

"Insecurity"

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Texts: Ecclesiastes 9: 7 - 12, Luke 12: 22 - 31

Rev. Peter Coutts

So if I'd been told on Wednesday that someone might shoot a bullet into a Presbyterian Church building in Varsity Acres (of all places), I would have dismissed the idea without a second thought. So you can imagine my surprise on Thursday when I learned that this had happened. We are indeed grateful to God that no one was hurt, that the people in the building did not panic, that the police responded very rapidly and quickly assured those here that the situation was safe. Then, after all that, the program taking place in the sanctuary simply carried on. There has been no messages about the incident, no threats. The police have no leads, can see no motives. We have nothing even to base speculation on about the incident. So we know that we're OK.

That being said, it is quite understandable if some in our congregation...if some in this neighbourhood...feel unsettled by the incident. Unsettled in part because we don't know why the bullet was fired, and unsettled in part because it highly unusual for Varsity Acres Presbyterian Church! But I think that unsettled feeling can also lurk in the back of our brain because of one of the anxieties of our age. Over the last few decades in Canada we have seen in our culture a growing feeling of insecurity. When I was a kid people weren't always mindful of locking their doors. People today can feel nervous walking a Calgary street in the dark. In the economic times we live in in our city people can be anxious about their job. Indeed, anxiety is the #2 mental health issue in Canada. Not knowing for certain frequently leads to anxiousness and worry. It's natural to feel these things. But the question for us as people of faith is: how do we deal with feelings of insecurity? What perspective should we have in the midst of uncertainty?

One man who knew a great deal about uncertainty was Qoheleth -- the author of Ecclesiastes. He was a guy who felt very secure in himself, and in what he had made of himself. "I became great and wealthy", he wrote, "and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem" (2:9). Initially, he assumed his success came from his ability to perceive his future and control his own destiny. He believed there was a certain predictability -- even dependability -- to the world which, if understood and used, would bring anyone "profit" as he called it. He called his understanding "wisdom". A summary of his thinking is found in chapter 10, verse 2: "It is natural for the wise person to do what is right!" Such confidence that everything was in control. But this self - satisfaction crumbled when the world turned out to be far less predictable -- far less certain -- than he first thought. He wrote, "There are righteous people in this world who are treated as if they were wicked" (8:14). Hmm...like good Presbyterians whose place of worship was shot at. Despite Qoheleth's expectations, his wealth and effort and wisdom did not bring him all the security he assumed it would. Life was still unpredictable. So as a philosopher reflecting on how his presumptions banged up against his experience, he was drawn to a conclusion. He wrote:

"I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favour to the skilful; but time and chance happen to them all. For no one can anticipate the time of disaster. Like fish taken in a cruel net, like birds caught in a trap, so mortals are snared at the time of calamity, when it suddenly falls upon them" (9:11-12).

With frankness this wise writer acknowledged a reality of life. Life is uncertain. Who could imagine that our building could be hit by a bullet?

How did he respond to this honest observation? Well, actually, at first reading, it can appear that he did not respond well at all. In his writing we can see signs of helplessness and hopelessness in this book: He wrote, "Whoever digs a pit will fall into it, whoever quarries stones will see the stones fall on them" (10:8-9). At times in his words there is an air of cynical inevitability. He also sounds powerless to change things, "What is crooked can never be made straight" (1.15). I think the feelings of insecurity of our age can nudge us towards these kinds of assessments....that can create a point-of-view of insecurity that we can read our experience through. It was interesting talking to reporters on Thursday. One asked, "Do you see this as a sign that your neighbourhood is changing?" Another asked, "Do you think your building was shot at because it is a place of worship?" I guess those are legitimate questions, and I appreciate that a good news story contains some tension. But to me, answering "yes" to those questions would add just a little more fuel to feelings of insecurity that is not warranted for this congregation and neighbourhood. This is a safe place.

