

“We Have a Say in How We’re Shaped and Moulded”

A Sermon Shared with the Congregation of St. Andrew’s United Church

Sunday, December 3, 2017 at 10:30 a.m.

Advent 1 – Communion – Laurentian University Choir

Scripture Readings: Isaiah 64:1-9

Mark 13:23-37

(Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)

Today is a day to take charge. Well, maybe, it is a day to take charge of letting go. Or possibly a day to take charge of being guided by the Spirit. Maybe it is a day to take a charge (sorry, a mis-placed basketball reference that someone can explain to Catherine after the service).

There are times when we feel we have little control and influence in life – indeed, we may feel shaped and moulded by outside influences and powers over which we have no say, yet we should never see ourselves as pawns in the winds of life.

Now the ancient Greeks often thought that way – even the gods were influenced and controlled by fate – *tyche*, or *τυχή* in Greek – but that is not the Christian perspective.

And so we enter Advent for another year – the anticipation of the birth of Jesus – but we should not see ourselves on a journey of limited self-assertion and stuck in a universe run amok around us. We may feel that way, but Advent is a time when we must say to the world: “I will not allow myself to be controlled by forces outside of me and around me; I will decide what is important to me and how I will live!”

A great goal, but one we can find a challenge to live out from time to time.

Now we await the birth of Jesus in this Advent season, and his teachings clearly are not about offering up to us the best that can ever be, and permit us to ignore the rest, but he does offer to each one of us a new way of experiencing the world. In her book on New Testament Images of Jesus (entitled *From Jesus to Christ*) Paula Fredriksen suggests that the early church had some time to write the gospels down after the life and death of Jesus, so they also had time to redefine the importance that Jesus brought to the world in his teachings and very being.

She suggests that the Jesus of the gospels is less and less a political figure (the kind of Messiah who would influence the political realities of the day, bringing his sense of “kingdom” to a world of tension and war) and more and more was seen as one who brought to all a “spiritual transformation.”

That is what we are suggesting for this advent, that we all enter into a spiritual holiday. It is not a great slogan and catchy phrase – well, maybe it is, but it is not shared for the purposes of being a slogan, but for the purposes of re-connecting with the essence of the expectation of Jesus and the beginning of life captured on the first Christmas morn, to which all of our teachings, prayers, and music will focus over the next four Sundays.

Today’s passage from Mark tells of how we can read the signs of the weather and the seasons through the rhythm of vegetation and the changing of the skies. You know here in

Sudbury, for example, when summer is approaching because the sun moves noticeably northward into the sky as it moves toward sunset, and in winter the sun is far further south in the sky. No one needs to measure it – we can see it.

Even if we did not know what date it is, we know that when trees begin to lose their leaves, then snow is soon to follow. It just is.

Now some assume that such teachings are Jesus' way to tell us there is a lot around us that we cannot control, so do not worry about trying to influence life.

But for me, the teaching seems the very opposite. We can read the rhythms of life and nature by what happens around us – most events are quite predictable – and so we do not need to be surprised by what is taking place and will take place. As a result, we should be prepared for the changing landscapes of life, and therefore be personally ready to find a way to make one's own impact on life.

It is as simple as that.

Henri Nouwen had a similar epiphany (sorry to rush the seasons, let's just say it was a moment of awareness) as he reflected on his priestly ministry after moving into Daybreak north of Toronto. He had been a world class scholar, teaching in halls of higher learning such as Notre Dame and Harvard, and now he shared his life with mentally challenged individuals. While clearly a meaningful ministry, how had it changed him? How must he change to be effective?

Nouwen on reflection learned that he needed to stop worrying about tomorrow. In his words, "the more willing I was to look honestly at what I was thinking and saying and doing now, the more easily I would come into touch with the movement of God's spirit in me, leading me to the future."

In his words, Nouwen invites us into our own spiritual holiday by not worrying about the future, but by living fully in the present and then await with anticipation and joy what life is about to bring us.

As we seek to do that, we are reminded that today we celebrate three people who are working through their course loads and now in second year of their respective programs. Today may not be as much of a spiritual holiday for them as they need to get into exam preparations, or for Douglas mid-terms papers due to a prolonged strike. But our faith means little if we do not experience a sense of renewed purpose and understanding as believers engaging in activities of scholastic pursuit and professional training. If God is important to our lives, that impacts all of our life and activities. That can be true of these students – both our award winners and the students from the University Choir who have led us in music today. It should be true of all of us. As a church we need to uplift those connections for people and honour them; as individual members we need to be reminded of those connections and celebrate them.

So today we invite you into a spiritual holiday this Advent. Come with anticipation; depart renewed and refreshed.