays. There are national days of celebration where we feel extra patriotic or mindful of where we still need to go as a nation.

And then there are dates that have to do with sad remembrances. Last week we marked Remembrance Sunday and two days ago was Remembrance Day. We remember in order to give thanks, but we also remember in order to grieve the terrible reality of war and tyranny and how little we have learned to work for peace without the sacrifice of so many innocent lives. More recently in this nation, we have begun to mark September 30 as Truth and Reconciliation Day. We remember the lost children and survivors of residential schools, their families and communities, and we are encouraged to seek out a path for healing and hoped for reconciliation with indigenous peoples of this land.

Many of us remember where we were and what we were doing on September 11, 2001, when passenger jets flew into the world trade centre buildings in New York killing thousands... Jewish friends and especially those with ancestors from Europe mark the sad anniversary of Kristallnacht – The night of Broken Glass - on November 9 every year since 1938, when Nazis in Germany torched synagogues, vandalized Jewish homes, schools and businesses, murdered hundreds and arrested thousands to be shipped off to concentration camps... Being Armenian on my mother's side, we mark April 24<sup>th</sup> every year. On that day in 1914, Armenian intellectuals were arrested and eventually executed, and this marks the beginning of a genocidal campaign against our people by Turkey, a nation which still refuses to acknowledge what happened... Chinese friends mark June 4<sup>th</sup>, 1989, as the day protesters in Tiananmen Square in Beijing were massacred for demanding democratic reform... Such reform feels like a distant dream today, decades later, and yet the dream lives on...

On the positive side, there are many immigrants and refugees in Canada, who mark personal anniversaries of having arrived in Canada and becoming citizens... In a former congregation where I was minister, there was a Vietnamese family, who had been sponsored as boat people following the Vietnam War. They were so thankful to the congregation and elders who had worked to bring them to Canada, that they would gather a collection to donate to the church every year as a way to say: "Thank you! We will always remember what you did for our family."

So what are your dates? We all have them – personal, relational, cultural... happy ones and sad ones too... And it is no different for the Hebrew people in our scriptures. Our reading invites us into a beautiful ceremony the people are called to institute when they settle in the land given to them as a gift, a land that belongs to God and a land that is also shared by other people, the earth and its creatures. How may this ancient ceremony help us reflect on the purpose and possibility of

anniversaries? Let's begin by taking a deeper dive into the meaning and purpose of this ancient ceremony, and in this regard, let me make several points.

1) First of all, the ceremony is a beautiful way of narrating again the story of the Hebrews' march to freedom. It's a way of telling again how the people were brutally enslaved in Egypt, but then, how God found them and they found God again. They were empowered to protest, resist and break free of their enslavement and then make the long journey physically and spiritually, a journey into a new homeland, a journey of freedom toward building their lives together as a people.

So how is it that you tell your stories, stories of freedom, of achievement, of healing, of coming through some struggle or ordeal? Do you mark this journey in some way? Do you tell and re-tell the story at certain times of the year or with certain people?...

2) Second, the ceremony is an opportunity to give something back. By bringing "some of the first of all the fruit of the ground," which they have harvested from the land given to them as a gift, they are giving thanks in a tangible way to God, recognizing the gift and the privilege of having a land to call home.

So how is it that you give something back in gratitude for the gifts and blessings in your life? How do you give back to the people who have helped you, guided you, taught you, mentored you and raised you? Are there people and communities to which you contribute? Are there others more in need of your support because you are thankful for the ways you were supported when you needed it?...

3) Third, the ceremony is also about sharing what they have, especially with those less fortunate. Those specifically named in our reading are those most vulnerable in that world – widows, orphans and resident aliens who are refugees. And there are the Levites, who have no land to farm but serve as spiritual leaders and are supported collectively by all the people.

So how is it that you share what you have in gratitude for the ways you have received. There is giving back and there is sharing, and even as both can be related in our minds, they are not necessarily the same thing. We give back to the community, nation, organizations and persons who have given to us, but we share what we have with those less fortunate because we recognize what we have as a gift above any thought that it is something deserved and earned because of our superior capacities or hard work. Sure, it's essential to work hard and give it all, but as we know, without the many resources available to us, the people and good health mental and physical, there is no way we could make it. We give back and we share and sometimes, there are very specific anniversaries, celebrations and dates that are earmarked for this very purpose.

