

CRISIS & NEW LIFE

Jeremiah 33: 14-16; Luke 21: 25-36

Stan was someone I met when he came to Toronto to help his mother transition from her condo into a seniors' residence. After the second Sunday attending church with his mother, Stan was inspired to tell me his story. He was a yoga instructor with his own studio in Ottawa. He lived simply, he looked fit and healthy, and he loved life. But he also shared with me how this was not always the case. Stan had been making lots of money as a senior executive in a large company for a decade before that. But the pressure, the stress and the unrelenting demands on his time led to a major mental health crisis which was also precipitated by a massive heart-attack. Stan had been in hospital for a month working on his physical and mental-health recovery. He knew something major had to change in his life.

Upon release from hospital, Stan started to make major changes beginning with quitting his job. He was going to work on his physical and mental health and his spirituality. Although he had grown up in church off and on, he found in yoga and the spirituality around yoga a pathway for his own inner healing and a community he could belong to as well. Even as it took a major crisis to change his life, looking back on it all now, he was thankful the change had come. It was an advent into a new beginning for Stan, a resurrection after a near death, a new life.

Then there was Charles. Charles was a funeral director, and on one long drive to a rural cemetery for an internment, he told me his story. His crisis was similar, in many ways, to that of Stan. Charles was also in the corporate world. He owned a large house, a cottage and provided the best schooling for his children with no thought to the cost. But Charles hit a wall of depression. Nothing was satisfying or meaningful anymore. He took some time away on stress leave. This turned into months. His wife was particularly concerned. His physical health also began to deteriorate, he lost his appetite and a lot of weight. He hit rock bottom.

But with the help of good therapy, the love of his wife and children, and some good medication, Charles started to climb out of the pit. The most significant change he made was also quitting his job like Stan. Charles wanted to do something meaningful with his life, something that would be helpful to people in crisis and grief. He went back to college and studied to become a funeral director. He went back to church. Even though they had to sell the big house and get something far more modest, Charles was just fine living a simpler life. He found real meaning walking with people through their most difficult times of grief and loss. He found real fulfillment providing care and guidance to people who were seeking help in navigating all those necessary decisions after the death of a loved one. It was all about the people for Charles. And like Stan, even though he had hit rock bottom, resurrection and advent into a new life were the best things that could have happened to him.

Well, it is in the face of crisis that the prophet Jeremiah speaks a word of hope also. Clearly, the people to whom Jeremiah is prophesying will have faced many threats and sources of stress. Clearly the people would have experienced grave injustices all around them. Why else would the prophet proclaim that a “righteous branch” will spring up among the people, a leader like the great King David. This leader will “execute justice and righteousness in the land.” Under this leader the people will also experience “salvation” and “safety”. Imagine what kind of suffering and ordeal they must have lived through for which such prophecy would be a lifeline... a lifeline, that is, if they could believe in it.

When you’ve been beaten down, broken and emptied out, whether you are to blame or the circumstances around you are to blame, how difficult it is to rise up again and believe a new day and a new way are possible. Whether you’ve been beaten down because of your race, your culture, your family, your sexuality or gender-identity, your job... Whether the emptiness is the absence of a loved one who has died... whether the threat is environmental collapse or the many extreme weather events that will demolish the life you’ve known... whether it’s the increasing gaps between those who have and those who have not in this world that disturb you profoundly... whether it’s escaping a terrible life in one part of the world as a refugee in search of a new place to live with dignity and safety, free from fear... Whatever the threat and however you’ve experienced brokenness, it can be impossibly difficult to believe wholeness is possible, that new life can truly come.

In the case of our gospel reading, Jesus couches his words of hope with an anticipation of a crisis yet to come. The signs are everywhere for Jesus. Anger and violence are building. Various groups among the people are sizzling with frustration while others are beaten down and emptied of life. There is talk of revolt against Rome. All it will take is a match to ignite the explosive bomb of rage and nothing-to-lose nihilism.

Of course, this destructive energy is also dangerous for followers of Jesus. Why? Because Jesus wants to put out the fire of rage and frustration with the powerful wind of love. The leaders of the people, on the other hand, want to fuel this fire so they can weaponize it against their enemies. If Jesus and his followers don’t jump on board, they will be burned first on the march of violent vengeance.

