

Acts 5: 27-32
Psalm 150
Revelation 1: 4-8
St. John 20: 19-31

Easter Octave 2022.

“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.
Revelation 1: 8

It's not a pleasant place to begin, but we face it: The current war in Ukraine, images of which can be transmitted around the world in mere seconds, can give us some sense of horror of war... It is not just the senseless human deaths, the wounding and maiming (as horrible as those are); nor the shocking views of the destruction of entire cities; nor even just the uncounted millions of refugees (some of whom receive help – and others who fall prey to human traffickers and other criminals, all of whom remind us that it is not only in Russia, Belarus or Ukraine in which evil flashes its ugly teeth); it's not even the appalling environmental destruction pounding into a planet which is already very sick; it's not even the fact that farmers are being pressed into military service – we Canadians will complain of high grocery prices; more impoverished places in the planet will likely face significant malnourishment or starvation in a matter of months... The whole situation is very grim, and short of a miracle, it is difficult to see the war ending very soon... Today is the day in which the Orthodox Christian churches, including in Ukraine, observe the festival of Easter... Christians across Canada are being asked to pray fervently for peace and for justice. Peace and justice may or may not come soon, but softened hearts seem to be the only way for transformation, by the Spirit of Christ...

We are not the first generation to face war, of course!... We can read of many battles and skirmishes in many pages of the Old Testament... Perhaps the most shocking event to the ancient people of Judah was the Babylonian invasion in the early 6th century before Christ's birth... The ancient prophets had warned for many years for God's people to leave behind idols – those small-g gods who were too small! – compared to the Lord God of hosts. The invasion by the Philistines, and the destruction of the Holy Temple and the city of Jerusalem, were seen as a consequence of the political, social and religious decay of God's people. The annihilation of the land was absolute...

Perhaps to prevent God's people from gathering together and rebelling, the Philistine army forced the people to move to different regions, to be scattered away from the land of Israel. This was shocking beyond words to the people of Judah! Hadn't God promised them *this land*? How could they worship God in a foreign land? This experience of being dispersed (a *diaspora*), of feeling abandoned by *God*, shaped later Old Testament literature. For example, Psalm 137 begins,

By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept,
When we remembered Zion. [The city of Jerusalem was built on Mt. Zion.]

On the willows there we hung up our lyres.
For their our captors required of us songs,
And our tormentors, mirth, saying,
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”
How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?
If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither!
Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth,
If I do not remember you,
If I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy!

The people felt utterly abandoned by God... They could not imagine that they could worship God in a different land... Just as it was when the people worshipped idols, their God was too *small*. They couldn’t imagine that they could worship God other than their original homeland... It would be 70 years before a new king allowed the exiles to return home...

So we see that this experience of war and destruction challenged God’s people deeply. Part of the problem was that the people couldn’t see to grasp that God is as all-mighty and all-present and all-knowing as in fact God is!...

It’s not just an Old Testament problem... Evidently, time and time again, the Lord Jesus taught his followers to be prepared that God’s kingdom would be established through his own suffering and death, and life after death. (Mark records Jesus Christ warning the apostles about this three times...) In spite of spending about 3 years in his company, the followers of Jesus Christ could only see his death as a devastating defeat!... The resurrection of Jesus Christ from death to new life was... absolutely unexpected!... astonishing!... bewildering!... glorious!... wonderful!... and stunning!... The world is redeemed through Jesus Christ, and the followers who thought they knew him best... had absolutely no idea! Their conception of God, and of death, and of life, was too small!... They had to expand their understanding of the breadth and power of the Triune God...

This has gone on through the ages – not only in Israel, but in the tradition of the Church, in which time and again our preconceptions have had to be challenged – really, by God himself... The British cleric J. B. Phillips is perhaps best known for producing a new paraphrase of much of the Bible in modern English in the 1940's and '50's. We might not realize that Phillips also authored a little book, *Your God Is Too Small*, printed in 1953. While some of us might take issue with some of J. B. Phillip’s assumptions, we can admit that we sometimes *overestimate ourselves* – and we seriously *underestimate* God... Our conceptions of God may indeed be too small – they must include the tremendous resurrection of Jesus Christ from death -- and the implications of how we are to live, and the resurrection we can share!...

In my experience, it's rare for someone to have a completely false view of God. More likely, their view of God is not *broad enough*: They may be devoted to social action but not to prayer; they may preach the Bible but seem hesitant to apply its principles; they may be devoted evangelists, but fail to celebrate fully the sacraments of the whole Church... We can't cling to sin in any form. But let's discover how God is at work, and how mighty our God is, in *every* corner of our hearts and lives...

To this end, next week, the Rev. Marie and I are going to begin a sermon series about "discipleship..." We want to invite you to consider how to live, practically, more fully into the kind of life which Christ's disciples are invited to live... I truly believe we won't want to miss it...

All glory, praise and honour be to Jesus Christ, among all the saints and heavenly powers, who is risen from death, and so has transformed our lives for ever.

Amen.