

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario
Sunday, November 3, 2019
Rev. Dr. David McKane

Faith, Hope and ...

Ruth 1: 1-18. Psalm 146. Mark 12: 28-34.

I want to thank Bruce for his gracious introduction. I look forward to sharing with you in worship over the next two months though I have no doubt you will be missing David Thompson and eager to know who your next Interim will be. Such times of change and uncertainty are always unsettling and filled with anxiety but throughout my ministry I have found that music is often the best antidote and I know that Torin and the choir will carry you as well as me through these next several weeks. Let us pray.

Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me. Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me. Melt me, mould me, fill me, use me. Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me. #400

In what seems a lifetime ago, as an undergraduate in University, I had the privilege of meeting Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. It was just after the Civil Rights marches in America. Heschel was born and raised an Orthodox Jew in Germany but moved to America in 1938. He lost many of his family during WW2 and lived and taught as a Liberal Conservative. Heschel walked with Martin Luther King Jr., protested the Vietnam War, worked on behalf of the freedom of Jews in the former Soviet Union and was deeply involved in Inter-Faith Dialogue. Rabbi Heschel had been invited to speak at my University and after his lecture several of us had been invited to join him for refreshments and conversation. I knew little about Judaism in those days but knew enough to recognize Heschel as an impressive leader and thinker. He would die at the early age of 65, just 6 years after my meeting him and I would discover what a giant of an intellect he was both in the Jewish community and in the Civil Rights community. "Be sure that every little deed counts," he said, "that every word has power. Never forget that you can still do your share to redeem the world in spite of all absurdities and frustrations and disappointments." I have never forgotten that and in this first anniversary of the murders at The Living Tree Synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, it is good to be reminded of it.

Heschel taught that the God of the Old Testament prophets is not the Wholly Other, a strange, weird, uncanny Being shrouded in unfathomable darkness, that the Numinous is not the supreme category for the prophets. The primary object of the prophets,

taught Heschel, was a pathos, pity and compassion, rather than a numen or deity. Writing about this in his book, **The Prophets** Heschel says that pathos, pity and compassion, far from being intrinsically irrational is a state that the prophet is able to comprehend morally as well as emotionally. (p.227)

Heschel talks about the fullness of God's care, about the need to be compassionate, about the need to work for justice, about the need to get involved in the affairs of humanity, both in the world and in the local community. Judaism, says Heschel, stands and falls with the idea of the absolute relevance of human deeds. The deed, says Heschel, is the source of holiness. In other words what we do with our lives has meaning. Our actions, like those of a Malala Yousafzai or a Greta Thunberg, can change the world. This is critical to both Jewish and Christian thinking about faith and hope and love. There is an old Ethiopian proverb; The child who is not embraced by the village will burn it down to feel it's warmth.

After marching with Martin Luther King Jr. in a civil Rights protest in Selma, Alabama, Heschel wrote that he felt like he was "praying with his legs." Some commentators thought that he was being glib but Heschel was speaking literally about his actions, about putting his faith in action, about walking the talk.

The Biblical story of Ruth and Naomi is such a story of "praying with her legs." It is a wonderful story on so many levels but for the purpose of today's sermon it is precisely what Heschel is talking about. Naomi has left her home and family in Bethlehem and emigrated to Moab on the other side of the Jordan with her husband and two sons. Her husband dies in Moab but her two sons marry, and she gains two daughters-in-law. Then her two sons die. Overwhelmed by grief in a strange country Naomi decides to return to her native village. Orpah, her daughter-in-law decides to remain in Moab, but Ruth will not abandon Naomi. After all that they have been through, after all that they have shared, even with little hope for the future Ruth "prays with her legs" and by her actions changes history through her great-grandson David and his descendant, the child born in a manger. In doing so the writer of the Book gives us some of the most beautiful words in all of Scripture, "Entreat me not to leave you or to return from following after you, for wither you go I go; where you lodge I will lodge; your people shall be my people and your God my God..." Faith and hope and

In our gospel lesson for today Jesus is in conversation with an unnamed scribe. They are discussing which is the greatest commandment and both agree on the "shema," the brief summation of the Jewish Law, - to love God with all our heart, with all our soul,

with all our mind and with all our strength, which means all of our resources and to love our neighbour as we love ourselves, a prayer that our religious Jewish cousins pray several times a day and which Lesley and Sylvia and the choir have just shared with us. Again there is much that we could unpack here but at the end of the day it is our actions that point to our faith. It is our deeds that create hope in our world, and it is our random acts of kindness that paint our image of God. We become what we worship, just as we become what we eat and Heschel, like Jesus, calls us not so much to take a leap of faith, in the words of Martin Luther, as to take a leap of action, to do something, as Matthew says over and over again in his gospel, a Terry Fox Run, a Walk-a-thon for Heart and Stroke or some other worthy cause. In this Heschel is very close to the teaching of the Celtic church, "Find a wrong and spend your life to make it right."

Thus our concern about war crimes, our struggle to save the environment, our anxiety about disappearing songbirds and environmental species. Thus our concern about clean drinking water for Canada's indigenous people and affordable housing for London's homeless. Thus our support for Habitat for Humanity and Canadian Food Grains and Service clubs and Boy Scout Apple drives and the Legion's poppy sales. The Bible teaches us that reverence for God is shown in reverence for life, in loving the Lord our God with all our hearts, with all our souls, with all our minds and with all our strength. We become what we worship or as our Stewardship quote says, ...the highest appreciation is not to utter words but to live by them.

Faith, hope and love abide, writes Paul to the church in Corinth, these three but the greatest of these, the greatest of these by far, is love, which is not a feeling or an emotion but an action. When did we see you hungry and feed you or thirsty and give you drink or naked and clothe you? the disciples ask Jesus. Ah, he says, perhaps with a wry smile upon his lips, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these, ...the least of these, you did it unto me! Go do it! And to God be the glory!

(c) David McKane.