

“A New Heaven and a New Earth”

Genesis 4: 1-16 & James 4: 1-10

This Thursday between 10:00 and 11:00 o'clock in the morning, traffic will draw to a halt at the centre of Brockville and other cities and towns across Canada. People will gather at Cenotaphs and War Memorials to remember. We pause each year on November eleventh because it was on the eleventh hour of the eleventh day, of the eleventh month in 1918, that the guns at last fell silent on the western front. The great war, the war to end all wars, was finally over. The soldiers wept, cheered, and danced in the trenches, and the whole world celebrated. We have never forgotten that moment. So it is this Thursday at the Cenotaph at eleven o'clock, we will pause to remember those who fought and died in the First World War, in the Second World War, in Korea, on Peace Keeping missions, and now in Afghanistan.

And we need to remember. Over one hundred thousand young Canadians lie buried in Europe as a result of World Wars one and two. I grew up in the shadow of World War II. I can remember the return of my father from serving overseas with the R.C.A.F. I grew up in Ottawa and most of my friends father's were also veterans. It was natural for us to talk about the war and to ask questions about it. What I discovered was that most veterans were not interested in talking about it. They just wanted to forget it. Those who had seen the worst of it, talked about it the least. What is also clear to me is that the veterans returned home with a tremendous determination to spend the rest of their lives doing things to build up and make our world a better place. They had seen enough of death and enough of destruction.

One the strangest things about humankind is on the one hand its willingness to go to extreme lengths to protect human life and rescue those in peril, and the other hand, an ever present willingness to engage in war and killing. How many of you watched as the trapped miners in Chile were being pulled up to safety? The whole world watched. Absolutely no expense was spared to rescue those trapped men. Experts from all over the world, including from Canada, were in Chile helping out in every way they could.

That rescue in Chile reminded me of a similar event that happened in the United States in 1987 in October of that year during the Worlds Series games. An eighteen-month-old toddler by the name of Jessica McClure fell down a backyard well in Midland Texas. Some of you will remember the story. We were all glued to our TVs. The little girl was alive, but she was wedged twenty-two feet down an eight-inch wide hole. Just like in Chile she was rescued by drilling a parallel shaft next to the well. The rescuers then burrowed over to her. It took 58 hours, but little Jessica was freed and everyone rejoiced. It took everyone's mind off the World Series. The comment by the manager of the Minnesota Twins, who won that year, was that Jessica's rescue reminded everyone of what was really important in life. Baseball, he said, is just a game.

But sadly the story does not end there. Jessica McClure's parents divorced three years later and fought over the girl's \$700,000 trust fund from donations. The volunteers who saved her life fought over the rights to a TV movie about the rescue. And later Paramedic Robert O'Donnell, the one who actually freed Jessica, took his own life in 1995 from what his family felt was the stress of fame. Out of a beautiful act came a string of unhappy events.

It makes you wonder. Can people ever get things right? Earlier we read together the story of Cain and Abel from the book of Genesis. It shows how deeply rooted the problem is. The death of Abel is the very first death recorded in the Bible. And that very first

death is a brutal murder – one brother killed by another. Carl Jung, the great psychologist, called it the dark side of human nature. The Bible is blunter. In the Bible it is called sin. The scriptures testify that it has forever been part of the human condition.

In the Hebrew language ‘Adam’ means man and ‘Eve’ means life. They had a son. Eve named him Cain because she says, “I got him with the help of the Lord.” In Hebrew Cain sounds like the word ‘got.’ Her second son was Abel. We are not told why they chose that name, but in Hebrew Abel means ‘breath’ or ‘vapor’ — something ethereal without substance, a bit like life itself.

According to the story Abel’s offering of a young lamb seemed to please God more than Cain’s offering of grain. I am not surprised that it looked that way to Cain. Think of your own backyard barbeque. Doesn’t the fat portion on a piece of meat burn well? It flares right up. We usually cut that part off before we put the steak on the barbeque. Grain on the other hand – it does not burn very well. It tends to smoulder and smoke.

So what we have in Genesis chapter 4 is a classic tale of jealousy. Life did not seem fair to Cain. “Why should Abel be doing better than me? I work hard too, but this younger brother gets all the credit, and all the rewards. It is not fair.” That is what Cain felt. He resented the fact that someone else who was no more worthy or smarter, was doing much better than he was. He wanted for himself what his brother had.

