

Week One

Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening

– 1 Samuel 3:9

Day I: Ash Wednesday

A Blossom of Hope

*The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom.*

Isaiah 35:1

On Shrove Tuesday, the chapel communities on Canadian Forces Base Kingston gather for a traditional pancake supper. The senior chaplain calls me forward with my family. He and another colleague put their hands firmly on our shoulders and pray for God's blessing and protection during my mission to Afghanistan.

During my tour I am invited to take part in a visit to a local school. A Canadian general has decided she wants to establish a relationship with the school—the greatest struggle in Afghanistan is winning trust.

There is a shortage of space and teachers. The students—remarkably, both boys and girls—must attend in shifts. The school has no air conditioning or insulation, so they shut down for the coldest and hottest months. Each classroom has a few, simple, wooden chairs and desks, a chalkboard, and very little else except one teaching aid that I have never seen in any Canadian classroom: a landmine identification chart.



Landmine identification chart



A rose in the rubble

This is a Muslim holiday, so there are no students, except one teenager who has been learning English and is keen to try out his new skills. The headmaster arrives with an Italian priest who was instrumental in establishing the school. I cannot understand the language of either person, but I can see from their eyes and gestures how proud they are of the school and its students. Through an interpreter, the general listens to the headmaster and the priest as they talk with passion about their hopes, their needs. The general assures them of our support as we unload two trucks of donated school supplies. Hands are shaken, photos are taken, and we all leave feeling that we have begun something worthwhile.

Outside the gates of the school, a young boy shouts and throws rocks at our vehicles as we drive away.

Back at camp, there used to be a rose garden, or so I am told. Now there is only a huge hole in the ground where a septic system is being installed to service the growing number of coalition troops. Nearby I find a single rose reaching for the sky. The stem is spindly; the bloom is so coated in fine dust that I can hardly tell it is pink.

Amidst the dirt and destruction, a blossom of hope. This, I think, is Afghanistan. This, I think, is Lent.

Prayer

Eternally patient God, source of all hope,
when I confront injustices that are older than I am
and greater than I alone can undo,
help me to trust that, even when I cannot see it,
small acts of kindness
can have disproportional and unpredictable outcomes
through the power of your Spirit. Amen.

Hymn

“Joy Shall Come” (*Voices United* 23)

Ponder

Recall a time you were in a “dusty wilderness” and yet found joy.

Day 2: Thursday

But You *Promised!*

Then Jephthah came to his home at Mizpah; and there was his daughter coming out to meet him with timbrels and with dancing.

She was his only child; he had no son or daughter except her.

When he saw her, he tore his clothes, and said,

“Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low; you have become the cause of great trouble to me. For I have opened my mouth to the Lord, and I cannot take back my vow.”

Judges 11:34, 35

“But you *promised* we’d go to the zoo today!” “But I prayed that I would get that job, and I didn’t! Don’t you listen to prayers?” “You assure us a good life, through you and your Son, but why do I hurt so much?” “But you promised” is the refrain of children to their parents and adults to God alike.

Indeed, God does listen to prayer, though prayers are not always answered as we assume they will be. And God does assure our salvation. And we, too, as followers of God, also keep all of our promises—don’t we?

At the beginning of the year, many people make New Year’s resolutions: “I will lose weight,” “I will spend more time with my family,” “I will volunteer at the local animal shelter,” “I will donate to the food bank.” How often do these vows fall by the wayside after only a few months?

Lent is a time of vows. It is a time of introspection, fasting, and in many Christian circles an opportunity to give up something to aid the introspection. How often do these vows fall by the wayside after only a few weeks?

But still, we have our commitment, our vow, our promise to God—made at our baptism (sometimes on our behalf).

Greater still is the example of Jesus.

What Jesus Christ did with people and what he showed people was about commitment: commitment to one another and commitment to God. And in the commitment and acts of Jesus we see anger, joy, hope, and new life. Just living is a commitment.

Lent is all about commitment to our vows to each other, to God, to Jesus Christ. A recommitment of our baptismal vows in the worship service gives new life in the Spirit.

Occasionally we will chafe against our commitments, and yell and scream and sometimes rage at God. But we always return to the strength of the promise—our vow to God and God’s promise to us through Jesus Christ—love.

Prayer

Loving and forgiving God,
aid us in keeping our vows
to you, each other, and ourselves.
Help us to see your promise in the world around us
and experience your love, even through tragedy. Amen.

Hymn

“Give to Me, Lord, a Thankful Heart” (*Voices United* 513)

Ponder

How well have you lived out your baptismal, confirmation, or other promises? Which promise in your life was most difficult to live out? Why?

