

Sermon for November 8th

In an age of sound bites and video clips, there is hardly a moment to pause and catch our breath. Any chance you've been tuned into cable news this week?

And yet, the realities of living with Covid-19 have presented us with opportunity to do just that. Pause, stop, catch our breath. Are we taking advantage of this opportunity? Or are we, like many of the people in this world caught up in endless news cycles, picking up our phones, doom scrolling or doom surfing our lives away?

Kevin Roose, of the New York Times wrote,
I've been doing a lot of this kind of *doomsurfing* recently — falling into deep, morbid rabbit holes filled with coronavirus content, agitating myself to the point of physical discomfort, erasing any hope of a good night's sleep. Maybe you have, too.

Whether it is Covid-19 or American election news, the temptation to keep our minds constantly agitated by the news is a profound and real temptation of our time.

Today's readings invite us into a different pattern of life and one that I think is profoundly relevant and needed at this time in history and appropriate to think about on a day on which we remember past wars and say together, never again.

This invitation to contemplation and prayerful attention and readiness is not exclusively a Judaeo-Christian invitation. We see this call in many of the major religions and increasingly even in contemporary culture.

Zen masters say that you cannot see yourself in running water, only still water.

Buddha said, "An unreflective mind is a poor roof. Passion, like rain, floods the house. But if the roof is strong, there is shelter."

And Meister Eckhart, the German theologian and mystic wrote, “What we plant in the soil of contemplation, we shall reap in the harvest of action.”

Both of our scripture passages today invite us to be proactive in our faith journey. In the Wisdom passage it is about going out and seeking lady Wisdom. In the gospel it is about being prepared no matter what unfolds.

I invite us to consider today the ways of contemplation as a necessary practice of all people of faith, of all people in general, in our longing for a world where peace, justice, equality and love are the dominant attribute of our actions.

Contemplation might sound like something monks and nuns do. A favourite story is about a parishioner named Joan that I knew in a former parish. A dynamic and active woman in the church - one of those people who never sat still. The priest had invited her along with others in the parish to a silent retreat at the convent. Joan complained loudly, as was her custom, that she had no intention of sitting in silence. The priest told her “Silence will not kill you, it will likely do you good.”

Contemplative silence is not an easy practice, but it is not as hard as we might think. For those in this parish who have participated in the various meditation groups, they know this. For those of us who have indulged in the practice from time to time we know this. But all of us need to be reminded of the necessity of this practice and called to an intentional commitment to it. For, as I said as I started, we do not live in a world that creates either the spaces nor the incentive to do so.

Think of the call to seek wisdom in scriptures. Again and again the prophets and Jesus himself, call us to the ways of wisdom. We might think this means rational, mind knowing, but the wisdom of God is a deeper knowing. Rational thought is a part of it, but alone cannot access true wisdom.

The mystics have taught us this through the centuries. The simple act of stopping, sitting comfortably, paying attention to your breath, learning to be aware of the various parts of your body, slowing your breath and relaxing.

Listening to your gut and your heart. Suddenly we find ourselves in a place of deeper knowing, even if we have to journey through the discomfort of sitting still in reflection at first.

This is what is meant by wisdom being “found by those who seek her, who rise to seek her, who fix their thoughts on her” as our Wisdom passage says today.

It isn’t a complicated practice and doesn’t require theological training or years of attending church. In fact, those two realities can hinder the practice as they often put us more firmly in our minds and in our outward acts of faith.

Contemplation simply requires a bit of time and place where you can sit still.

I suggest you take 5 minutes every day for a week, to start. You might light a candle. You might put on a piece of music (preferably without words). Take a few deep, slow breaths in and out. You might say, “Hello God” as a way to start and then you sit and you learn to listen with your whole self. When your mind gets busy - with the grocery list, the election results or whatever, you simply remind it “not now”. The more you practice, the more the distracting thoughts retreat. But practice you must.

You don’t have to be a Christian to know the value in mediation, contemplation and reflection. The community development expert, Margaret Wheatley says, “without reflection, we go blindly on our way, creating more unintended consequences, and failing to achieve anything useful.”

Have you not had enough of a world where people blindly go about their days, speaking words and enacting actions that create conflict, discord, and hurt? One small but very significant way we can participate in creating a very different environment in this world is through contemplation. It is a tried and true practice and one that every one is invited to explore. Let us say yes to this invitation for the sake of peace.