



Sermons from Northwood United Church

“A Song Awakens: Hope”
Will Sparks November 29th, 2015

May the words of my mouth, the meditations of our hearts and the actions of our lives be acceptable in your sight O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen

Paul Valery said it well. "A poem's first line comes as a free gift of the gods. The second line we must make, "word by word", straining all our resources so that it harmonizes with the supernatural first, so that it rhymes."

What is true of poetry is also true of sermons. The first line- the germ of the sermon- comes as a free gift of God. Inspiration. Sometimes that gift is given with ease as the date approaches- that, for the preacher is a sign of God's mercy. Yet sometimes God makes us sweat for a while- a sign of God's weird sense of humour. Well, God was really yucking it up this time.

Our theme for this advent season is "A Song Awakens" playing with the metaphor of the good news of Jesus' birth as a song, sung by angels, sung by Mary, singing or perhaps rising in our hearts. And it wakes us up to the reality of God with us, but it also is a song that perhaps has been dormant within us and is, itself, waking up within us. This is the first Sunday of our journey towards the birth celebrations so I search for a first line to the song, a first faint note, the hook.

I tried a couple of first lines that crossed my desk, like: did you know that the density of the average Christmas cake is the same as the density of mahogany? That didn't go anywhere. Too heavy. Neither did the observation that less than four weeks from today it is estimated that 84 million cookies will be left out for Santa Claus. Nope. Trivia is inadequate.

But then I ran across two little pre-Christmas ads: Get inspired at Guildford Town Centre's Black Friday Frenzy, and "Christmas begins at Guildford Town Centre." Now I think I know what advertisers are perhaps accidentally getting at. Christmas has gone generic- no-name brand. Wrapped in yellow plastic so that you can't tell where it comes from. And Christmas has gone commercial, so that today, the dominant starting place for our seasonal observance is in flyers and at the mall.

But before we allow ourselves to get bent out of shape by generic, no-name brand commercial versions, just where does Christmas begin for you, and me, for people of faith who are followers of Jesus?

Well for me, it begins with a hunger, mine and God's. Within me and I believe within all human beings, is a hunger to be free, a hunger for life to have meaning and purpose, and a hunger for justice and peace, a hunger for relationship with others as an individual and within community that is true and genuine and healthy, vibrant and alive and creative. That hunger is, at its essence, a spiritual hunger. And I believe God is as hungry for relationship with us as we are for God. And the generic, commercial response to the Christmas season is a way of trying to capitalize on and feed in a very surfacey, material way, what is really a deep spiritual hunger.

One of the profound privileges of being a minister is that I am, on occasion, given the opportunity to be with people in the midst of really significant times in their lives. It is often a very humbling experience to walk with people through real, unvarnished life.

I remember visiting in the hospital once with a woman who had been through surgery, but was still very very sick. And she knew it. There were all kinds of medical protocols that I was supposed to follow in order to visit with her: gloves, gown, mask, the whole nine yards. And I went into the room to visit with this woman who had not been touched by unprotected human hands for days. It was my honour to journey with her through a very frightening land.

I went close to her bedrail, leaned down so I could see her face close to the bars, and we started to talk. She was a totally charming woman, who was going through a totally... not charming experience. She had many medical problems that were very serious, and for her and for her family there was fear and grief and confusion everywhere they looked. But it came clear to me as I looked into her eyes that at the core, there was a spiritual need- a hunger. She needed someone to reach through the veil of tubes and machines and procedures and struggles and pain, and simply hold her. I didn't know what to do, but by some crazy stroke of grace that appeared in my mind as a gift- I took her face in my gloved hands and said to her, "I am with you, the nurse here us with you- you are not alone in this." And she looked at me with a look of recognition, a look that came from the soul behind her eyes, and she said, "I know."

It is my belief that God has been trying to do that for us forever. God has tried reach through the bars and barriers that grow us around us, to hold our face in loving hands and tell us "I am with you- you are not alone in this." The prophets knew it and tried to tell us. And though Paul said we see dimly, and we can make out the message often only faintly, it has been there since the beginning of time and since the day we were born, a song of hope embedded in our hearts and in the universe.

And we who are followers of Jesus look at the birth of Jesus on the horizon as God's way of trying to feed that deepest of hungers within us. We see in Jesus a resounding attempt by God to reach through the veil of our human experience, cut through the cacophony of generic commercial noise, and hold us, whisper to us, tell us again, "look. You are not alone. You can hear me? I am here."

So today as we begin this journey again to the manger where the sounding joy is repeated, I offer you an invitation. I invite you to believe, to take on faith and trust, that, as Jeremiah put it, "I will fulfil my promise," and as Isaiah put it, "the light shines in the darkness." I invite you listen carefully for the voice within, and the voice in the midst of the world which whispers, "I am with you. You are not alone in this," as the first line in the poem of your life. And, having received it as a gift of God, having allowed it to reach through the veil of your own humanity and hold you and touch you and take up residence in you, I invite you to then strain all your resources, making all the other lines of your life harmonize with that supernatural first line, so that they may rhyme. Amen.