Good Morning. And the Lord be with you. (Also with you). I am grateful to be with you this morning to worship together, to share a bit about who we are as Mennonite Church Saskatchewan and to walk with you on this third Sunday of Lent. Susie shared with me that during this Lenten Journey, you are focusing on naming different fears and bringing them before God. This morning I have chosen to focus on the fear of the future.

But before we dive into the message, a little bit of who we are.

Mennonite Church Sask is a community of 27 congregations (made up of 2700) members) who have covenanted together be Christ Centred and Sent as we seek to be and grow as communities of grace, joy and peace. Of our 27 congregations, 15 are located within an hour of Saskatoon, four are across the “north”, three in the west, one in Swift Current, one in Eyebrow, two in Regina and one in Drake. Around 40% of our congregations average 40 worshippers or less and our largest 2 congregations average between 150-200 worshippers on a Sunday morning. In regards to our pastoral leadership, we currently have 31 active pastors and 14 are women, 17 are men, and 30% are under the age of 40. I am grateful to be able to work with this group of leaders and I thank you for your commitment to the work of the broader church, both here in Sask and across MC Canada. It is evident the larger church matters to you through both your financial commitments and the amount of people who serve on various board and councils. Thank you.

Over the last three and a half years I’ve been blessed with the privilege of traveling around the province getting to know our 27 congregations, helping with transitions, finding new pastors, sharing in their joys, and at times, their concerns. And one of the growing concerns often expressed throughout our congregations, both rural and urban, has to do with the lack of children and young people in our pews and what this means for the future of the church. And while I understand there are some mornings here where children seem to make their way out of the woodwork, this concern is widespread. But as I meet with colleagues and hear what is happening in other places and other denominations, I recognize that we are not alone in this experience.

Right across Canada, the religious landscape is shifting dramatically. Two weekends ago at the MC Sask Annual Delegate Session, our main presenter David Fitch, author, professor and church planter from Chicago, met with our pastors and leaders Friday afternoon and named three changes happening in Canada that have dramatically impacted the church. Culturally, the church used to be an important voice in society. It was respectable and looked upon for moral guidance in the public square. For the most part, that is gone. In fact, it’s almost the opposite. Because of past abuses, the “Church’s” voice is asked, and maybe rightfully so, to be silent and to listen, which actually, might not be a bad thing. Linguistically, there was a time when biblical references abounded. One could talk about sin and salvation and most people had a point of reference. Sports commentators often relied on biblical metaphors to talk about matches, like David and Goliath, but today, those are nearly absent. And sociologically, Canadians no longer go to church. In the 60s, upwards of 90% of Canadians regularly attended worship. Today, that’s around 12%. According to Joel Thiessen, a Christian Sociologist at Ambrose University, only 3 in 10 Canadians born into a faith community remain connected to that faith community when they become adults. Even the head of the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada has stated that “church growth”, to use that language, has plateaued in recent years. Now the only church that seems to be showing significant growth in Canada is the Catholic Church and that’s primarily due to immigration. In fact, the place where there is “growth” in the Mennonite Church Canada is also due to immigration and this often comes in the form of New Canadian Congregations joining one of our regional churches; last year an Ethiopian congregation in Edmonton joined Mennonite Church Alberta and a Haitian congregation in Montreal joined Mennonite Church Easter Canada.

Now, I didn’t come here to bore you with statistics nor depress you with reality, though I believe dealing with reality is important. However, this question about young people and the future of the church is an important one, but one that I think is somewhat misplaced.

Does having children in church actually serve an indicator of God’s blessing upon the church? Does it guarantee a future for the church? And on flip side, does not having children mean the death of the church? Does not having children mean we must fear the future?

To wrestle with both of these questions, I’d like us to turn to the two stories we heard read this morning; the story of Abraham and Sarah and the delayed promise of their son Isaac and the “conversion” of the Ethiopian Eunuch. Putting these two stories together may seem odd, but I invite you reflect with me because I think they may both shed some light on these concerns and just maybe offer us some hope in what looks like a barren landscape.

In most cultures, ancient and some present, the birth of children, and in particular, the birth of a son, was seen as a blessing from God. Now, I’m not saying that was right, but it was true. Of course, we know all children are a blessing from God. But in Abe & Sarah’s day, a male child meant someone to pass on the family name and inheritance; it meant continuing the bloodline, it meant a future. Thus, not having children, and in particular an heir, was seen as a curse.

So, as you can imagine, Abraham and Sarah lived with incredible shame going all those years without having a male child. What makes the situation even worse, (or as Elliott would say, double worse), is that Yahweh has specifically told Abraham and Sarah that they would have as many descendants as there are stars in the sky and grains of sand on the beach. Yet, he and Sarah are childless. To the watching world, they are not blessed but are cursed. Abraham even protests against God about the situation, saying in chapter 15, “what will you give me for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezar of Damascus.”

Abraham and Sarah understand how this works. The “pews” are empty. There is no future here. Sure, God made a promise, but there is no child, and thus no descendants. It remains this way until Abraham is 98 and Sarah is 90 and three strangers show up unexpectedly at their tent, and after extending these strangers hospitality, they go on to tell Abraham (and an ease-dropping Sarah) that she will give birth to a son in one year’s time. As you can imagine, Sarah responds with a belly laugh. I mean, this is funny (no, it’s double funny) Who wouldn’t laugh? To the 80 year old’s and up, how would you respond if three strangers showed up and told you, “oh by the way, you’re now going give birth to your heir? Are you kidding me? 15 minutes with the grandkids and you are ready to send them home! Yeah right! Sarah and Abraham are too old…that ship has sailed and the sailors are out of sea (if you get my drift). Sarah’s womb is as lifeless as Jesus’ tomb. They are frail. Near death even. There is no future here. Yet, one year later, Isaac, the one named after that belly laugh, is born!

