

“Disappointments Need Not Lead to Despair”

A Sermon Shared with the Congregation of St. Andrew’s United Church
for Lent Five, April 2, 2017 at 10:30 a.m.

Scripture Readings: Ezekiel 37:1-14; Romans 8:6-11

(by The Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)

It is one of those events that almost everyone remembers where they were when they heard about the airplanes hitting the World Trade Centre. I was at College Boreal, my first time visiting the institution, for a planned video call meeting at 10:00 a.m. that would connect to colleges in Thunder Bay, Etobicoke, and here in Sudbury. Having never been to the college, I wanted to make sure I was there in plenty of time, and the instructions seemed to suggest it was on the edge of town, so I left around 9:00 a.m. and, as you guessed it, was in the parking lot of the college in less than 20 minutes, walking into the main building and finding my way to the communications section where cameras and audio-visual systems were at the ready shortly after 9:30 a.m.

As I walked into the office area, I saw people standing about watching small televisions in a couple of strategic spots. I thought at first this must be a wonderful place to work, you can watch television as you have your morning coffee, until I realized what they were watching, and in silence saw the second plane hit the tower. We knew we were in the midst of an historic moment, and words could not describe the scene of horror, destruction, and devastation.

A similar experience was remembered by many who heard of, or who witnessed the Challenger disaster of January 28, 1986, 73 seconds into lift-off.

I was at the post office in Forest, getting my personal and church mail, a normal place in a small town to gather, visit, and chat with neighbours and friends. A member of the congregation came up to me – a retired civil servant who decided in his mid-fifties to take early retirement and move to Forest. He and his wife bought a motel and started their own business. They were active and welcome members of the United Church there, and he always had a story or a funny quip to share, so when he approached me at the curb outside of the post office in a seeming state of panic, proclaiming: “I am so glad you are here – I need to speak to my minister,” I simply viewed it as another funny line (the purpose of which was still hidden from me).

Very quickly, however, I learned that he was not joking – he was upset by the destruction of the Challenger spaceship that morning, and he wanted someone – anyone – with whom he could talk to try to make sense of this horrible tragedy. That is how I learned of the disaster.

Now I do not wish to start today’s message on a down note for any empty purpose, but the truth is these stories are as close as I can come to setting the scene for today’s reading from the prophet Ezekiel. Ezekiel speaks about a valley of dry bones. It had for him, no doubt, the same impact that huge disasters and upsetting moments had for people in our time when tragedy strikes, and widespread destruction is evident.

It is not natural to have a large area filled with the remains of the dead. Clearly something awful happened here in days gone by. Ezekiel would be filled with pain and sadness due to this tragedy, as were those around him.

They are moments beyond comment, beyond understanding, beyond discerning their ultimate purpose and meaning. And they remain symbols of how humans have tried to face horror and destruction, and found a way to the other side.

A valley of dry bones is an upsetting vision. It represents slaughter, famine, or some kind of unusual and extraordinary event that obviously touched many. Yet Ezekiel has a way of seeing in the tragedy a vision of new hope and renewed life. We rely on people in our everyday circumstances who can turn tragedy into hope, and pain into new life. They are the essence of our faith journey.

Making sure disappointments do not lead to despair involves us in being able to put into perspective all that we experience. It is far easier, I realize, to remember times past and how we survived them than it is to see dangers and disappointments in times present and see beyond them. But it is a goal we must be able to manage.

In her book *I Want to be In That Number – Cool Saints I have Known*, Lois Wilson, former Moderator of the United Church, herself about to turn 90, writes about people who have turned potential disappointments not into despair, but into action and hope. One of the people in that book is Mary Coyne Rowell Jackman, part of a well-known philanthropic family in Toronto, and a person of some personal wealth and means. But Lois Wilson writes about her determination on a number of fronts.

Let me mention just two. In the late 1920's she helped to set up a women's branch of the Canadian Institute for International Affairs, since women were not welcome in the meetings at Hart House at the University of Toronto. At Metropolitan United Church she established the Bond Child Development Centre in 1937 for workers on minimum wage to help their children have a healthy start to life, an organization which exists to this day, 80 years later.

To many, she was a woman of wealth and means, advantaged by her ability (and that of her mother) to be a university graduate when few could afford such education, the mother of a former Lieutenant Governor in Hal Jackman, and the mother of a controversial Senator, Nancy Jackman, yet she always saw despair of others as something she needed to address, and developed opportunities to encourage others and provide hope instead of despair.

In her address to the convocation of 1992 as she received an honorary doctorate from the University of Toronto, Mary remarked, in part:

“...life is an adventure. I can testify to that with every fibre of my 88 year-old self. The adventure has to do with love but also mostly with the search for truth. When you have truth you have meaning. When you have meaning you have it all.”

We have a choice – Ezekiel reminds us that we can be overwhelmed by images that invade our space, or we can be prepared to write a new chapter of history based on the vitality of Christ, and the hope God gives us. It is our option to choose.

We need not accept the view that our disappointments will inevitably lead to despair, but we can look for another way to end the story, and inspire others.