

“Wise People Live by the Standards They Set”

A Sermon Shared with the Congregation of St. Andrew's United Church
for Sunday, November 13, 2016

Scripture Readings: Isaiah 65:17-25

Luke 21:5-19

(by The Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)

Let's imagine we are writing the Bible today. We are putting pen to paper (or finger to keyboard or voice to recorder) to speak about how God is addressing the world today, and where the voice of God is being heard.

What would we speak about? Some of us might want to speak about the rising temperatures. After all, here we are in November with snow non-existent after Remembrance Day, and sunny days of double digit temperatures being the norm. Surely writing about God's place in our world would speak to that reality of temperature management, if not global warming.

And some would say that the increasing debt experienced by families and young people, especially those who have gone on to College and University education and have not reached their vocational dreams, so struggle to meet their financial commitments.

Others struggle to meet requirements in retirement, worried that their pension money will not last through their lifetime. There may be some here today with that very real worry.

And of course if we were writing the Bible this weekend we would hardly miss mentioning Leonard Cohen. After all, he lived the full range of religious experience – a Montreal Jew who later embraced Buddhism, and whose signature anthem incorporates a basic Hebrew concept that has been apportioned by Christians as well – Hallelujah.

Cohen in his poetry, lifestyle, and touring, challenged all to think about music, words, and God in new ways. We would want to see, in this treatise we are writing about God, how the best of our story could be shared with poetry and music in a way to captivate the reader. The Bible, after all, does that in the Psalms and prophetic books we have now.

And of course, if we are to write about God today, we must speak about the election south of us, and the rise to the Presidency of Donald Trump. He is not the mythic power of David defeating Goliath, or Moses leading his people across the desert. He is certainly not a modern day Ronald Reagan, for the latter was an experienced Governor and a long-time public figure who had sought the nomination 4 years before his eventual victory.

So why the talk about speaking about God in our time, and specifically on this weekend? Am I mixing up religion, politics and the news inappropriately? Well, it would be natural to somehow touch on current issues and public figures that impact the reader, for what happens every day could tell a lot about how we would speak about God's presence and guidance.

Why do I say that? Well, the biblical readings for today do just that.

The passage from Isaiah, the final section of that book of prophecy, was written after the return from exile. And what are the themes? Living a long and healthy life, building a home

and getting to live in it, growing crops and not seeing the work of nurture and plowing ruined. People who have suffered and been under siege get excited by what some of us might term normal, everyday life. Isaiah celebrates the ordinary as if it is special.

And Luke's gospel speaks about the destruction of the Temple. Amazing prophetic prediction, or some-kind of futurist insight? I doubt it – the fall of the temple may be “predicted” here for the writing of the gospel was about the time that the destruction happened.

Jesus speaks about armies coming into Jerusalem and surrounding the temple. The end is nigh.

Now what do we make of all of this? The writer of Luke's gospel has some dramatic tales of destruction and ruination in his story of the faith and its future. He figured Jesus knew all about what was now taking place, so why not include it in his story of the gospel? Yet he also guards the reader with an overall statement before this succession of disasters and destruction happens: “Take heed that you are not led astray, for many will come in my name...”

Some have turned these Lucan passages into a journey to find out which disaster, which political movement, which rogue nation or leader or dictator, will announce the end of the world as we know it and so herald in the beginning of a new age, but Jesus said: “Watch out, do not be led astray by people who claim to speak on my behalf...”

Malcolm Gladwell is the small town Ontario boy made good. Growing up outside of Kitchener-Waterloo in Elmira, a community to which he and his family moved from England when Malcolm was 6 years old as his father began teaching at the University of Waterloo, Malcolm was always the curious learner.

A journalist with *The New Yorker* magazine, Gladwell has offered various interesting theories on how we learn and succeed. His third book, *Outliers*, tries to explain why some people succeed while others do not.

His opening chapter discusses success in hockey, using the Memorial Cup final game of 2007 as his point of reference, when the Vancouver Giants defeated the Medicine Hat Tigers. In the midst of the joy of victory, the Vancouver Giants coach said he was proud of the accomplishment of his players, that all had bought into the goal and system.

Gladwell himself says hockey is a sport where those rewarded are simply players of pure talent – hockey in Canada is the great leveller. It does not matter where you are born or what your economic background – talent will help you rise to the top.

Or does it? In a detailed analysis of the top players in Major Junior Hockey, and eventually the NHL, Gladwell points out that a disproportionate number of players are born in the first 4 months of the year than in the last 4 months. Why? Well, very simply, age groupings among children growing up are based on the calendar year, and when you are six, seven or eight in early hockey leagues, someone who is 6 years nine months when the season begins is far more developed than someone who is 5 years 10 months old, and so on up the early years. And players for the top teams, travelling leagues and triple A level teams, get chosen

from the best players when young, so the smaller, younger hockey player may never make it to the higher echelon of the sport due to the age disparity.

Now in the same book, Gladwell says something quite different about violin players and their rise to success. He says if you visited a university and saw violin players seeking a major in music, there may be three general categories of players – those who are “good,” and probably destined to be music teachers in school or pursue music as a personal avocation, but never play professionally; those who are very capable and will reach a professional level, and may end up in a symphony playing violin in a middle or back row, supporting the concert master and others; and then there are the elite violin players who will be the soloists and guest artists for the greatest symphonies of the world, wonderful musicians who will make dramatic, successful recordings to engage people everywhere.

The assumption, claims Gladwell, is that the elite level musician is simply more talented than the rest, but he dismisses that. They do have unique and original ability, but unless they are willing to practice (and he calculates it takes about 10,000 hours of practice to reach full potential), then even the most talented will not succeed. Talent is no replacement for hard work and effort – we need both.

And so it is in the gospel lesson for today.

Jesus speaks about not allowing those around us to get us off course in what we hope to accomplish, to share, to experience. It is the effort we apply to life, and the ways that we commit to what is important to us, that determines the kind of life we shall have.

I am not sure you have been as amused as I have been this week after an election campaign where Donald Trump spent weeks decrying the electoral system and saying it was rigged, and he only would accept the results if he won, and so did accept them since he did win, and now many Democratic-leaning commentators and pollsters are saying the election was tainted by the fact the coverage was unfair, the electoral system was biased, and voting opportunities were not equal. We heard nothing like that until after the election finished.

Listening to excuses as to why one fails after the fact, and blaming others, is the very thing Jesus tried to guard against.

He knew that followers of him would not have a chance to be successful if they only reacted to what others said and did. They had to be dedicated to what they believed, and not waver no matter what happens around them. Do your best to do good, he urged his followers, and do not blame your failures on the weather, the economy, the people of other faiths, or even the changing of the clocks.

We can try hard to take what Jesus said literally, and trace what disasters he refers to, what economic crises he had in mind when he speaks of the challenges people faced. But all of this is secondary to taking Jesus seriously – to know that what we face is never as important as how we face it.

Set the standard by which you will live, seek to be consistent with Jesus’ teachings, and move forward. This is more than a cocktail of success in life; it is a promise of good things to come.