

Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa
March 7 2021 – Elizabeth Bryce

Readings: Psalm 19 (paraphrase)
John 2:13-22

Sermon: “I’m Fine” - Lent 2

On Ash Wednesday, I attended a General Council “chapel” service with our moderator, Richard Bott. It was held over Zoom – which is why people across the country could be at “General Council’s chapel”, even the moderator was in BC.

One meaningful aspect of the service for me was the music that was offered by Lydia Pederson, who is well known in the music ministry of our denomination – you can find her name and arrangements throughout our hymn books. As a time of musical meditation in the service, she played John Bell and Graham Maule’s Don’t be afraid from More Voices – it is written in the key of C, so even though the words reference fear, the tune is quite bright – it’s hopeful – it IS reassuring to know God is there, when we are fearful. Lydia played it once, just as it was written on the printed page, then she played it a second time.

The second time she interpreted the melody into what was perhaps a minor key. I am no musician, but that is how I understand the difference the second time around – I’m sure there is an actual musical explanation is beyond my understanding. But it was a very subtle change, you would still recognize the tune, but had the feeling that something completely new or different is taking place.

I found the change very meaningful. The lyrics that were running through my head were the same as the first time: *Don’t be afraid, my love is stronger than your fear...* But the sound of that minor key, the deep shadows between the notes in the chords, the more awkward transition from one line to the next. It took that well known refrain to another, to a different place, to a place of the unknown, to a place of risk, of depth, of mystery.

I found that simple chorus of improvisation played by Lydia to be so meaningful that I am still thinking about it 2 weeks later. For me, the season of Lent is a time of deep thought. Lent is a time of building up our courage so that we can ask some tough questions. Lent is a time of taking risks with our faith and worship that we might not take at other times of the year.

The scripture passages of Lent – particularly the ones from the gospel – are not readings that lend themselves to a comfortable or an easy faith! In the gospel of Mark for example it is all wrestling with demons and taking up your cross, and this week the famous scene of Jesus picking a fight in the temple. They are not easy passages.

We are a people so in need of hope right now. We have carried on as best we can through this pandemic time. We have been creative in adapting to new technology and

old limitations. We have worshipped and prayed together, whether our hearts were bursting or broken, whether our relationships were deepening or darkening under the stress of so much time together, so much time apart.

Sometimes I find it hard to wrestle a song of hope out of a difficult story like this gospel passage, a story that is so full of minor chords, awkward transitions, infinite mysteries and unanswered questions.

I can only imagine what the disciples were thinking on that day. In this story from John's gospel, the clearing of the temple comes much closer to the beginning of Jesus' ministry than it does to the end. This is only chapter 2 in the gospel of John, not chapters 21, 11 or 19 which is where we find the story in Matthew Mark and Luke. So I can just imagine the disciples shaking their heads in disbelief when they saw Jesus' reaction, wondering why Jesus would want to come to Jerusalem, only to leave the authorities with THIS first impression. A crazy man with a wild whip, turning the tables and quoting the prophets like he was some kind of religious fanatic. Really Jesus? Is this how you want them to remember you?

For John, the turning of the tables and the clearing of the temple are not Jesus' condemnation of what will happen on Calvary's hill in less than a week as it is in the synoptic gospels. This is his demonstration of what will happen for the next 3 years! How he and the authorities will come head to head time and again because they are never going to be on the same page when it comes to understanding the essence of God's kingdom and how it is lived out on earth.

For John, the temple is not just the pile of stones and series of courtyards where people come to pray. For John the temple is Jesus – Jesus is an incarnate temple, a living Word, a visible metaphor of the place where God dwells. Not in stone and curtain and courtyard, but in flesh and blood. Not in power and prestige but in vulnerability and emotion and hurt.

When Jesus says “stop making my father's house a marketplace” he was talking about the blindness of his own people to see when something new was being born right before their eyes. But they were so busy with the business of being an institution that they could not see Jesus or hear the truth of what he taught. They heard his words and felt defensive, cornered, angry.

And the result for Jesus is BIG feelings, as my friends with young children like to say. You have big feelings about this situation, and you expressing it with hitting or crying, instead of using your words.

I wonder if any of you are having those big feelings right now. Are you having big or deep feeling, thanks to this global situation which you haven't chosen but which has so drastically changed your life. It's like we are all being forced to play in a minor key when what our ears long to hear is that positive C major that is so reassuring and full of hope.

I find it fascinating, again this is just in the gospel of John, I find it fascinating that in the very last verse, John tells us that *“After (Jesus) was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.”*

It's a very common experience, having these BIG feelings. And then it's only later on, that you or someone else realizes, what was REALLY going on. The pieces fall into place and you find yourself say “NOW I get it.” You blew up at the bank teller or gave your partner the silent treatment. You pressed send on that awful email or you overreacted when your computer had a glitch. You cried all the way through a really stupid movie or couldn't fall asleep at night.

There's a lot going on. When I ask people how they are doing, probably 75% of them say “I'm fine.” And I say it too.
But when I say “I'm fine”

Sometimes what I mean is: I don't have the energy to go into how I'm really feeling right now.

Sometimes what I mean is: If you really wanted to know how I am, my answer would probably shock you.

Sometimes what I mean is: I have good days and bad days, and today you caught me on a good day.

Sometimes what I really mean is: There are so many people out there who have it much worse than I do that I don't think I should complain.

Today we are hearing the story of Jesus' expressing his BIG deep feelings because the religious people who really should have been listening to God had stopped. They were so busy maintaining the temple as an institution, instead of preparing it to be a place for listening to God. When someone, Jesus, actually spoke holy words in their midst, they were deaf to their meaning.

And that made Jesus ANGRY. This is not the gentle Jesus meek and mild that came to Sunday School or catechism classes. He knew something was wrong and he said so. He embodied that anger because he listened to God, and he listened to his own feelings. When the disciples asked why his face was turning beet red with emotion, Jesus didn't say “I'm fine.”

Today we light a candle in memory of many lives lost in 2020. We read out the names of the ones connected to our congregation, but we know there are so many more. And each of those names represents deep feeling for someone who loved them.

With COVID restrictions, we haven't been able to gather family and friends to remember and celebrate these very special lives. Some smaller family gatherings have taken

place, which has brought a measure of comfort, but grief is already hard enough to put into words. Having to delay our memorials for almost a year just pushes those big feelings down even more.

I don't want to put too much pressure on one little candle, but for many of us the light that shines in the darkness today represents the many feelings that we have not been able to speak out loud. And the gospel of John reminds us "the darkness did not overcome it." When we light this candle in a community we bring all of our strength and all of our hope to support those who are not able to burn that light on their own, not right now.

"I'm fine."

And we are – ultimately. Even with the depth of grief or maybe anger we carry. We are fine, with those questions of faith that don't really have answers. We are fine, taking the risk of showing God who we really are.

Because God is always with us, putting a living word to our silence, and infinite hope to our despair, and new life where we have seen only death.

Thanks be to God. We are not alone. Amen