

Life in Desperate Times

Ephesians 5:15–20

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(Before getting into my sermon proper, I want to say how thankful I am that today's lectionary reading ended at Eph 5:20. Vs. 21 wouldn't be so bad: "Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ."¹ But then there is vs. 22: "Wives be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord."² I can imagine if I were to preach on that text, screens would start clicking off till it would be just Rhonda and myself and she would be here only because she is in charge. Or, since its Zoom maybe Rhonda would just mute me and we would be done. But, that is not our text so we are safe. However, let me say one thing: This text does NOT mean what it has traditionally been taught to mean and how it has been used to oppress women in church, home, and society. Enough said. We will leave that for another day. On with our sermon for today.)

A few weeks ago, our older daughter, Larissa, asked in a phone conversation: "Will there be any world left for Aubrey when she grows up? It seems like it's burning up." Aubrey is her two-year-old daughter. It did seem so and continues to seem so. Wild fires in NW Ontario, in Manitoba, northern Saskatchewan and the interior of BC. South all the way down the western coast of the US including the Dixie Fire in California which on Wednesday was at well over 500,000 acres or over 806 sq. miles or 90 times the size of Swift Current. BC reports that its wildfires, this year, so far, have burnt the equivalent of almost 700,000 football fields. Add reports out of Greece and Turkey to name but two countries and the world does seem to be on fire.

On the Canadian prairies it is drought. Two or three weeks ago a rancher told me that at that point, ranchers had already scheduled the sale of 40,000 cows at Heartland Cattle Auctions in SC. The picture on the screen of a farmer in his field is but one example of fields across the province. We are in desperate times.

War in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen and other places. Rising racism, homophobia, and misogyny in the US.

The discovery of hundreds of unmarked graves at former residential schools is finally bringing home the horrendous devastation and harm, yes genocide, caused by European colonization in Canada and the birth and development of our country, one we used to be so proud of.

And, none of us needs reminding that we have lived with the Covid-19 pandemic for 18 months. Many of us have friends or family members who have died due to the virus. Sylvia & I know a young woman in her mid-thirties, a nurse, who used to work extra shifts and double shifts. She was diagnosed in mid-October and still is not working full-time. Increasingly younger people, including children are being hit, children under 12 who cannot be vaccinated. What will happen to our children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren? Okay. I can hear many of you

¹ Eph 5:21. NRSV.

² Eph 5:22. NRSV.

thinking: “Do you really have to remind us, Friesen? We know, we fear, and we would like to get away from it all.” We live in desperate times.

Recently I told my brother about 3 shows I have watched or am watching on Netflix—Manifest, Sweet Tooth, and Glitch. His comment: “You and your science fiction. LOL.” My response was: “Have to try and escape real world somehow.” A few hours on the couch with our trusty friend, Netflix, is probably okay. However, escaping the real world is not. These desperate times are our reality and a whole bunch of gratitude for what is still good and focusing on positive thinking is not enough to deal with the realities of life in 2021. We must, if we are to be fully human, live within this world and its desperate times. How might we do that?

Though it may seem these are truly unique times, they are not. Yes, we are more aware of what is happening around the world thanks to the news media and the Internet. However, people have had to live in desperate times throughout human history. In the 20th century, two World Wars, a Spanish flu pandemic, the stock market crash of 1929 and the drought of the 30s. We don’t have time to trace desperate times throughout history. However, if we take a time machine ride back to the 1st century of the Common Era, we would find a scroll written by Paul or one of his disciples and meant for circulation among the churches on the northern side of the Mediterranean Sea. Here we read: “So watch your step. Use your head. Make the most of every chance you get. These are desperate times!”³ The translation Karen read called the times the people were in “evil days.”⁴ So does the NRSV. I find Eugene Peterson’s translation in *The Message* grabs my imagination: “These are desperate times.”

So for a minimum of 2000 years people have at various times, maybe always, lived in “desperate times.” That means there is a good chance we might be able to learn from the Wisdom of Ages collected for us in what I call the Ancient Writings, more commonly referred to as the Bible. What might that Wisdom teach us about living in desperate times?