Some people fight back against the uncertainties of life by working so very hard to gain control of the uncertainties. But there are no guarantees. There is the true story of a young couple who lived on Vancouver Island in the 1970's. They were fearful of nuclear war and convinced that they were not safe, even on Vancouver Island. So they pulled out a map of the world and chose what they believed to be the most remote, out of the way place on the planet, guaranteed safe. So they packed up their family and moved to the Falkland Islands. Who could have guessed? Qoheleth was absolutely right – despite our best efforts to control the things which worry us, life is still uncertain.

Fortunately, there is a spiritual resource for us in the face of uncertain times. It was the only response Qoheleth as a philosopher could come up with. That was the certainty of God as the one solid point to hold onto in an unpredictable world. In chapter three we read, "I know that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it. God has done this, so that all should stand in awe before God" (3:14). Why awe? God is the only one who can make something certain, and that is truly unique in a world which is random, unpredictable, and beyond our control. Just knowing this gave this wise man a sense of security. And that security for him was enough... enough so he could acknowledge that life was still unpredictable and uncontrollable – that's reality! – but even in that uncertainty – because God was certain – he could be content. Qoheleth's simple message, repeated several times in this book: learn to be content with life, despite what it throws at you. God is certain.

The Christian writer Lewis Smedes puts this sense so very well. In writing about the secret of being at peace in an uncertain world, he said: "it is the discovery that we can be content with our discontent. Uncertainty is a part of any journey, and we are born to travel. We are uncertain until we get to where

we hope to be, but as long as we have hope of getting there, we can be content with the discontent. Acceptance of the fact that we can't control everything, and hope under God that things will be well, these are the spiritual resources that can sustain us in an uncertain world." Qoheleth, perhaps 3,000 years before Lewis Smedes put it this way, "Though sinners do evil 100 times and even prolong their lives, yet I know that it will be well with those who fear God" (8:12)

The Jewish psychologist Viktor Frankl saw this worked out so powerfully during his internment in the concentration camps of WW2. He lived with thousands of prisoners living with the most fundamental uncertainty of life, with no ability to control their fate. As he watched his fellow prisoners he saw that those who remembered that they were the children of God endured the uncertainty so much better. They walked more erect. They talked lively talk together. They made music. They remained civil and had dignity. They could pray fervent, even fierce prayers to God concerning their captivity and the threat of death. Knowing they were the children of God allowed them to wade through the uncertainty. It spoke to their sense of sacred identity. It gave them meaning and purpose and value. Everything, including life itself, could be taken away from them, but not their God, not their status as God's chosen people, not their ultimate condition before God. Just like Qoheleth: clinging to the big picture – that God endures – helped them have hope, and that helped them endure. In that most horrible, crushing reality of insecurity and total lack of control, Frankl saw that this group blended acceptance with hope..

Christ raised this view to even greater heights, speaking to our common struggle with feelings of insecurity. He said, "I tell you, do not worry about your life" (Luke 12:22). There is more to life, he said, than worrying about yourselves, "for it is the nations of the world that does these things" (vs 30): that is, those people who did not believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Jesus. These people did not have a God to depend on, and so they were trapped in their worries. In contrast, we have a dependable God who will care for us. "Consider the ravens" Christ said, "they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than these birds!" (vs 24). This statement is more dramatic than we think, because for the Jews the raven was an unclean creature. If God cared for such as these..... how much more he would care for us!

And then the kicker in this sermon. Jesus posed a straightforward rhetorical question, "Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to the span of your life?" I can just imagine Jesus pausing for a moment so his listeners could fill in the obvious answer -- no. Then his reply, "If then you are not able to do so small a thing as this, why do you worry about the rest?"

So a bullet came through a window of our sanctuary. Qoheleth wrote, "There is nothing new under the sun". Such was Qoheleth's judgement upon the flow of history. He faced times of unpredictability, as we do... as did the generations that span the gulf between Qoheleth and us. But neither is the solution for our insecurity something which is "new under the sun". Qoheleth's and Christ's answer to us as we face uncertainties of life is the same: life is uncertain, we cannot control everything, but God is in God's Heaven, and we can rely on God. As Jesus put it, "Your Father knows your need. So strive after his kingdom (that is, focus on the bigger picture), and these things will be given you as well" (Luke 12:30-31)