

Gird Up Your Loins

It's a rare thing for a biblical phrase to be adopted into common parlance and that phrase reflects the same meaning today as it did when it was first uttered.

Such is the phrase "gird up your loins".

Today's reading is from the Hebrew Scriptures in the Book of Job. Job has been chosen as a pawn between God and Satan in a kind of cosmic game of chess. From the very beginning of the Book of Job...

One day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them. The Lord said to Satan, 'Where have you come from?' Satan answered the Lord, 'From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it.' The Lord said to Satan, 'Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil.' Then Satan answered the Lord, 'Does Job fear God for nothing? Have you not put a fence around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But stretch out your hand now, and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face.' The Lord said to Satan, 'Very well, all that he has is in your power; only do not stretch out your hand against him!' So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord. (Job 1:1-6-12, NRSV)

And so Satan is told they can do anything they choose to Job in order to convince Job to renounce and curse God. They are allowed to do anything except harm Job. It doesn't work. Satan killed Job's children, devastated the crops, slaughtered the livestock and took his livelihood and life away.

Job is obviously upset, yet he does not curse God. So Satan comes back and asks if he can hurt Job just a little bit. Not kill Job, but make him uncomfortable. God agrees and our hero is then covered in itchy sores that covered Job from the top of his head to the tip of his toes.

And still he did not curse God. Even his wife pleaded with him to escape the misery he was trapped in. Job refused. And so, his three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar come to spend time with their friend and help to cheer him up. Except the way they go about this is to blame Job for his lot in life.

They believe that Job has sinned against God and this is his punishment. They don't really want to help Job, they want the gossip. Some friends they are! I mean, with friends like that –

And so Job is left again, to scratch himself with a shard of pottery, seated in a pile of ashes to soothe the sores and lament his lot in life. This goes on for thirty-eight chapters, where various people come to see Job and Job does get frustrated with his lot in life, yet never curses God.

After a time of self-pitying, where Job is wondering where God is in all this misery, God shows up. And one of the first things he says is "Gird up your loins".

This is very practical advice. You see, in Biblical times, the common fashion was to wear long tunics. These would protect you from the sun, and were modest and well made. Not practical if you needed to mend a net or run away from something or someone. For that you would either remove the tunic or pick up the hem of it and tuck it into the girdle or belt that would be worn around the middle of the tunic.

Hence, gird up your loins. Prepare yourself for hard work. Or for battle.

This past week we have seen devastation in many forms. Last weekend Myles Sanderson went on a rampage in Saskatchewan, stabbing 28 people over 13 locations including James Smith Cree Nation. Those who were stabbed include 11 who died from their injuries and 18 who were wounded, some severely. Included in those stabbed to death is Myles' brother Damien.

The first wake and funeral in the James Smith Cree nation was for Damien. His family prepared his memorial in a traditional way and were not expecting anyone to attend his service, given his role in the rampage with his brother.

As his parents opened the door to the community centre they were overwhelmed with a room full of mourners and a table laden with food, prepared by the community matriarchs. This community came together through love to support a family through an indescribable loss.

As the news of the stabbing unfolded, Queen Elizabeth II sent a statement which read:

"I would like to extend my condolences to those who have lost loved ones in the attacks that occurred this past weekend in Saskatchewan," Queen Elizabeth said in her statement on Wednesday.

"My thoughts and prayers are with those recovering from injuries, and grieving such horrific losses.

"I mourn with all Canadians at this tragic time."

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The day before, newly appointed Prime Minister Liz Truss was asked by Queen Elizabeth to form a government in her name. Traditionally, these requests take place at Buckingham Palace, but as the Queen had been in declining health she had moved to Balmoral Castle in Scotland where she intended to recuperate.

Thursday morning I was putting the finishing touches on a memorial sermon for Dina Dominick, a lovely artistic woman who had taken her life after a long, horrific struggle with depression.

Part of my morning routine is to check the news headlines and there was breaking news with respect to Queen Elizabeth and her declining health. I never imagined that only a couple of hours later, the second Elizabethan Era would come to an end and a new King would be crowned.

It takes great strength to live in this world. It seems we are constantly in a state of fight or flight. I would imagine if we still wore long tunics as were worn in Biblical times, they would be nearly always girded to prepare us to face the struggles ahead of us.