1. The Ephesian author has a few suggestions: ***Watch your step. Use your head. Don’t act like fools. Be wise and thoughtful.***” I want to shout “Amen & Amen!” when I read that. If only I weren’t a Mennonite in the United Church and I probably could give myself the permission to do so. Think carefully and clearly. Maybe conspiracy theories and QAnon and listening to the scientific and medical fringe are not just 21st century phenomena. This is no time to ignore carefully done science, the advice of experienced doctors, and the evidence all around. Whether on the pandemic, or vaccines, or human-caused climate change, this is a time to think clearly and carefully, to trust those who have the training, knowledge and experience—the three things that create wisdom. This is no time to ignore the wisdom of the wise and go drinking with the fringe, the attention seekers, and those who know they can financially profit from the ones who jump at every conspiracy theory around. Use your heads. Think Clearly. Act carefully and soberly.

Jesus and his interpreters in the NT make it clear that those of us who know Jesus and know about Jesus have a responsibility to set the example for the rest of the world. God wants to partner with us to make sure God’s will happens on earth as it does in heaven. God’s will is healthy people and a healthy planet. God has given scientists and others the wisdom to lead us. It is now up to us to live wisely and set the example for others.

³ Eph 5:15. *The Message*.

⁴ The Inclusive Bible.

Get vaccinated. Obey health orders, Decrease carbon emissions.

2. A second suggestion comes directly from Jesus and is found in our Gospel reading for this week. The other Gospel writers have Jesus saying this particular piece at the Last Supper. Pastor John has it in chapter 6, shortly after the feeding of the 5000. Here Jesus says:

I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh. . . . Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life . . . for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.⁵

If I could have been an adviser to Jesus that sunny afternoon, I might have interrupted him gently and respectfully and said: “Eh, excuse me Jesus. I know that is being creative, using your imagination and really attention grabbing. But do you realize the kind of problems this is going to cause for all those who will follow you through history? Eating human flesh and drinking human blood? Really?! You really think that appropriate? Cannibalism?! I suspect many, centuries from now, will have no idea what you meant. Others may take it literally and think they are actually eating you Sunday after Sunday. Maybe, with all due respect, you could use a different metaphor.” However, I wasn’t there. And, since Jesus was/is wiser than me on every other thing he said, maybe the problem is just me. However, it does still leave us with the question: “What did Jesus mean and how can it help us to live in desperate times?”

What do bread and wine do for us? **Bread**, as a metaphor for everything we eat, is carried by our blood stream to every part of our body and is what our body uses to generate energy and build our cells. We are, in that sense, what we eat. So when Jesus uses the metaphor of “eating his flesh,” he is inviting us to have who Jesus was on this earth to become an integral part of everything we are, our entire character, how we think, how we act, how we see the world, and how we respond to the world. Jesus also lived in desperate times and so how Jesus interpreted, lived in, and responded to desperate times is to become second nature to us. Eventually we shouldn’t even have to think about it.

Wine does more than slake our thirst. It enlivens the spirit. Makes us more relaxed. As the Ephesian author understands it, in many ways the same effect as a glass or two of wine. In movies, TV shows, and real life, when someone has had a tough day or is facing a tough situation or is getting uptight and/or panics, they say they need a drink. A beer after work, wine for supper, or a stiff shot of whisky in the moment helps. The alcohol relaxes them. In small amounts, sets them free to think clearly. Stops a wildly beating heart. Helps them face the situation head on. We need not panic. We don’t have to give up in despair. Binge-watching sci-fi on Netflix is not the only option.

This is how our relationship with God created through Jesus, our sense of the Spirit within, and our Jesus character can help us in desperate times. We can take stock and re-think. We come to realize that even though we are in desperate times, we are in desperate times in a world that has NOT been forsaken by God, though sometimes it seems it has. So, a drink of wine as Jesus’ blood reminds us that in the most desperate time in Jesus’ life and when he was

⁵ From John 6:51-56. NRSV.

convinced God had forsaken, God was present. So God is present in our lives and our world, no matter how desperate. We can continue. We can face this situation head on.

The Ancient Writings have a lot more about living in desperate times.⁶ These two teachings will get us started. We are invited, each on our own and together with others, to find more by reading the Ancient Writings and/or having contemporary authors point to the Way.

So, think clearly and carefully, act responsibly, have Jesus shape your character, God's presence calm you, and the Holy Spirit set you free. This is the way to abundant living in desperate times.

⁶ See my book, *Wandering the Wilderness*, for 12 teachings given at 12 Trail Posts, teachings that combine Ancient Writings and 21st century research to help us live in desperate times.