4) Finally, by telling the story again and again and ensuring future generations learn it, by giving something back for the gift and privilege of their freedom and bounty, and by sharing what they have so that no one goes hungry, homeless or feels excluded, the people are fulfilling their covenant relationship with God. They cannot claim to love God if they neglect their neighbour, and they cannot claim to serve God if they neglect to honour the land as a gift rather than something owned and

hoarded for themselves. Unlike Egypt and other empires where power and control is hierarchical and people take what they can get and leave others who can't get destitute, the newly liberated Hebrews are to build a society where there is no hierarchy, only responsibility of offices, where everyone has land and resources are shared, and where decision making is also shared because leaders are recognized by the people rather than seizing power by force.

OK, this is impressive, beautiful and admirable of the Hebrews, even as we know that they, like many peoples, honoured the vision better than the practice of it. But what does this have to do with us here today as we mark an Anniversary – 71 years for Armour Heights (established in 1951) 84 years for Melrose Park Church (established in 1938) and the marriage of the two congregations 24 years ago (“amalgamated” in 1998) creating the new Armour Heights Presbyterian Church? What can we learn from the ancient founding ceremony of the Hebrew people to enrich our anniversary?

Well, we can tell the story. When the congregations that make up Armour Heights today were founded, this part of the world was very different than it is today. There was not the diversity of cultures and peoples that we see today. Most, if not all the people were white Anglo Saxon, heterosexual (at least publicly) because any other option was forbidden, especially in the church, and Sundays were closed for every activity other than church. Church was where you gathered to meet friends, make connections, socialize and build your friendships and community. And so, churches were full every Sunday. Men were also officially in charge even though women continued to do a lion's share of the volunteering and work. But through the church a lot of the social programs and support networks in society were organized. God was male and almighty, but God was also love. And over the years, the church was forced to change or die as Sundays were opened up to all kinds of other options for activities and socializing. Faith had to become a choice for itself rather than a sidebar to other social purposes churches offered. As secularism grew and peoples immigrated here from parts of the world where other religions were practiced, faith in the God revealed and embodied in Jesus had to become more intentional a commitment. Church could not remain a social club and survive.

Armour Heights has navigated these changes and continued to flourish as a community that learned again and again how to be ever more inclusive of diversity – cultural, gender and sexual diversity. Armour Heights continued to find ways to diversify its sharing with the community and its mindfulness of those most destitute. Armour Heights continued to find ways to proclaim the love of God in worship and music, mission and outreach and most recently through Covid, expand its reach beyond the geographic boundary of the GTA.

How will we keep telling our story? We will talk about the risks we took because we care, our generous outreach, our provision of deep spiritual content for adults and vibrant programming for the children and youth who will find the space in their busy schedules to prioritize some spirituality in their lives...

We will continue to grow as a church that prioritizes inclusion and celebrates how God's love includes everyone. We will continue to prioritize justice as healing and reconciliation with indigenous peoples of this land. We will continue to support the most vulnerable of our society in the inner city, as exploited

youth and women, as underhoused persons in need of mental health support, as families with children who could never attend a summer camp without some financial support.

We will continue to explore and build partnerships with community organizations as we have begun to do with Mosaic. We will also explore relationships with people of other faiths in the coming years... And given the climate crisis that will be front and centre a concern for us and future generations, we must explore ways Armour Heights may become a leader in our building and practices as opportunities and government incentives become available.

But all of this, as for the Hebrews, can only succeed if we're all in. it's not about the ministers and leaders simply promoting and organizing the vision for the congregation. Anniversaries are opportunities to tell the story and celebrate our giving back, our sharing and our renewal of relationship with our Creator God, Jesus our spiritual head and the Spirit flowing in and through us. But anniversaries are also opportunities for everyone here, in person and online, to embrace the vision, to renew our commitment or maybe make a commitment in a new way. However it happens, participation and immersion of the whole community is how Armour Heights will truly celebrate a future as rich as the past has been and the present is now...

So then, what do you say? Are you in?... Amen.