For the communities surrounding James Smith Cree Nation, the families of those who were injured or killed. They must all gird their loins. Not only for the deep grief of a tragedy without reason yet also to support the survivors and the parents of the attacker. Love is a difficult thing. Forgiveness is a difficult thing. Support is not possible without grace and love.

Liz Truss must have her loins girded as well. She went from moving into Number 10 Downing Street and meeting Queen Elizabeth II to announcing her death and preparing to meet with King Charles III, all in a span of four days.

King Charles III has acceded the throne. A reason to celebrate, as he's been "heir apparent" for more than five decades, and yet, the only reason he has acceded is because his mother has died. He is quoted as saying "The moment I've been dreading. Try and keep going." to Prime Minister Truss.

For many Britons Queen Elizabeth is the only monarch they've ever known, and was to many, regarded as a beloved grandmother figure.

Given the precarious financial position that Great Britain finds itself in, the new PM and the new King find themselves with a long and tenuous road ahead of them. But first, they must follow the protocols which have been written and rewritten over the last 70 years, to take her late Majesty Queen Elizabeth II on a type of farewell tour as she lays in state in Scotland, Ireland, Wales and finally England. An opportunity for Britons to say a final farewell.

She will be laid to rest at Westminster Abbey on Monday 19 September at 11:00 am British Standard Time.

Queen Elizabeth was a noble queen, unlikely to ever have been crowned; that is, until her Uncle David, known as King Edward abdicated in favour of his younger brother Albert, who became King George, Elizabeth's father. King Edward abdicated the throne in order to marry Wallis Simpson, an American divorcee whom the royal family had refused him to marry.

King Charles must have his loins girded as well. He is stepping into a role which he has been born to, and had waited two-thirds of his life to fulfill. Yet he must find a way to govern a grieving commonwealth as well as manage his own grief and that of his family. All of which is done in public.

There have been calls for the dissolution of the monarchy; for changes to the monarchy for the past fifty or so years. Undoubtedly there will be harsh criticism of whatever King Charles III does, because he's not his mother.

Doubtless his time on the throne will be but a blink in time compared to his mother's yet he is acceding the throne in a crucial time. As well as being King of Great Britain and the Commonwealth and Realms, he assumes the role of Defender of the Faith. It was recognized by Parliament as an official title of the English monarch in 1544, and has been borne by all subsequent sovereigns.

King Charles has been quoted as saying he wants to be Defender of The Faith(s) recognising there is more than one way to see God. Each of those ways is legitimate and necessary; as it is then and only then that the fullness of God can be experienced. To say that God is of a single gender or any gender for that matter is ridiculous. To say that God only belongs to Christianity, or Judaism, or Islam, or Hinduism, or Buddhism is also ridiculous.

Each faith is enriched by the other. We are meant to work in collaboration, not in repudiation with one another. Learning from another faith does not diminish my faith; if anything it strengthens and brightens it.

We live in a post-Christian country, definitely in a post-Christian province. It may feel we need to be girded to speak of our faith in an increasingly secular world, yet I believe since COVID we have been forced to work in collaboration more than ever before.

I have presided over twelve funeral services since the beginning of July and I have two more this week. To say I am weary would be an understatement. And yes, my loins are girded as I continue to support a grieving community, grieving families, and tend to my own grief.

As we move through the Season of Creation, I will be including ways to help lessen my load. I had planned to begin that this week – but then all of this happened, so it will begin next Sunday.

No matter how you have been affected by the horrific stabbing in Saskatchewan, the death of Queen Elizabeth II, the accession of King Charles III or the general state of the world it is important to remember three important things:

Number One - God loves you and nothing will ever change that.

Number Two - it is important to breathe deeply, in and out, every single day.

Number Three - it is important to stay hydrated and drink lots of water, every single day.

And if all you do is concentrate on those three things, that's okay.

Be gentle with yourself. Be kind to yourself and to all you meet.

When circumstances dictate, take advice from God to Job and gird your loins.

Let the Church say, Amen.

Amen.

The Reverend Canon Andrea L. Brennan
Regional Dean, East Kootenay Region
Incumbent, Elk Valley Ecumenical Shared Ministry
Christ Church Anglican & Fernie Knox United Church
Sermon for Creation 1 - 11 September 2022
Job 38.1-8