However, the birth of Isaak doesn’t conclude the issue of barrenness in the book of Genesis. In fact, it continues on for the next two generations. Genesis 25:21 notes that Rebecca, Isaac’s wife, was barren until she conceived Jacob and Esau and Jacob’s favoured wife, Rachel, was barren until she conceived Joseph, Jacob’s 11th son!

This theme continues. Hannah is considered barren until she gives birth to the great prophet Samuel and Elizabeth is considered barren until she gives birth to the great prophet John the Baptist.

So, what’s going on here? What is the importance of barrenness in the Bible? Five significant biblical women cannot conceive until there is some divine intervention. What do we make of that?

While there are multiple interpretations on this topic, the one that stands out for me in this time, and in this place, has to do with the need to trust God for our future, especially when that future seems impossible to imagine.

As mentioned earlier, having a male child, an heir, in the ancient world was both seen as a blessing from God and a way to secure one’s future. Often these went together hand in hand. Yet for Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Rachel, they could not secure their future by their own doing. In fact, Abraham and Sarah even tried to come up with alternative plans, because God was taking God’s sweet time. And so they came up with a strategy to speed things along and devised a plan by taking advantage of the Egyptian servant girl Hagar in order to produce an heir. They wanted to secure their future for themselves, and as result, took advantage of another human being. This did not go well. It wasn’t until they were beyond their own ability and power, in a rather unlikely scenario, that God’s future presented itself. In all these stories, the future wasn’t secured or taken by human actions; rather the future was given as a gift by the grace of God.

Talking about the future as a gift from God as opposed to something we need to secure, or control, or take is a far cry from what we hear and are sold in the world around us. In our secular age, the future is something we actually fear. It is something we want to control, and because we can’t, we are an anxious people. And unfortunately, the church also falls into this anxiety and gets caught up trying to strategize a secured future instead of learning what it means to trust in God’s promise. What if, for a moment, we envisioned the future as a gift from God? Even in this day of political, economical, social and environmental unrest, can we as a people of God, imagine the future as a gift from God, something we receive? How would that change our outlook? How would that change us? It’s with this in mind, that I would like to briefly turn to the fascinating story of Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch.

In much of the Bible, Eunuchs are not looked upon favourably. Deuteronomy 23:1, states pretty clearly that “No man whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the Assembly of the Lord.” According to the law of Moses, Eunuchs are out. And they were out primarily for two reasons. First, they are defiled, impure according to custom. And secondly, they can not produce any off-spring. And, as mentioned earlier, producing children, and in particular sons, was seen as a blessing from God and for that matter, a contribution to the future of God’s people…in other words, it helps to fill up the pews. Thus, Eunuchs were useless in these matters. So, with this in mind, when Philip not only gets into the chariot of a Gentile Eunuch but offers to baptize him and welcome him into the family of God, something truly radical is taking place.

Eunuchs are not welcomed at all in the law of Moses, and yet by the leading of the Holy Spirit, Philip crosses a whole bunch of traditional boundaries and after a short bible study on Isaiah 53, baptizes and welcomes him into the family of God. There was no seven year BFC study to see if this was acceptable. He didn’t call, or write, or text Peter, or John, or Thomas, or any of the other disciples to see if this was okay. Instead, by the leading of the Spirit, he just did it. And imagine, what if this Eunuch heads home to Ethiopia and begins to share what had happened to him and other Eunuchs in the Queen’s court get excited about this Jesus guy and said they too wanted to be baptized and soon there is this church in Ethiopia, made up of Eunuchs, celebrating the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ! Now tell me, how many children will these early Eunuch Christians produce for the future of the church? Since they cannot produce children, where will the future of their church come from?

While having lots of children in the pews is nice, even desirable, if that were the case, would we not be tempted to say, “Thank you God, but our future is secure?” What the stories of barrenness and the Ethiopian Eunuch do is remind us that faithfulness is not measured by how many children are in our pews but by our openness to trust God to fulfill God’s promises and to follow the nudging’s and leadings of the Holy Spirit.

Two years ago, MC Sask invited Betty Pries to lead us through Refresh, Refocus, Renew, and a part of this year long process was a season of prayer where we all were invited to pray some very specific prayers. One of the prayers was this; Lord, Open us to Your future.

What I like about this prayer is that it implies God has a future God is willing to provide. While I am aware of the concerns about the future of the church in Canada, and all the changing dynamics from Christendom to post-Christendom, I am also aware that the mission of God to bring about the reconciliation of all things unto God, continues. God still desires and longs for humanity to be brought back into right relationship with God, each other and the world. And in our hearts, we desire this too! And as long as the Holy Spirit continues to blow upon the earth, fulfilling God’s reconciling purposes in the world, there is a future for God’s people. In fact, the impetus of this prayer is on us…Lord, open us to your future. Are we, in fact, open to the future, to the promise, God is willing to show us? And if so, are we open to follow where the Spirit is leading, even if that means getting into a chariot with an Ethiopian Eunuch (or our present day equivalent)?? To open ourselves to God’s future means we no longer need to look at the future as something to fear, but rather, recognizing it is a gift of God’s grace, we can journey forward into these uncertain days with the confidence and trust that the Lord our God, through the power of the Holy Spirit, goes before us.

Let us pray:

Lord, Open us to receive your future.

Amen