

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"Desperate Times...Desperate Measures"
Dr. J. Dent

November 15, 2015
25th Sunday after Pentecost

When I chose the name of this sermon on Tuesday, "Desperate Times...Desperate Measures," I had no idea that on Friday there would be terrorist attacks in Paris in at least five different locations with over 125 dead and over 300 hundred wounded, and the French government considering the ISIS attacks "an act of war." Of course desperation takes many forms in this life. I suppose the Islamic militants might consider their acts desperate to condemn the Western lifestyle and secular insults to their religious understanding of life. Terror and violence are tools they use that make no sense to us who hope to simply live and let live.

My connection to Paris goes back to my teen years, when I spent a Summer in Paris, and then a couple of weeks in the south of France with a Reformed pastor and his family on an exchange programme. It's there I learned to live and communicate in French and something of the French culture. I had no sense of this type of terror or violence in those days.

We not only respond to the terror, but we also respond to the response to the terror, as a message of desperation in response to desperate acts. In these moments we wonder what is an appropriate military and police response to such coordinated terror. I have difficulty evaluating the events of the last couple of days, and feel something like those in the streets of Paris, in somewhat a state of shock, even though Paris is a long ways from here. At least that's my response, what's yours? I wonder about the police and military response, if the terrorists win when culture is completely disrupted and everyone is afraid to go about their daily business. On the other hand, we still do not know if there are more teams poised to carry out further violence, suicide bombings and random killings; which would necessitate closures and remaining indoors. Although I felt this way more on Friday and Saturday than I do now.

Desperate times demand desperate measures. In this last week of remembrance, we become aware of how precious our freedoms actually are.

When I was concentrating on desperation earlier in the week, I was thinking about desperate Hannah. She was unable to have a child. She was in the

precarious position of being the second wife of Elkanah, a man who loved her, more than for her ability to produce sons. In this polygamous family, one way we can relate to Hannah, is to consider what it might be today to not be able to have children and to have a sibling who is rubbing it in, and bullying you.

Hannah was desperate, no doubt about it. She wanted to have children, and she decided to talk to God in prayer. Now we all know that just because we pray about something, that does not guarantee it will happen. But there is a fervency in her prayer, and a negotiating with God, that if she has a son, she would devote that son to God and God's ministry. Such fervency was interpreted as drunkenness by Eli the priest, whose own sons had broken many priestly rules, ethical restrictions and did not care about God, even as priests. This was the dark time at the end of the Judges, where "everyone did what was right in their own eyes," including all the idolatry, and doing whatever they wanted to do, as opposed to listening to God in the Scriptures. This was the dark time of physical, and spiritual oppression just before God would bring the era of the prophets, starting with young Samuel.

And such an era was brought in with prayer, Hannah's prayer. I'm thinking the main lesson of these first two chapters of 1 Samuel is: desperation rightly leads us to prayer. Desperation rightly leads us to prayer. So when you get global terrorism on the news and you begin to worry about your friends and loved ones in Europe and elsewhere. Prayer is the place to go. Even if you don't have friends or family there, and just see the faces of those who are there. The exact words don't matter, but the heart toward the Lord for bringing a desperate situation to a peaceful conclusion, that's worth trying to pray.

The writer to the Hebrews tell us that Jesus has become our high priest, giving us complete access to God, and a good relationship with God. Because Jesus provides the way to a right relationship with God, we can have confidence in such a relationship and not just fear or anxiety about how God feels about us. Because of what Jesus has done at the Cross and the Resurrection, we are encouraged to be and do three things. This is all from Hebrews 10: 22-25: First, draw near to God, talking to God honestly, trusting God to change us from our untrusting ways, our insincere coping mechanisms, and guilt ridden past to a freer, opener, grace filled present. When we draw near to God in prayer, God can and does place us in his shower and cleanse us.

Second, draw near to God in hope. Hope anew that truth is better than deception. Hope anew that life and light is better than death and darkness. Hope anew that justice and mercy matter, and that God will bring these in due time.

Third, draw near to God together. Help each other. Meet together in small groups. Pray together. Encourage each other, because encouragement is a spiritual activity, and it takes effort. It's so easy to become discouraged and lose hope in this life. We need each other to help each other in our relationship to Christ together, and on our mission together to touch this world with the love of Jesus.

I hope you have noticed that the main point of this passage is drawing near to God, in three different but complementary ways.

This part of Hebrews I call the divine salad. "Let us (lettuce)...let us draw near to God with a sincere heart ... ²³ Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess... ²⁴ And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds... If we partake of this salad together, we have the spiritual health, we are looking for, even in the midst of world turmoil.

Jesus was clear in Mark 13, not to put our hope or our admiration into buildings. For the kingdom and the mission is so much more than the buildings. But he was also clear that we should not be discouraged by the wars and the rumours of wars, because they have happened and they are happening, they will happen again. He was more concerned that we not be led away from our faith and trust in Him to others who would draw us away from God, away from his mission. Devestation brings desperation, but distraction may be the worst of all. Don't be distracted away from your faith and trust in God. Don't be turned away from the primary relationship in your life, with Christ.

In that place of primary relationship with God, speaking openly and often to God, you will have what you need. In that prayer position, you will have what you need.

Let us pray.