

“It Takes More Than Good Eyesight to See Great Opportunities”

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

For the Baptism of Jesus Sunday

Scripture Readings: Psalm 29 (VU #756)

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

(by The Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)

There are seasons of one’s life, just as there are seasons of one’s experiences, learning, and personal growth – both physical and emotional.

Not surprisingly, the seasons of our lives often parallel seasons of friends and loved ones whom we have known over the years, in some cases decades.

I can still remember when I was in my twenties and thirties, and many friends were going through the birth of their children. Was it possible to discuss anything else but birth day preparations, baby experiences and new learnings, or a growing child’s activities? At each meeting pictures galore were shared – especially with the first child.

I have a couple of friends who recently have undergone cataract surgery. There is the anticipation of the surgery, the decision making on when and how it will take place, deciding on the doctor to whom they will entrust their eyes, and then the surgery date and recovery time.

While the decision making may be prolonged and tiring, one hopes that the end result will be worth the effort. But we do not know until we go through with it.

Much of life is like that – we do not know the result until we have gone through the process. We may wish to know the future, or be confident that everything will turn out as we assume it will, but the future is not so simple to determine.

In hindsight we may have the answers, but looking ahead we may need assistance to calculate where we are being led, and how God wants us to act and behave.

As Christians we believe in the Jewish search for a Messiah, but unlike our Jewish sisters and brothers we see Jesus as that Messiah, while Jewish people still await the Messiah. Our Muslim friends see Jesus as a religious leader, a prophet in the line of great Middle-Eastern prophets from the time of Abraham and Sarah to the present, but not a Messiah. Jews also see Jesus as a religious leader of note, just not the anticipated Messiah.

While we see Jesus in different ways, we share a religious faith struggle which includes never being sure if we have all of the answers.

The gospel story for today tells us of a John the Baptist, an important religious leader of the first century C.E. (the time of the Common Era). Some saw John as the Messiah. He was different in his demeanour and lifestyle, he had strict teachings, he was committed to God, and he brought a new understanding of the faith to people.

Now we have experienced people who are seen as Messianic-like characters – not just in religion but in sports, politics, community leadership, business, education. Some fulfil their promise; some flame out; some simply bring strong leadership and commitment but are only temporarily seen as special and uniquely outstanding. When it comes to the standard of “Messiah,” it is hard to live up to it.

Even earliest Christians were not sure at times that Jesus lived up to that standard himself.

You see, it takes more than good eyesight to read the stories of the faith, to clearly see the life around us, and to be ready to accept the great opportunities that come our way. There is something special about those who are open to accept and identify those special opportunities.

For some, that insight may rest with people who have a way to predict the future, who can see what needs to be done, and do it, even before events occur.

John Naisbitt and Patricia Aberdene, in the lead-up to the 21st Century, wrote a book entitled ***Megatrends*** that attempted to lay out what we could expect in the next (i.e. 21st) century. Their secret for their insights? They studied weekly newspapers across North America, especially in the United States, for they figured trends and new ideas revealed in small communities would eventually become trends across the land.

One blogger has suggested that the world is going to be shaken physically in the near future due to climate change and global warming, but people will be challenged even more spiritually and emotionally.

Simply put, people will be challenged in a way that they have never been challenged before. It is this challenging that will awaken them.

In a Study in the ***Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine*** reported by Psychopsychologist Rollin McCraty and his colleagues from the Institute of Heartmath in

Boulder, Colorado, it was reported that we all have an ability to predict the future – even if for only five seconds.

People were shown a series of images – some neutral (or boring), and some emotional (or provocative) in terms of what they showed. People were disinterested in the boring pictures and awakened and energized by the provocative pictures. But after a while they discovered that people would begin to react to the more provocative or emotional images a few seconds before they were shown them, even though the pattern of showing them was random. It was as if the individuals anticipated which picture was to be shown next, and both the heart and the brain worked together to react to the picture – through raised heartbeat, higher body temperature, and increased brain activity.

We know when something significant is happening even before it happens.

For me that is a helpful insight for religious people, and one we have lost in the evolution of our respective faiths.

Within the Christian protestant tradition, at any rate, our focus often is in making sure we do things the right way, not necessarily first and foremost being open to where God is leading us into the future.

We have set rituals and traditional liturgies and services that are important to expressing the faith, and at times we forget that the call into the future, a new reality, is where God is most present and alive for people of every generation.

In 12 days on January 22nd, a multi-faith service is planned for St. Patrick's Roman Catholic Church as part of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity celebrations and acknowledgments. This service will acknowledge the discrimination and torture of people of faith – Christians, Jews, Muslims and others – around the world in over 40 countries. Roger Nash and Imam Abdul are to be part of that service on Friday, January 22nd at 7:00 p.m. at St. Patrick's on Walford Rd.

Being part of the planning team, I received the draft of the service from Father Jim Hutton and replied: "The service looks fine, just as we discussed, but I assume there will be a blessing after the final hymn."

I clearly hit a nerve for within 15 minutes came the reply from Fr. Jim: "You are more Catholic than me – yes, I will make sure there is a closing blessing."

Singing hymns, offering prayers, receiving blessings are part of the essence of expressing the faith. I do not question or belittle that – in fact, I rejoice when those are done with care and insight. But ultimately, we are alive and open to God when we see new things happening around us to open up a future that will be different from pains and animosities of the past.

Those around John the Baptist knew he was a great religious leader, and some were not ready to accept that anyone else could be as good, never mind even stronger and more significant a leader, as John himself argued about Jesus.

Some early Christians preserved teachings (though not in our canon of the accepted Bible) that had an earthly Jesus proclaim to his followers: “Be better than I am.” Jesus argued he had the advantage of birth, training, community support, divine intervention. We ordinary humans can reach heights of service, insight, and faith as great as what he accomplished, even though we live without the advantages Jesus experienced, and so his encouragement to “be better than I am” carry a unique significance.

Jesus in his baptism experienced a great spiritual renewal and awakening, and further, received the blessing of God. Yet Jesus expressed the implications of that divine blessing most clearly when he taught his disciples that “those who are not against us are for us.”

In a charged environment of the first century, where religious truth was sought, and people assumed only one way could be the right way, the baptized Jesus, and later through his teaching, preaching, and healing, the mature Jesus lived that principle: “Those who are not against us are for us.” So may we – all of us – not get buried in pointing to our differences, or worrying about the uniqueness of our faith, but let us live as followers of God, Jehovah, Elohim, Allah, El Shaddai, the Almighty – and celebrate the fact that those who are not against us are for us.

No matter how clear our vision, such words of acceptance can provide one and all with great insights, and great opportunities for living out our faith in God’s world, and with God’s people, today.