Now before we condemn Cain, we need to look in the mirror. We have all been there ourselves. Life is unfair in many ways. And we all have felt resentment when it seems that other members of our family do better than we do. It actually can be quite galling. How did my sister manage to marry a doctor and I ended up with a teacher? (It could have been worse. It might have been a minister.) Feelings of resentment are hard to repress and they can be much stronger if you are suddenly confronted by something serious like a life changing illness, or accident.

In the Genesis story we read that Cain was so bitter that it showed in his face. He could not hide it. God said to him “Why are you looking so miserable? Why so angry? If you choose the right you will have a smile on your face. If you chose the wrong, watch out, sin is crouching at your door. It is waiting to destroy you.”

Do you recall a wonderful movie from the 1980s called Amadeus? It is about Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, one of the greatest composers who ever lived. Mozart was amazing. He never revised his manuscripts. If you look at original manuscripts of other great composers (like Beethoven) you will see tons of changes – lines are scratched out, revisions here there and everywhere. Not so with Mozart. The music just seemed to spring perfectly from his head. He rarely had to change a note.

In the movie there is another composer who lived at the same time – a contemporary. His name was Antonio Salieri. He hated Mozart for the same reason that Cain hated Abel. In Salieri’s mind it was just not fair for God to give him the desire to be great and then deny him the talent, while at the same time giving great talent to a “creature” like Mozart. Salieri was devout. Mozart was a party animal. Salieri worked hard. Mozart didn’t have to. In the end Salieri is so bitter that he takes his personal crucifix and burns it in the fire. He and God are finished.

What Salieri could not accept was that life is never fair in the way he wanted it to be. What counts in life is not what another has or does not have, but what you do with what you have. In the New Testament, in James 4 we read, “Why do you fight and argue with each other? Isn’t it because you are full of selfish desires that struggle to control you? You want something you don’t have, and you will do anything to get it. You will even kill! But you still cannot get what you want, and you won’t get it by fighting and arguing.”

James is saying that the root of the world’s problems and the hope of a solution, lie in the same place — in the human heart. We must not just wish to do good, we have to be empowered to do it. It is a power that has but one source. It comes from the cross. At the heart of our faith is the deepest understanding that Jesus’ death on the cross broke the power of sin and evil which hung him there in the first place. His death unleashed an energy wave, a tsunami of love in a new and very powerful way. Jesus’ death opened a direct channel between heaven and earth. It reconciles people to God and then to each other. By his death, hearts of stone begin to beat with

love and understanding. It took the blood of Christ to wash away the deepest stains of human sin. It took a powerful force to combat the evil of this world — and that force was and is the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.

And yet it is only when we seek that love, this energy the Holy Spirit gives, that we start to change. It is only when the love of Christ dwells in our hearts that our selfish desires start to look foolish and begin to recede.

Let me close with a story from James W. Moore. He is today a retired United Methodists minister – an acclaimed preacher and the author of 40 books. In one of his books, “Standing on the Promises or Sitting on the Premises,” (great title) he tells of an American in the city of Damascus. This man was in the famous marketplace on the street called Straight. The marketplace was busy, crowded, teeming with merchants, shoppers, and tourists. In the midst of the bustle a man slowly rode through the crowd on his bicycle. He had precariously balanced on his handle bars a basket of oranges. Accidentally he was bumped by a porter who was so bent over, carrying his heavy burden, that he had not seen him. The burden dropped, the oranges were scattered, and a bitter altercation broke out between the cyclist and the porter. Angry words, threats, hostilities were shouted. The crowd gathered to watch what was certain to become a bloody fight. The enraged cyclist moved toward the porter with a clenched fist. But just then, a poorly dressed little man stepped out of the crowd and positioned himself between the adversaries. Then the little man did an amazing thing. He reached out, tenderly took the cyclist's clenched fist in his hands, and gently kissed it! A murmur of approval swept over the crowd. They laughed, then they applauded. The antagonists relaxed and hugged each other. And all the people began happily picking up the oranges.

As the little man started to walk away, the American called to him: “That was a brave and beautiful thing you did!” he said. “Why did you do it? You could have been hurt.” The little man smiled and said, “I am a Christian! The Spirit of Christ is in me, and he gives me the courage to be a peacemaker. He gives me the courage to do the right thing.”

He will give us all that same courage. I believe the day will come when people of every race and colour will know that we are as closely related to each other as were Cain and Abel, and that to kill one another is but to slay a brother or a sister. I believe that the ceremony at the cenotaph this Thursday is to remember our veterans and to honour them by reminding us all of a better way — a world without violence, a world without war, where truly we can beat our swords into ploughshares and our spears into pruning hooks. A world where nation will not lift up sword against nation, neither shall we learn war any more.

Amen.