

**New St. James Presbyterian Church  
Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
Sunday, September 18, 2022**

**“Amen! And to God be the glory!”**

**Rev. Dr. David McKane, Guest Minister**

My mother often said, it is always good to be invited back, even if it is to apologize for my behaviour as a child. It is good to be back with you yet again and to team with Torin and the choir for yet another service.

Whenever I first read the readings selected for today I felt that I had just listened to the news out of Ukraine or perhaps Afghanistan.

Jeremiah, writing in the 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE, sounds like many a contemporary news reader. Jeremiah is prophesying against the threat of Assyria which is threatening to destroy Israel, its culture, its national institutions and its religious buildings much like Putin is doing to the Ukraine. Recognizing the reality of such a threat Jeremiah is prophesying about the inescapable fate of his people.

Our hearts, too, are sick, and grief is upon us whether it be the pain of the Ukraine, the cry of the refugees in Afghanistan or in many other parts of the world, the pain of so many Indigenous Canadians, the despair of those battling forest fires in Newfoundland, or the western provinces of Canada Jeremiah sounds very much like Tanya Talaga writing for the Globe and Mail or Rosemary Barton of the CBC

I thought I should choose other lections or choose an old sermon, but no, I decided to run with those selected. I, too, weep for the poor people of the Ukraine and those still waiting to escape from Afghanistan. I, too, still mourn the loss of those Canadian children who died as a result of Residential schooling and still unable to obtain records from the Canadian government, the Catholic Church in Canada or in Rome. O how I long for a balm in Gilead or elsewhere.

“Dear God, who loves all humankind, forgive our foolish ways” wrote John Greenleaf Whittier in 1872, long before politicians, like many of us, to heed the warnings and the threat of Climate Change or Ruth Duck writing in 1988, “out of the depths, O God, we call to you, wounds of the past remain, affecting all we do...”, much like what London’s David Suzuki or our Indigenous brothers and sisters or Glen Pearson of The London Food Bank have been telling us for years.

Let me tell you two stories of hymn writers. They are not the stories of famous hymn writers like Charles Wesley or Canadian Sylvia Dunstan.

The first is the story of George Matheson, blind Scottish Presbyterian minister. George Matheson was born in Glasgow, Scotland in 1842, the eldest of eight children. He graduated from Glasgow University with first class honours in Classics and Philosophy when he was 19 when tragedy struck. He discovered that he was going blind with no hope of a cure. This plunged him into deep despair. While at University he had met a young woman, the love of his life, whom he hoped to marry, but when she heard of his affliction she told him, “I do wish to be the wife of a blind man.” and so they parted.

Years later, on the eve of his sister’s wedding, the thought of his own disappointment at the young woman’s rebuff resurfaced and was the occasion for his most famous hymn. He had refused to attend the wedding because of his own pain so he stayed alone in the manse at Innellan, near Dunoon. He would write years later, *“Something happened to me that night, which was known only to myself, and which caused the most severe mental suffering. The hymn was the fruit of that suffering. It was the quickest bit of work I ever did in my life. I had*

*the impression of it being dictated to me by some inner voice rather than working on it myself. I am quite sure than the whole work was completed in five minutes and equally sure that it received no retouching or correction by my hand. I have no natural gift of rhythm...this came like a dayspring from on high.” Thus Matheson wrote:*

*O Love that wilt not let me go.....I give thee back the life I owe,...O Joy that seekest me through pain, I cannot close my heart to thee, I trace the rainbow through the rain....*

George Matheson had entered the ministry of the Presbyterian Church of Scotland as a blind student, beginning his ministry at Innellan, staying for eighteen years before receiving a call to St. Bernard's Church in Edinburgh. He wrote many books and articles for the Presbyterian Church in Scotland one of which caught the eye of Queen Victoria, who invited him to preach at Balmoral and then published one of his books.

George Matheson never did marry but throughout his life he proved that there was a Love that would never let him go, a Love to which I, among many others, can also attest.

The second story is that of Martin Rinckart who was born in 1586 in Eilenberg, Germany. Eilenberg was a small walled city set in the countryside of Saxony. In 1618 war broke out all over Europe, country fighting against country much like much of the world today. It lasted for 30 years. In the midst of that war plague broke out much like Covid but because it happened more than 400 years ago there was no vaccines or even cooperation among countries to treat it. Due to the war people were leaving their own towns and villages for the security of the walled cities like Eilenberg. Eilenberg, a small city at best, when the plague broke out killing many of the people inside the city. To make matters worse people could not leave the city because the Swedish army besieged the city and threatened to starve the people if they did not pay an exorbitant sum of money, much like the computer blackmailers of today. Some 5000 people died in the city of Eilenberg among them all of the ministers except Martin Rinckart who would conduct 40 to 50 funerals in a day. Most of the city's officials had also died as did Martin's wife so the people pressed Martin to negotiate an end to the siege. Martin did so, offering the Swedish army a much lesser sum that they had demanded. With all the horrible things that had happened that year, both to Martin and to the city as they approached the time of thanksgiving for the harvests that had been destroyed by the various armies over the 30 years of war Martin wrote a hymn of thanksgiving for the deliverance of Eilenberg, a hymn we still sing today. Thinking of all that Martin had suffered during those 30 years of war and plague, of all the pain he had endured, of all the evil he had witnessed I stand in awe of his courage and his faith, his strength of will when most people would have abandoned God as they believed God had abandoned them. Thinking of all the refugees from the Ukraine, from Afghanistan, from Syria, from Myanmar, from Africa and thinking, too, of all the families in Canada still dealing with the problems of Residential Schools and the grief of a lost generation of children or all those who have lost their homes and businesses to floods or to forest fires, I can see him, in my mind's eye, penning the lines of his now famous hymn;

*“Now thank we all our God, with heart, and hands, and voices, ....in whom this world rejoices... who from our mother's arms has blessed us on our way with countless gifts of love....”*

Those would not be the first words out of my mouth, given the circumstances.

It takes great courage and great faith for many people to sing that hymn even in today's world so we in thanksgiving sing it for them. So I end this sermon with the words that Bach ended every piece of music that he ever wrote,

Amen! And to God be the glory!

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