

“Is it a Sign from God if it Confirms our Bias?”

A Sermon Shared with the Congregation of St. Andrew's United Church
for Sunday, December 18, 2016

Advent 4 – Candle of Love

Scripture Readings: Isaiah 7:10-16

Matthew 1:18-25

(by The Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)

I have been thinking a lot about the question I want to pose to all of you today: “Is it a sign from God if what is said and done or observed confirms our bias?” Put differently, is it really an indisputable sign and message from God when we experience what would normally happen, what we wanted to happen, or possibly what underlies and supports our biases in life already?

Should not something from God at least challenge our thinking and set aside our expectations for everything to be always the same – be something other than that which is just as we like it?

There is an old chestnut of a story, often shared, and I bet many of you have heard more than once. A minister is telling a children's story and is portraying a character found in the bush. This character runs up trees and jumps from tree to tree by leaping off the end of the branches, and before winter buries a lot of nuts for use later. What is the animal? The group of children collectively is glassy eyed, silent, almost mesmerized.

The minister tries again: “I know you are a bright group and some of you must know the answer. Don't be shy – what kind of animal is this?”

Finally one seven year old gets up the courage to speak: “It sounds an awful lot like a squirrel to me, but I know the right answer is “Jesus.”

We are like that – we know the right answer is Jesus, so we sometimes jump over the question, or even what this Jesus means and how he affects us, speaks to us, and influences (or can influence) our lives. We may even do that in remembering and honouring the birth of Jesus – we know what it all means, so we need not listen to the stories very carefully year after year after year.

But more on that later.

So Canada has a new official bird. We did not have one as we were about to enter into the 150th anniversary of our birth. Now it took us over 100 years to get to the point of naming the beaver as the official animal of Canada, and that came down not without controversy.

But, until recently, we had no official bird.

What bird should it be? You may know the answer but if you were asked a year ago what bird do you see as being the official bird of Canada, what would you have said?

Baseball fans would vote for the Blue Jay, though it received a small percentage of votes. The bird to captivate the most people was the Common Loon. After all, in Ontario it is known on cottage country waterways and in northern lakes. It is immortalized on the Canadian dollar coin which is never referred to as such, but is always in the vernacular known as a “Loonie.”

The Loonie is displayed on Highway 17 at Echo Bay, but other travellers may vote for another bird also immortalized along that highway, though I hear the statue is aging and crumbling: The Canada Goose at Wawa. Many thought that made an appropriate, dignified, and majestic choice.

The bird chosen, barely half the number of people voted for it as voted for the Loon, yet about double the number of those who chose the Canada Goose, is the Gray Jay.

Until 1957 this bird was known as the Canada Jay, but the world ornithology community changed the name so it was not country specific, even though these birds tend to be found almost exclusively in Canada, with a few in Alaska and maybe in the mountainous areas of the northwest United States mainland.

Another name for the bird, Whiskey Jack, is based not on the noise that it makes, but rather is a rendering in English of the bird’s name in Cree.

So the Gray Jay is officially Canada’s Bird, and many of us wonder where that idea came from. Not expected by many, or maybe not the usual image of a bird to carry the weight of a country, this choice stretches us to see a new symbol with a new purpose. Maybe it was an inspired choice.

In the passage from Isaiah read earlier we have Ahaz being told: “Ask for a sign from the Lord – it may be as deep as Sheol or as high as Heaven.” But Ahaz would not ask such a thing – he will not put God to the test. So in response he gets a message that a young woman will have a child who will eat curds and honey and be called “Immanuel” which means “God is with us.”

You don’t want to push God to show you or tell you something farfetched and out of the box? Well then, it will happen anyway.

We like to jump over that part – we turn a stable into a nursery room, and imagine the trek from Nazareth to Bethlehem to be an extended sandy road, not the struggle through hills and rocks and around water as it would have been in that time.

The Christmas Story becomes for us not a hardened struggle of survival, but a quaint tale of transition. It is more than that.

Life is often transformed and set on a new direction not when our biases and expectations are met, but when something unusual and unexpected happens.

Do we take time to really appreciate and ponder that uniqueness?

And if we find it hard to ponder anew the message of Christmas, maybe we can reflect on what it means to have the Gray Jay as the bird of Canada.

It is a bird committed to this country – it does not leave in winter. It is a bird that often incubates eggs and hatches young ones before the warmth of spring has arrived.

It is a bird remembered by Robert Bateman, one of Canada's greatest naturalist painters, who once saw the Gray Jay when at the gate into Algonquin Park with his family as a boy. The bird flies near their car so they stopped, and it seemed to some it wanted attention, so Bateman rolled down the window and offered the bird part of a sandwich. It lit on his finger – an amazing image of this bird both wild and tame. For Bateman that might be an image of Canadians – wild or tough and hardy in the bush, and yet soft and gentle and tame in our interactions.

And then I got back to Isaiah. The image of a young woman having a child who would be significant – a tough edge, a strident purpose, and yet as later hymn writers would capture this Jesus as gentle, meek and mild.

It seems that is what we want in life – people who have a wild and enthusiastic side, and people who have a gentle and kind side.

Jesus fulfilled that expectations because that is what we want – at least what we want when we are challenged to see the world in a new way.

Now I wonder – does that prove Jesus is from God because he fulfills our bias for a great leader? Or maybe, just maybe, we need to hear his teachings with new ears and see here the product of that surprise birth explained by Isaiah as to who this leader and Messiah would be.

We may have lost the surprise of the words, but we should not lose the power of the image. After all, the birth is just a week away, and the story still has a powerful impact when we let it.

A young woman will have a baby, and in that humble beginning, greatness will rise for the good of the world. Seeing that greatness, and making space for that opportunity from humble beginnings -- even in our own time, is truly a God-given journey worth taking.