Now historically, we know that these prophetic words of warning from Jesus came to fulfillment within 30 years of his death. Apocalyptic language of end of the world destruction, distress and suffering, point to the invasion of Roman troops under general Titus who came in and laid siege on Jerusalem in 70 AD. The Romans burned the city to the ground, destroyed the temple and crucified tens of thousands. This was preceded by Jerusalem being the battle ground of armed gangs under various warlords like Haiti is now for example. Fuelling the fire of

hate and violence is not easy to control as much as political leaders like to use it for their political ends. Sometimes it backfires and everyone gets burned.

OK, so Jesus warns of this crisis to come. But he also proclaims hope. All will not be lost. There will be resurrection... if, that is, God's people prepare with faith and if God's people cultivate the spiritual muscle of hope. So then, what kind of faith and hope does Jesus counsel for people who want to be servants of love in a world that can move destructively from crisis to crisis?

Two things... Jesus counsels two things necessary so that faith and hope grow alive in us when crisis comes.

1) First, Jesus says, "look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near..." And what is the kingdom of God Jesus has been proclaiming throughout his ministry? It is a communion of love and justice everyone is invited to join. On behalf of God Jesus is summoning all people to join his kingdom movement of love and justice. And love and justice are ever more pressing and necessary when crisis comes. When the trees are sprouting leaves you know summer is coming. Summer is like a coming crisis, usually when military invasions are planned. But for those rooted in a vision of faith and hope in the kingdom of love and justice, summer is also a call to love in the face of crisis that much more intentionally and fiercely.

Crisis is not just loss and devastation. It is that. But faith and hope also see in crisis opportunity and possibility. Think about our climate crisis and the devastation it's causing so many right now around the world. The leaves have been sprouting for a while now. The crisis will only get worse unless our faith and hope awaken us to ways love and justice can come alive. Obviously we cannot control what nations and peoples do collectively. But we can begin with the people around us, the things that preoccupy us, the ways we can be of service, the things we can learn and become alive to. Where is injustice happening? How can I serve love so that I am an instrument of healing and maybe reconciliation? What new things can I learn? What new ways can I grow in how I relate to the world around me and my lifestyle?

Jesus is calling for a new beginning of love and justice. Join the kingdom movement and let's help turn this ship around beginning with us. Advent is a time of new beginnings, a new year. Crisis will come. But even before it comes let's begin focussing on the other side of it. What will we learn and how will we grow as we face the crisis ourselves and walk with others through theirs?

2) Finally, Jesus also says this: "Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly,

like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of humanity.”

When crisis comes and after crisis goes, will we be able to stand before the Son of humanity and declare our faithfulness to his love and justice in our lives? Are we ready, alert, prayerful and grounded, at peace with our conscience and free to respond with love? Or are we weighed down with excess emotional baggage and preoccupation such that we self-medicate by intoxication, escape and distraction rather than engaging our life issues and relationships in search of healing and direction?

One of the words Jesus uses is “*kraipale*” translated as dissipation. Dissipation means a mental wasting away of energy. Dissipation is mental exhaustion which we deal with by numbing ourselves because it’s uncomfortable facing our lives, our relationships and the realities of our world right now. We can escape or we can engage. We can give up in despair, lose ourselves in some addiction or we can trust in hope that new possibilities can come, new relationships can be formed, and new doors can open.

Crisis will come in your life and mine. It’s just the way it is. It’s all around us too. We can’t control it all too often. The question is: how do we prepare? What resources do we have around us? How may we cultivate faith and hope in the power of love to work in and through our lives? How does a community place and space like this church become a source of strengthening, grounding and spiritual growing for you?

Stan and Charles made major changes in their lives in the face of their personal crises. What must each of us do in our own lives? And what about collectively in the face of our climate emergency, a world of social unrest, conflict and polarization, a world where pandemics can rise up and spread super fast, a world where people are in search of the basics to live in safety and dignity? How do we engage the world around us with faith and hope through the power of love? And how do we find some inner peace in such love despite so much that is beyond our control?

Prayer: Come to us anew, O God, come to us again and again, especially as we feel caught up and pulled down by worry and need and crisis... Come to us this season of Advent and fill us up with fresh faith, hope and love... and give us your peace within despite the turbulence without... Amen.