

Reflection on the Word: Easter 3, April 15, 2018

1 John 3:1-7; Luke 24:36b-48

This past week has been yet another one filled with disturbing news and stories that tear at the heart. Many of you, I'm sure, were moved by the emotional prayer vigil held in a Sakatchewan arena where instead of game 6 of a tournament that would have brought the Humboldt Broncos back to home ice, a whole community gathered to mourn the loss of 15, now 16, mostly young hockey players, who died as the result of a tragic bus accident.

Elsewhere, in Syria, dozens were killed in an apparent chemical attack, and as images of dying or suffering children and other innocent people appeared on television screens and internet sites, international rage grew. A former teacher was jailed for possession of hard core child porn; harassment allegations were made against yet another member of government; on and on the headlines go.

And yet, in the midst of so much that seems horrific and disturbing; in the midst of a world that so often speaks of death, oppression, and hopelessness ... we must not forget the treasure that we have in being called children of God ... and how that makes all the difference.

It certainly made a difference in that Humboldt arena on Sunday night ... while people wept and mourned the tragic loss of so many, they also sang hymns and prayed and held hands and trusted that God was with them, even in the midst of the hurt and pain and unanswered questions. Watching, I could see that the Spirit of the wounded, yet resurrected Christ, was present in so many ways.

And while broken hearts sang together an emotional rendition of "Amazing Grace", there was a real sense of God's love and grace holding them and surrounding them ... in the outpouring of love and sympathy from across the whole country and indeed the world; in the generous outpouring of financial support; in the emails and tweets and flowers and prayers and moments of silence held in other arenas as people gathered for both NHL and other games.

The whole scene that unfolded over our televisions and computer screens spoke to both Good Friday and Easter – to death and despair and to the hope and new life of resurrection. And to the promise that is contained in the words from 1 John "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God..."

Penny Zettler, a pastor of congregational care in a Minnesota church, speaks about how times of sorrow, pain, and darkness, can give us a greater appreciation of what it means to live our lives in the light of Jesus' love, and in the assurance that we are God's children. And it doesn't have to be a personal experience of darkness or pain, but that appreciation can come through empathy with another's pain – opening our eyes and our hearts to the blessing that comes through trust in God's amazing grace.

She tells a story about a vacation which she and her family had taken. Because they had access to free air travel and some German first cousins who had offered them a place to stay, they could go as a whole family to Europe and stay well within their budget.

Penny had dreamed for weeks and weeks about their trip – It would be complete with castles surrounded by fairy-tale moats; restaurants smelling of sauerbraten and sausage; great cathedrals adorned with rich stained glass; and quaint villages where cows with loud clanking bells would graze in the meadows.

But no death camps. Definitely no death camps. Her husband, a teacher who had read extensively about the Holocaust, thought it would be good for the children to see Dachau ... after all, it was an important part of history and would be quite an educational experience. Penny argued that we all see enough darkness in a week at home and on the news and that it seemed insane to choose a place of horror for a sunny morning's vacation tour.

Actually, if truth be told, she was revolted at the thought of being in a death camp ... in a place where there had been so much evil and chaos.

But next thing she knew, there they were, having driven through the proper, prim, perfect German countryside ... past scenic little houses with starched lace curtains – windows overflowing with pink and red geraniums ... there they were in Dachau, this place of darkness splotched onto the shiny countryside.

"Are you coming?" her husband asked, as he and the children stepped out of the car. Reluctantly, Penny got out and walked through the gray chain-link fence into that place of evil. She slowly caught her breath and took in Dachau, the death camp where so many of God's best creation were exterminated.

The camp was dark. Gray. Devoid of colour. There had been absolutely no attempt to put a smile on what had happened there. No one was trying to deny what had occurred there. There were no German geraniums brightening up the scene. No white lace curtains on any window.

The paths were dirt. The buildings were worn, gray, rough wood. The sculptures were black iron. The pictures were black and white. The names of those murdered were written on the walls in black ink. A plain gray sign pointed to the area where the ovens were, where so many were murdered and not given so much as a funeral shroud.

In that place where God's heart broke, there were only images that continue to bring tears. Only darkness. And yet, to Penny, it seemed so right.

It was such a perfect picture of a world that did not know God, a place where chaos reigned and the children of the darkness were, for a short minute, allowed to have power.

And yet having seen what evil looks like, Penny also thought of how she has also seen what God's world looks like in all its purity after a snowfall,

underneath a spring rain shower, and bathed in a rainbow. She thought of the people in her church back home who work at the local shelter to provide food and clothing and a safe place for those who are homeless. She thought of the women who lovingly volunteer at the hospice, caring for families and their loved ones in their last days and weeks; and of the playground where children laugh and run freely without fear.

And she was reminded of who she is and who she is connected to. "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are." She was reminded that there is always more grace in God than there is sin in the world. That as children of God, we are called to live as Christ lived, walking in the light of God's amazing grace.

Certainly, there are those who do not know God, and so there will be darkness, sin, pain, sorrow. Certainly, evil makes its presence felt in many places in our world and innocent people suffer. Certainly, there are accidents and disasters beyond our control and people die. But death and suffering will not be the final word.

Jesus appeared to the disciples when they needed a friend. He showed up and offered them his peace. He offered them healing and grace. The God who redeemed the world in Jesus is still at work in our world today – redeeming, uplifting, comforting, transforming, making new. The Christ who stands before us with nail-scarred hands and feet is the One who still offers peace to us all, sending us out into a world of chaos with confidence, hope, and joy. We are those who know the gift of being called children of God; we know of a love that is stronger than evil, pain and death; and so we go forth with an Alleluia on our lips and with confidence in that love which lives in, around, and through us, even today.

Amen