

Reflection for October 15, 2023 – Is It The End Of The World As We Know It? Based on Isaiah 25:1-9 and Philippians 4:1-9

Lately I have been feeling a little gloomy. My energy seems to be waning and I'm more easily distracted than usual. I'm feeling a little disconnected with the world, restless and not in the most positive frame of mind. I have been asking myself what that is about, and I think I know at least in part, what is affecting me.

I'm not feeling so hopeful these days.

World conflicts have been the norm for millennia, we are used to hearing stories that are so very tragic. But I feel like I am maxed out. Recent events of so much death and destruction, are really getting to me. Until very recently it was the Ukraine that was headline news, so troublesome. Of course, now it is the conflict between Israel and Palestine that has become so upsetting. Such hatred and bloodshed on some of the very lands Christ walked is unfathomable, even though, in reality, it has been going on for centuries.

For those thousands and thousands of affected innocent men, women and children I ask, where God have you ***“been a refuge to the poor, a refuge to the needy in their distress, a shelter from the rainstorm and a shade from the heat.”*** When God, will you swallow up death forever and wipe away the tears from all the faces of those who grieve or despair. I pray that this prophetic wisdom from Isaiah will come true, but is that possible? And if so, how and when?

Adding to my personal list of disappointments, and concerns, what is to become of this United Church of ours. Not Peachland United Church specifically, but the larger United Church. More and more Communities of Faith are closing as membership declines and costs to maintain ministry are just unmanageable.

On that particular note, I heard just a couple of weeks ago that my former Church, PLURA Hills in Kamloops is closing.

Some of you have been through a church closure and you know how that hurts. For me this event is particularly hard to take. The founder of the congregation was one of my mentors. And after worshipping in a local elementary school for almost 20 years, up went a building in 1999. I was the building committee chair, a job very satisfying, but not for the faint of heart. I can remember vividly a mound of dirt and some shovels when we broke ground. What a celebration we had after realizing a dream. It had taken years. And now, it is all coming to an end. I am truthfully quite heartbroken.

Truly, one might wonder if the events of our times might add some credence to arguments of the “great apocalypse” that has been projected for millennia. The apocalypse, the end of the world as we know it.

I am not a subscriber to that theology but in fact, the phrase, the end of the world as we know it, might be something worth thinking about.

Margaret Swedish, an advocate of ecological wholeness, writes that the world we know is ending. She says, ***“What is familiar to us as a framework in which we have lived our lives for a very long time is ending.”***¹

¹ Same as below

She's speaking about the climate crisis. Creation is under incredible stress, and we don't know what is going to happen. However, I think her words are worth considering, as we deal with so much constant grief, that seems to be weighing us down.

"We need a sense of God that does not invite us to grow smaller." Swedish says. In my vision, this would be a God that stops us from retreating into hopelessness. A God that embraces us with urgency, with passion, with love, as did the God revealed in Jesus Christ.²

Exiles in despair lived through an end of the world time for them. Isaiah was there to bolster their spirit, reminding the people that God had already done wonderful things. In his prophetic wisdom, everyone would feast on rich food, **"a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear."** This was hopeful news for a people feeling quite hopeless.

In Paul's Epistle this morning, he asks Euodia and Syntyche to put aside their differences. These two women were influential in the early church. Paul saw their conflict as threatening what he had built. He urged them and everyone in the church then to **⁹Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.** Keep on teaching and working as disciples. Regardless of the changing time, an end time, as Paul was in prison when he wrote his letters to the Philippians, he provides promises of God's unfailing love. This is hope again in times of an ending.

Maybe Margaret Swedish's reference to the end of the world as we know it is best reflected in the life of Jesus himself. Can you imagine how your hopes would be crushed with Jesus' betrayal, arrest and execution.

Here was something tangible, finally a real challenge to abuse of authority. Someone finally would put the record straight, "all are created equally by God, all are favoured, all are to be treated with dignity." Jesus' death would have been the end of the world as many knew it.

Of course, hope didn't end then. And hope hasn't ended in the centuries since. Christ's message carries on, "Love one another, as I have loved you." "Turn the other cheek." He healed the blind, the beggar, a haemorrhaging woman and forgave a prostitute. He fed the stranger. All are things we are asked to do today. They are simple things, but they continue to provide hope throughout the world.

Jesus came into a deeply divided and polarized society. A hated oppressor, differing religious groups, division between Gentile, Jew and Samaritan, segregation between men and women, slaves and free, rich, and poor.³ The miracle of his presence was in bringing hope. As it turns out, his untimely, brutal, and senseless death started something new. In Jesus' resurrection so too was there a resurrection of hope once again. An ending and a new beginning at the same time.

So, as I pick myself up and dust myself off from my doldrums, I realize I have to ask myself a fairly simple, but nonetheless direct question. Ian, do you believe in Jesus? Because if you do, you believe in hope. You believe in the possibility of resurrection, that difficult end times can give birth to promising new ones. You believe that a new kin-dom is still possible.

² Insert reference to website

³ rohr

That doesn't mean I can't be discouraged; I know that is part of this time. It doesn't mean I'm going to like what is going on around me in the world. It doesn't mean I am going to somehow begin even remotely to understand why religious zealots want to annihilate each other. It doesn't mean I can fathom why some politicians or oligarchs want to destroy their neighbours.

I don't have to try and understand it. That is a very good thing because I can't. None of us can.

But I do believe, as naïve as it may be, that I can make a difference. And I have to remain steeped in hope to do that.

The world as we know it is changing. These are end times for many things. Having said that, if Jesus was here among us today, he would see that as possibility. And he would offer a hopeful message. He would offer words of wisdom. "Don't be fooled into believing that justice is impossible," he would say. "Don't believe, despite what you have experienced, that the world will stay the same or even get worse. Don't believe the naysayers. Don't throw your arms up in frustration. Don't give in or give up. Remain hopeful. I lived in hope. When you follow me, you live in hope also."

Following Jesus means living in hope. Living in hope is the antidote to a dreaded illness, its called apathy.

It is hard to be hopeful at times but hopeful we must be if we believe in Jesus and a knew kin-dom reality.

It might be a good thing to believe in the end of the world as we know it. That way there will always be room for a brighter future.

Thanks for listening this morning,

Amen