

Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.” For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

I had a very good experience of study last week in Vernon and I’m grateful that our church provides time and opportunity for me to explore new thinking, from many disciplines, that helps me grow as a spiritual leader. I had the most remarkable dream about communing in the Spirit world, manipulating energy in a way I’d only heard about. Sometime I’ll tell you about the vision that came from that dream about this place. At a fundraising event for the North Okanagan Hospice Society I witnessed my wife speak with an authority I’d never heard before which helped me to appreciate again why we commute. I had two very intimate conversations with friends who challenge me all the time about the nature of faith, issues of theology and culture, and their own experiences with Spirit which are significantly different than my own. And my reading involved two books.

The first was Malcolm Gladwell’s *The Tipping Point* in which he does a forensic study on epidemics. He examines social, cultural, fashion and viral epidemics to uncover why some trends take off, becoming discovered by the world, and why some trends die on the vine. Whether he was examining the return of hush puppies as a fashion trend, the spread of the AIDS virus, the success of Sesame Street to enhance children’s literacy or the launch of the American Revolution with Paul Revere’s ride warning that the British were coming, Gladwell explores the intricate relationship between the stickiness of a message, the originator of the message, the role of players in distributing the information, and the context in which the message is received. In today’s computer/internet/facebook world, we would say the tipping point is when something goes viral, when a message is read by millions all over the world. Tipping points can be created, according to Gladwell, when those who originate an idea harness these elements. Of course I was wondering about the communication strategy of our congregation – especially in light of the fact that three people came to our Unplug Christmas Madness Event on Friday night. It’s not designed for you, so don’t feel like you need to be there. I’m interested in the kinds of communication processes that will encourage those who want something different, to actually take it in.

The other book I began to read was Greta Vosper’s *With or without God*. Vosper is an ordained minister in the United Church of Canada who has a serious bone to pick with the church, the whole church, the whole Christian tradition as we typically understand it. Vosper believes that a new instruction is coming from somewhere other than Zion that the church will ignore at its peril. Her writing is confrontational. She knows she sits at the very margins of liberal Christian theology, which puts her in direct conflict with most every other Christian

denomination. She has been the object of controversy in our own United Church Observer magazine and yet she is undaunted in her challenge that the world around us knows something about the reality of “god” and is wondering why the church hasn’t discovered that the emperor is not wearing any clothes.

It begins with an analysis of paradigms. A paradigm is an assumption about the world; its your world view. It’s a way of looking at a particular problem, a particular story, a particular pattern. Some might think of a paradigm as a construct...a way of building reality. The world is flat...that would be an example of a paradigm. When we see the world as flat, we come to believe things about the nature of the sun’s appearance, and the arrival of night. We wonder what lies beyond the horizon, never daring to take our boats that far. Another paradigm might be that the sun revolves around the earth. All knowledge becomes based on seeing the world in this way. You get an idea of a paradigm.

Vosper believes that in all other disciplines of study – biology, chemistry, physics, mathematics, geography, anthropology, and the like – when new knowledge is learned that abolishes a particular world view, a paradigm, then that particular study lets go of the old knowledge. We know the world is not flat; we know the sun does not revolve around the earth. We no longer build our lives on those assumptions. Vosper’s biggest controversy is that even though the church has new information about God, it has a new theology, it perpetuates the same old paradigms, the same theologies that were created in the fourth century when Constantin looked at a sword, turned it upside down and saw the cross, and discovered a way to regulate people’s behaviour through morality, not physical violence. The cross became the new sword – getting people to do things through guilt and sin. Jesus, saviour of the world, Jesus, perfect sacrifice for my sins, might be two paradigms through which the church saw the world, and God’s moving action.

Vosper makes the point that we perpetuate these unhelpful, basically incorrect paradigms in every hymn of triumph and glory we sing, in the words of our prayers, in the actions of our liturgies. We are simply not telling the truth any longer. At least according to what I’m reading in her book.

Virgin Birth, Risen Corpse, Angry God – these are more paradigms through which the church explains who God is, what God is up to, and what we need to do, what promises we need to keep in order to get out of death, alive. And what we know is that critically thinking people are actively rejecting these notions because there is other, more compelling information and experience that offer a new construct...a new way of seeing reality. Some of you explored this thinking in the course you just finished with Dawn Burnell Powers.

This is powerful reading folks because in my view, Vosper takes seriously the teaching of the incarnation. God revealed in creation. God is not a source, a being beyond this place, pulling

strings and making grace happen. If anything, God is Spirit moving in relationships – relationships with self, others and the creation to make something bigger, more transcendent, more akin to re-creation. Perpetuating the old paradigms renders the church irrelevant and leaves frightened people seeking answers to life's questions in places that have no interest in helping them do that.

What does this mean for the church? What is the emerging role of the church as it seeks to walk with people who are seeking answers to life's big why questions? Much of what I've read from Vosper resonates inside of me....and I think our role is to admit that we don't have the answers that satisfy any longer. What we do have is each other. We offer to the world an intimate place where we can be fully who we are...whoever we are, wherever we are on a journey...with big questions or little. And we have this Jewish carpenter who claimed his own humanity and encouraged, his followers, those waifs and strays he picked up along the way, to do the same. Today, it's not right belief, it's not right practice, it's not strict adherence to a set of rules that sets us free. Today more than ever, we are called to unleash the powers of love and justice in the world, in partnership with anyone who will join with us.

The problem with a text like this morning is that it sets up a one right way if we're not careful. God's holy mountain was the set of Jewish laws that set the people apart. The rules made sense and they did contribute to the orderly conduct of disparate people trying to live together. With all nations following these rules, orderly conduct could be the result. And it has never happened. Nations still wage war upon nations; we watched it this week in the attacks on South Korea. We hear it in the rhetorical responses of nations protecting their economic interests. The so called superpower of the US is asking China to lean on North Korea. The whole power base is shifting and partly because everyone thinks their God is the right God.

What if Vosper is right? What if there is no Wizard of Oz God pulling levers and helping us all return to Kansas with one click of the heals on our red sequined slippers? What if the incarnation is what I'm imagining? What if each of us is the holy incarnate one, born of a woman isolated in pregnancy, called to set the prisoner free, heal the sick, feed the poor? What if we are the ones to arbitrate justice, to beat our swords into ploughshares, not because some law tells us to, but because we realize that when we kill at war, when we gain economic control over the poorest, when we dump our wastes into the bowels of the earth we are actually doing this to the incarnate one. If I'm the incarnate one, and you are the incarnate one, then surely our enemy is also the incarnate one. This is true individually, this is true collectively. This is true on a national and international scale.

There is no freedom until all are free. There is no peace until all live in peace. There is no justice until we all experience justice. The reality of the incarnation makes us the peace seekers....May hope abound as we respond to Advent's call to seeking peace. Amen.