***After Yonge Street***

A Sermon Preached at Lawrence Park Community Church, April 29, 2018

Text, “Close Every Door” from *Joseph and the Technicolor Dreamcoat* and Genesis 39

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I feel like I’ve been miserable for a long time now. Too much tragedy. The Humboldt Broncos bus accident and then the murders of ten people on Yonge St. So how, exactly, were we supposed to laugh and sing today, about *Joseph and His Technicolor Dreamcoat*?

On the other hand, by the time the cast sings “Close Every Door,” the last song we heard today, Joseph had suffered two tragedies of his own. First, his brothers sell him into slavery; and second, he is thrown in prison for sexual harassment—though he claimed, of course, to be innocent.

Life in prison sucks. And yet, in “Close Every Door,” strangely—or perhaps, given his narcissism, not so strangely—Joseph claims that God has promised his family a land, territory of their own. Joseph says this promise gives him peace of mind. Joseph believes that no matter how bad things get for him, God will fix it. God will bless me, thinks Joseph. God will answer my prayers. God will snap his fingers and make everything better, if only I pray. Some Christians talk like this too, a lot. I used to talk like that.

What do we make of this idea that God can fix everything, for us? Never mind the Syrians or Palestinians or the homeless or prisoners! And if God can, why did God allow an accident like Humboldt or murders such as we saw this past week? Or any murder for that matter? Is, as Joseph seems to believe, God really in control?

Two weeks ago, I said, “no.” The bus accident and the Yonge Street murders were not part of God’s plan, not God’s idea, not something God has control over. God is not a puppet master, pulling us and our neighbours on strings, making things work according to some inscrutable plan that we have to trust in. God does not cause bus accidents or murders or global warming or poverty or crime. Thinking so is just a fancy religious way of getting us off the hook, when actually mostly we humans are responsible for what gets reported on the nightly news.

So, what does God do, if God doesn’t snap his or her fingers to make things come out peachy keen for us? Two weeks ago, I said God that comes to us not in fire or earthquakes and implausible answers to impossible prayers, but as with Elijah on Mount Horeb—read it in 1 Kings 19—God comes to us in a gentle but insistent whisper. As Jesus says of his words, **“**What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops.”

God is not a powerful divine monarch who grants one boon to you but no favours for me. God is, rather, in a key strand of scripture, a gentle persuader, always trying to convince us to become more human, to make shalom real not only for ourselves, but others. God invites us to find him in the good we do, rather than in the impossible things we ask of him (or her).

God whispers. God’s haunts us with dreams of peace in wartime, with hunger for shalom where there is chaos, and with the desire to embrace and love where there is grief. God whispers that it is the least and the last, those unable to advocate for themselves that ought to be our number one concern. Responding to this divine plea, to this whisper, is called “following Jesus.”

When things are at their worst, God whispers to us, in scripture, encouraging us to love our neighbours as Jesus loved his, and to imitate people like Terry Fox or Martin Luther King or Malala Yousafzai. Perhaps we will never achieve their kind of world-changing stature, but we can imitate them in a way that makes a difference for the ones we are with.

After Humboldt, I said that hope in the face of tragedy is a discipline we embrace so that whatever we touch becomes more of what it is supposed to be.

Which brings me, finally, to the murders on Yonge Street. On Monday Toronto’s citizens did embrace the discipline of hope, and so doing did make our city, province, and nation more of what we are supposed to be.

Last Monday we saw a whole city respond to those murders compassionately. Bystanders who escaped death held the hands of the injured and dying. First responders on the scene saved lives. There was no panic. Hospital nurses and doctors did their job. Not only did people of all races suffer the tragedy, but together, people of all races and religions helped us deal with it. The police force has operated in this city, since the G-20 meetings and Sammy Yatin’s murder, under a cloud, and probably for good reason. But the police officer who arrested the suspect acted in a most exemplary manner, and that gives me great hope that we can resolve some of the systemic issues we’re facing on the police front. Monday was a tragedy faced by people disciplined by hope, all together making a new world out of the ruins of the old.

The American press was incredulous. According to CNN, “Politicians of all stripes were calm. The media was careful. The police were disciplined. And the people were unfazed. Instead of hysteria, accusation and anger, there were sorrow and sympathy. No xenophobic calls for vigilantism or limits on freedom. It was an extraordinary exercise in restraint -- a particularly Canadian response.”

Listen. We are building something very special in this country—a multiethnic, caring society. Not a utopia, perhaps. Not perfect. Not—as Joseph or some Americans believe about themselves—God’s one special nation. No, here in Canada we will continue to struggle with things like pipelines, justice for First Nations, traffic congestion and the environment. But what I saw on Monday and the rest of this week gives me hope that we can tackle such issues not merely for personal or political or corporate gain, but for the good of all Canadians. Just as we took on the tragedy without asking questions about religion or party affiliation or rank or wealth, we need to take on our every neighbours’ needs and injustices, struggles and dreams, as if they were ours. This is Christianity taking responsibility rather than waiting for God to pull strings. This is hope embracing discipline. This is the Canada I love and want, and the Canada this world both needs—and already has.