Day 3: Friday

The *Beloved*

*And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son,
the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."*

Matthew 3:17

In the Christian tradition the 40 days of Lent correspond to the 40 days Jesus spent in the wilderness after his baptism in the River Jordan. For Jesus, this was a time of intense testing and temptation. This period of 40 days is in turn related to the 40 years the Israelites spent wandering in the wilderness in the Book of Exodus. They, like Jesus, passed through water (the Red Sea) and out into a place of testing. In the wilderness, one is tempted to give up, to take the easy way out. There is a constant temptation to complain, or to turn on one other, as indeed the Israelites did. They even wanted to turn around and go back to Egypt! But it was in the desert, in the barren wilderness, that their identity as the "light of the nations" was forged. Jesus' difficult wilderness experience also confirmed his mission and identity as the Light of the World.

In recalling these stories, the season of Lent is meant to confirm us in our identity, which is closely bound up with our ongoing mission—to keep shining God's love and mercy even as we walk through the wilderness of life.

"This is my Son, the Beloved." These words spoken from heaven at Jesus' baptism legitimate him as not only a prophet, but also the first-born son of the Most High. "Beloved," the word, connotes esteem, worthiness, favour, as well as parental intimacy. The original term used here comes from *agape*, a word with many derivations that appears in the writings of Greek philosophers, but is taken up in a unique way by the authors of the New Testament. In 1 John we read that God is *agape*, a life-giving love that reaches out to embrace us as sons and daughters. We show our identity as those who are deeply loved by showing love to each other. We, as children of God, are the community of the Beloved.

It is hard for us to understand this love. We may rail against it. Some of us have had experiences that have tested our ability to love and be loved by a neighbour. Some may have difficulty relating the love of God to the love of a parent because of their experiences as families. However, the Bible also speaks of how we are “adopted” into God’s family, becoming full-fledged brothers and sisters of Christ. We are no less loved than Jesus himself.

This is a truth worth thinking about as we wander through our Lenten wilderness. When we are tested by circumstances, when we are tempted to show hatred instead of love, let us remember the scene at the Jordan and the voice from heaven. The voice speaks today: you are God’s beloved child.

Lent is a time for us to rediscover our identity as children of God with the mission of sharing with the world God’s abundant grace and love.

Prayer

True Light who has come into the world,
we praise you for your unending love,
which has forever transformed our world.
To you we lift our voices
and open our hearts,
that they may be filled to overflowing
with your transforming love. Amen.

Hymn

“Lord Jesus, You Shall Be My Song” (*Voices United* 641)

Ponder

Why would someone rail against God? List as many reasons as you can.

Day 4: Saturday

Loneliness

After he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain...to pray.
Matthew 14:23

Voices faded behind him as he climbed
The top of the mountain seemed far
But his determined steps led him there
He sank down on his knees with unspeakable weariness
Tears flooding his face
The press of the crowds
Their desperate needs
The clamour of their voices
The prevalence of sin
His heart cried out in agony to God
Of all he had seen and experienced
Here was a communion so treasured
So intimate
Words were unnecessary
All was shared
The night was still and lonely
His mind wandered to that time of utter loneliness
The burning sand under his feet and the blazing sun above
Forty days with no one there
Nothing to eat or drink
Utter evil visited him
But utter holiness prevailed
He had understood then the reward of loneliness
Of long days and weary nights alone
Of depending upon a strength unseen
Yet so real
Of losing all that he thought strengthened him
And gaining the only lasting strength
God

Apart from anyone or anything else
His loneliness turned into fullness
True fullness
It was this fullness, this true companionship
That he had come to seek
In loneliness he knew strength
Strength unmeasured
Peace perfected
Greater than any evil he could witness
Greater than the companionship of committed disciples
Greater than the unabashed adoration of crowds of people
Greater than the closest friend
How he treasured this loneliness
How he sought it with every fibre of his being
For it was filled with the companionship of his beloved Father
It was his secret place of strength
Precious solitude that brought such sweet intimacy
Loneliness
Precious Loneliness

Prayer

Bless my humble prayers, Loving Creator,
and increase my desire to be in prayer with you. Amen.

Hymn

“Take Time to Be Holy” (*Voices United* 672)

Ponder

Jot down a few of the places where you have prayed. Where do you feel you pray deepest or best? Why is that so?

Four-Strand Garland

Week One

Before beginning this period of reflection, take time to light a candle or read a psalm or brief prayer. Slowly review the verse for Week One. After you have thought about the following four questions and made jot notes, use the suggested hymn as a prayer. Continue in prayer, repeating your favourite name for God (two to three minutes), sitting quietly in the Holy Presence as long as you like.

1. Which reading out of this week's voices *moved* you most?
Why this reading?

2. Which devotion most evoked a sense of *thanksgiving* in you?

3. Which reflection stirred you most toward *regret* or confession?

4. In what ways was *guidance* given to you through your time spent with God this week?

Prayer Hymn

"Giver of the Perfect Gift" (*Voices United* 116)