

## December 22, 2013

*Our passages today fit neatly together. The first is a prophecy from the 8<sup>th</sup> c. BC that predicts the birth of a king from the line of David. The birth is promised to be miraculous and the boy born will change the world. The second reading from Matthew's gospel walks us through the events leading up to Jesus' birth. He shows clearly that Jesus fulfills all that Isaiah promised. Jesus **is** the Messiah. Listen to the good news.*

### **Isaiah 7: 10-16**

<sup>10</sup>God spoke again to Ahaz. This time he said, <sup>11</sup>"Ask for a sign from your GOD. Ask anything. Be extravagant. Ask for the moon!"

<sup>12</sup>But Ahaz said, "I'd never do that. I'd never make demands like that on GOD!"

<sup>13</sup>So Isaiah told him, "Then listen to this, government of David! It's bad enough that you make people tired with your pious, timid hypocrisies, but now you're making God tired. <sup>14</sup>So the Master is going to give you a sign anyway. Watch for this: A girl who is presently a virgin will get pregnant. She'll bear a son and name him Immanuel (God-With-Us). <sup>15</sup>By the time the child is twelve years old, able to make moral decisions, <sup>16</sup>the threat of war will be over. Relax, those two kings that have you so worried will be out of the picture.

### **Matthew 1: 18-25**

<sup>18</sup>The birth of Jesus took place like this. His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. Before they came to the marriage bed, Joseph discovered she was pregnant. (It was by the Holy Spirit, but he didn't know that.) <sup>19</sup>Joseph, chagrined but noble, determined to take care of things quietly so Mary would not be disgraced.

<sup>20</sup>While he was trying to figure a way out, he had a dream. God's angel spoke in the dream: "Joseph, son of David, don't hesitate to get married. Mary's pregnancy is Spirit-conceived. God's Holy Spirit has made her pregnant. <sup>21</sup>She will bring a son to birth, and when she does, you, Joseph, will name him Jesus—'God saves'—because he will save his people from their sins." <sup>22</sup>This would bring the prophet's embryonic sermon to full term:

<sup>23</sup>Watch for this—a virgin will get pregnant and bear a son; They will name him Emmanuel (Hebrew for "God is with us").

<sup>24</sup>Then Joseph woke up. He did exactly what God's angel commanded in the dream: He married Mary. <sup>25</sup>But he did not consummate the marriage until she had the baby. He named the baby Jesus.

*Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.*

**THANKS BE TO GOD!**

## Sermon – “I believe”

We’re going to do something a bit different today. It was prompted by an article in the November issue of THE OBSERVER. Those of you who get it may remember the cover article, Beyond Belief.

The Observer is an award-winning monthly news magazine published by the United Church. When I was doing under graduate political science, it was recommended by my professor of International Study / Canadian International Relations because of the United Church’s long standing involvement in social action and politics particularly in Canada’s recognition of China.

Anyway, there were three articles in the November issue. The first was called Beyond Belief and it was a conversation between one of the Observer writers, the minister of Westdale United Church in Toronto, Gretta Vosper and the minister at Alderwood United in Mississauga, Connie denBok. Now Connie is on, I would say, on the more conservative end of the United Church spectrum and Greta - ok, I’ll show my stripes - is just off the United Church spectrum. She is the author of a book called With or Without God. The second article was by Ken Gallinger. Ken for a long time wrote the “Question and Answer” section of the Observer and his article here was Please Don’t Call Me Reverend Anymore. He has actually given up his ordination vows and is no longer a United Church minister and then there was a small piece by Trisha Elliot called Past Tense Pastors. She explained that there now exists this organization, supported in large part by the Richard Dawkins Foundation, called the Clergy Project and that it is for ministers who have stopped believing and have left church work. I have to tell you that I reacted viscerally to all of this – you know I was sitting at my desk reading it and (&())&\*(#\$\_@#&(! It was not very ladylike and probably not terribly pastoral. I have felt this way about Gretta Vosper ever since her book came out – I’m thinkin’ if you don’t believe then don’t be a minister! But after I cooled off and got some sense back, what struck me was their lack of belief and their loss of belief made me think of ‘what do I believe?’ This seemed like the perfect day for Patrick and I to wrestle with this question. We’ve just celebrated three baptisms where we have asked those parents to say again and again “I believe”.

In the Westminster handbook of Reformed Theology – one of those lovely books I have over my desk, I looked up the definition of ‘heresy’ Heresy means the “rejection or distortion of a major element of Christian doctrine.” That’s what heresy is, technically. It is the deliberate and persistent denial by a professing Christian of a fundamental of the faith. So when Gretta Vosper says, “*I don’t believe in God*” - that is a deliberate and persistent denial of a fundamental element of the faith. When Gretta and Ken tell us they don’t believe in God, then where do they belong? Ken has left the church, Gretta’s still in.

So what do I believe?

My best understanding of God comes from what I have learned of Jesus. Now I did study history and there are lots of historic figures that some of you will have heard of and if you have studied a particular time in history, you may know a little bit more in depth about some more historic figures. The remarkable thing about Jesus is that we know so much about his life all these millennia later and we worship him. We're not the first ones who've done it. It has been this compelling life that is so known – you can go anywhere in the world and say "Jesus" and you'll get a response whether the person is a believer or not. He is known.

So I want to ask Patrick because Patrick is in his process of call and training for ministry so a lot of things are probably fresher for him because all those committees he's had to go to are trying to beat it out of him. So I've asked Patrick to talk a bit about his sense of call and his foundational beliefs.

