**Have you not heard? God is with us! (Luke 24:13-35)**

It was a beautiful late summer day 19 years ago. I had just dropped Rachael at her kindergarten class. I was doing some chores around the house. When the phone rang and I heard a good friend’s voice on the other end I naturally asked, “How are things going? What’s up with you?” Her response, “Haven’t you heard?” said in such a chilling tone, led me to understand immediately that something bad had happened. That was what we refer to now as 9/11.

How is it possible I didn’t know?

I can only imagine the incredulity of the disciples who start up a conversation with this stranger on the road to Emmaus that day. He seems to not have heard about the drama that has unfolded these past days in Jerusalem. He’s the only one.

There has been over the centuries a lot of commentary about why the two disciples did not recognize the man they were speaking with was Jesus. Some will say they were purposely kept from recognizing him (an outside miraculous source) and others will say that they were unable, within themselves to recognize him (be it their perception had been so clouded by recent events, or Jesus was so changed in his resurrected state as to be not easily recognized).

A lectionary blog that I often read, and have referred to before, is “Provoking the Gospel” by Richard W. Swanson, a professor of religion and philosophy. With this week’s gospel passage, he paraphrases from the original Greek. Where we read, in verse 16, “but their eyes were kept from recognizing him”, Swanson paraphrases,

Their eyes were defeated so that that they not know him.

I was so struck by this choice of words. I immediately related to the sense of one’s eyes being defeated.

The point is, these two traumatized disciples were broken hearted, confused, and troubled. They were trying to make sense of what had unfolded, when this stranger interrupts their dialogue. You can almost see their posture and facial expressions. Their eyes downcast, their foreheads furrowed in deep thought, the heaviness of their feet treading upon the road.

Their eyes were defeated.

I have to admit that I have felt this week as though my eyes were defeated. The pandemic continues and though some restrictions we currently endure will be lifted, we are understanding more clearly how completely our lives will be changed, at least for a year or two, if not longer. As I walked with the Midgley family as they prayerfully commended Tom into God’s care and keeping, I felt the loss of community, of the comfort of a hug on their behalf. And as the horrific tragedy of last weekend’s shooting in Nova Scotia unfolded in the news and in personal stories through those connected with those communities, I hadn’t realized there were so many parts of my heart that could break.

My eyes felt defeated this week.

And so, as I read this story, the famous “Road to Emmaus” story, I am struck anew by the role Jesus plays. At first unknown, and yet fully engaged. And then revealed, by the most mundane act. Let me share with you the places of comfort God has taken me this week through this story. These places have not erased the grief and sorrow in my heart, but they have reminded me that the God I follow in Jesus is a companioning God who walks with us to help us carry the grief and sorrows that we share.

(As an aside, if you haven’t read Phil’s article that came out in this week’s Newsletter, entitled “A Unique Grief for a Unique Time”, I recommend it to you. Phil speaks to the shared or communal grief that we are experiencing at times like this. It is important that we understand the heaviness in our hearts is shared in this way.)

***The Spirit of Christ walks with us, even when we are unaware.***

This one is rather simple and straightforward, and at the same time, so difficult. Just as we long for the physical comfort of a friend’s presence over a cup of coffee right now, or in a hug, so we long for more tangible experience of God’s presence.

It is important, I think, to meditate on the reality that the Spirit of God is with us. Perhaps take a few minutes each day to simply sit in that awareness. Reflect on these two disciples who were actively speaking with Jesus, but unaware it was him. Or hold in your mind and heart such verses as,

Joshua 1:9 "Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go."

Isaiah 41:10 "Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."

Zephaniah 3:17 "The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing."

Matthew 28:20 "Teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

***The Spirit teaches us so that we are able to put things into context and hold them more appropriately.***

This Gospel passage tells us that Jesus, as a stranger, helps the two disciples to put what has happened into a larger context. He reminds them, from the early history of the Jewish people, starting with Moses, and going through the prophets, that all that has unfolded is part of a larger story in which God’s purposes are revealed and realized, even if specific moments in that story seem to indicate defeat.

In other words, death is never the end of the story. We are a Resurrection people. The hard part is that we cannot see the whole story from this vantage point of our lives on earth. And so, faith and hope enter in, to carry and sustain us as we journey forward.

This truth does not diminish the pain and horror of the evil that befalls us, like the shooting last weekend. The grief and sorrow and anger that we feel is real, and it necessarily compels us to action. To grieve with the families and communities of those killed, to pray for healing and comfort, to act against such violence in whatever ways we can.

And then to journey forward, with that faith and hope, however tenuous, that each of those people killed last weekend, are whole and alive in the resurrected life, awaiting that reunion of all in “the glorious company of the saints in light.”

***It is in the mundane that God’s presence is revealed.***

It is in the simple act of breaking bread that the disciples finally realize that Jesus is Jesus. He gives the blessing, breaks the bread, gives it to them, and their eyes are opened.

We would do well in these challenging days to ponder this truth. God is showing up all around us in simple, but life giving ways. Many of you have already shared those stories.

I was struck by a news piece from the BBC this week about the mental health toll in Italy due to their experience of the pandemic. During this piece, they showed food bank volunteers, called “City Angels” delivering food to people in isolation, many elderly, many alone. They were commenting on how they have become “counsellors’ for many of these people, recognizing how many people need a simple conversation, a chance to connect with another human being. So they take the time to do so.

In the breaking of bread, Jesus was made known. In the neighbour who picks up your groceries, in the friend who dropped off some baking, in the parishioner who donated to the food bank, in the cashier at the grocery store working despite the risk...the God who is with us is made known.

Haven’t you heard? God is with us!