Patrick:

"I stepped away from church and religion for about 20 years in my early 20's and wanted absolutely nothing to do with anything to do with church. I spent those 20 years searching for something, understanding that there was this big hole in my life, this sense of loss and not knowing what that was. Finally at one point in my life, I felt that I had lost everything. I had nothing left but also at that point, I finally realized that I had not lost everything because I had not lost myself. I had not lost my Spirit and who I really was. In coming to recognize that, I came to touch something that was greater than what I was - something that was more - something that was larger. I will admit that I was very confused about what that was but I knew that I needed to go further and so I was walking by Augustine United Church one Sunday evening and their sign said Music, Meditation & Art and I thought, Okay, I love music, I was exploring meditation and I like art so why not – Sunday evening service, pretty safe place to be unlike a Sunday morning service where they are expecting you to know this and understand that. So I went to this Sunday evening service and the very first piece of music they played I recognized from the first two bars. It was one of my most favourite pieces of classical music by Eric Sautee. That piece of music had carried me through those really dark times. When I felt all alone I would put that music on and I would just listen. So I sat there and I looked up at this large, cavernous church with the huge pipe organ and I felt like I was at home. Something stirred within me and said "*This is where you need to be.*" And so that's what I started to do, I started to come to church. I will be honest with you and tell you that I started going to church being selfish, thinking "what can that church or people do for me" and as I became more a part of that community, I understood that It was "What can I do? What can I bring? What can I share? How can I be a part of that? It's not what they can do for me, but what can I do for and bring to them. And so from this point I started to become more involved in the church but there was still this nagging voice in the back of

my head that said, *"there's more for you, you are meant to be more than what you think you are capable of doing, you are meant to be more than who you are."*

So a group of extremely prayerful people challenged me to look at what that meant. Over the course of 3 years, (normal discernment in the church is 1 year, mine took 3 years,) over the course of those 3 years, I realized I am called to be here. Sharon asked me to talk about my foundational beliefs and I struggled with this – not that I don't believe but how to properly articulate what I believe. Bruce Sangwin in his book Darwin, Divinity and Dance with the Cosmos which is an amazing book – the entire 1<sup>st</sup> chapter of the book talks about how unlikely it is that we are here today and that it is almost impossible that this happened by chance. I believe that. I walk outside every day – even when it's 40 below out – and I see the beauty in this world, and I see God in that. I see God in the people I meet. I believe in God and I believe that God is constantly, constantly turning towards us to form relationship with us and Jesus was that relationship embodied in the flesh, fully human, fully divine and we are called to turn towards God.

Sharon:

I was ordained in 1981. If you want to ask if my faith has changed during the time since, I would have to say yes. Over the course of 3 decades of preparing sermons, week in and week out, constantly reading scripture, reading commentaries, I was often challenged by biblical scholars who have unearthed new material, new wisdom, new insight about scripture, about the society of the times in which that scripture was written, about the economics, the history – all of those things that people didn't know at one point. I should tell you that I was never a biblical literalist. I don't read the Bible and think that a holy hand came down from heaven and grabbed the hand of a human being and wrote it but that never threatened my believing. I know how threatening it is to say that to some people. They take those words literally as the active work of God. I see so much of scripture as a story of faith and those words were very carefully chosen – stories of faith – stories to build up the faith of others – stories to carry on, to impart as a legacy the faith of others. Not history because I understand history. There are rules around history that the historians follow as they are documenting details. Scripture is not history – it is a story of faith. I've also experienced things that have happened to me and I have been the witness and companion for others who have gone through deep suffering and I've had more than my share of moments when I've said *"Excuse me, why God?"* But I'm here to tell you that in the midst of all that, I am not an atheist – in fact, I am probably going far deeper into the ability to believe. I cannot abandon my beliefs, as Ken Gallinger talks about in his article *"the God talk"*. I, in my life, am not living in a post-theistic Christianity – I don't know how you can have Christianity without God. I think it's completely an oxymoron.

I believe in God. I believe in the Creator and I was greatly comforted when physicist , John Polkinghorne in his 50's after teaching at Cambridge for years and years, studied for the Anglican priesthood. He has now become a great interpreter of questions of science with questions of faith and when he talks about creation he says, "*You know, man has never been able to make a carbon atom, never!*" We do other things but we cannot create a carbon atom – and carbon is the building block for everything that is and Polkinghorne says we are all stardust. Jodi Mitchell tells us that too and I'm ok with that, that there is something greater, wiser and more complex than me who created the galaxies, the solar system, and oppositional thumbs that makes us so special - freckles also make us special. The same God created music that can inspire and transform us – this is stardust. I believe that the divine is present in my world. I have seen God in action. I have felt God with me. And I have been surprised by God. My faith in God, the reconciler of the world, has changed – there's no doubt about it. It has been tested, it is deeper than it once was. It has sustained me when I wanted to give up. It has made me take risks that others told me I was a fool to take. My faith in the God we learned about in Jesus grounds and informs my life. It is the means by which I know beyond a shadow of a doubt, that I am loved, called, and privileged to serve.

So if you haven't read these articles, I'll make sure that Lucy makes copies of them – they are interesting, if sometimes exasperating reading but here we are in the week of Christmas and you know, I don't imagine that Jesus was born in a stable and laid in a manger and it doesn't matter to me if Mary was a virgin and if that troubles any of you, I apologize. But I do understand that anyone that encountered the man, Jesus, who'd perhaps witnessed his crucifixion, and then was one of the many witnesses who saw him alive again, knew that this was a story that had to be told and as any good story has it, you have to have a beginning and they gave us this beginning so we would have some sense of how amazing, how life-changing, how history-transforming was this man, Jesus. This is why I believe and this is why I spent 32 Christmases away from family to be here with you.

Amen

The other question we were going to tackle was why believing matters to us and we'll do that on January 26<sup>th</sup> – so do come out and enjoy the sequel.