

Exploring the Scriptures: December 30, 2012
On Stars and Surprises and Following

Luke 2:22-40
by Blair Odney

In his book, *Power Surge: Six Marks of Discipleship for a Changing Church*, US Presbyterian minister Michael Foss quotes the church development and baby boomer guru William Easum, who has followed the statistics of protestant churches in the US for years. Easum has often quoted the staggering statistics about church decline that we've been following here at LVUC for the past three years or so. Easum said "most mainline and established churches are dying because they only take care of their members. Three out of four will close over the next 25-30 years. Most mainline churches are already irrelevant to the needs of postmodern people."

That's a great way to start a conversation especially a week after Christmas, isn't it? Let me get more depressing with some more statistics. While 91% of US households own at least one bible and 80% of US adults believe the bible is the most influential book in human history only 38% of US adults read the bible in any given week. 96% believe in God; 93% believe in a virgin birth and yet 61% say that the Holy Spirit is not real. 39% believe Jesus did not have a physical resurrection. Orthodoxy is inconsistent, belief systems are all over the place.

And remember Dr. Doom of the United Church of Canada, David Ewart when he came to visit us nearly three years ago. If nothing changes, we will have no baptisms, weddings, confirmations, or children in Sunday School by 2025 – the denomination's 100th anniversary. And he added, if nothing changes, we will have 1/5th the congregations we had when we began in 1925.

Listen to what Foss writes: "There is a vacuum of ideas and strategies with which to respond to the growing disparity between the life and ministry of the congregation and the real lives of people in our society. The connection between the faith of the church and the life of ordinary people is strained to the breaking point. Churches are losing members in droves. All too many folks whose names still fill churches' membership rolls have long since slipped out the back door. The two most common reasons given: burnout and boredom."

Merry Christmas, said the Grinch.

While here at LVUC we have taken some bold steps to reverse some of these trends as they affect us, everyone in leadership – from the board, to the trustees, to the staff - agree on one thing; we have no idea whether any of this will stem the tide of decline that hit this congregation like most other mainline churches in the lower mainland.

People have left Canadian churches, people left LVUC for the same reasons: burnout – too few people to do the work. And boredom – our theological muscle has atrophied, our sermons are irrelevant, and our learning programs do not begin to get at the serious questions people are asking about purpose and meaning.

None of us in leadership here is even sure we should make the cross a design feature of the new building. That's not because we wonder whether the cross is still a faithful symbol of contemporary Christianity. It's because without a cross as a design feature right in the architecture, the building might be more attractive to any future buyers. We're still in a place of uncertainty about the future of this congregation in this community; try as we might to change things.

I bet you'd like me to stop now.

Burnout and boredom...interesting reasons for church decline! I find this to be an interesting mess in which to re-discover what ministry is, and what following this baby from Bethlehem really means. Burnout and Boredom. I wonder if that's what was going on for those wise men from the east, when, as the story goes, they saw a star they had never seen before in the night sky. I wonder if boredom and burnout were overtaking the shepherds in those fields keeping watch over their flocks, when the angel of the Lord showed up and the glory of the Lord shone all around them.

And Anna, the wise old woman who'd been hanging around the temple for decades after her husband died. In burnout and boredom, how did she see a mother and a father, bringing their first born son to the temple, as required by Jewish religious law? And Simeon; was he bored when after seeing Jesus, he tripped out on these parents: "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed." Can you imagine him looking right at Mary when he added "and a sword will pierce your own soul too?"

I'm noticing two things in all of this today. I'm noticing that if in fact the shepherds and the wise men were bored, something startled them out of their complacency. The story says it was angels with a story about a baby, and a star that compelled a very long journey into dangerous territory. What I know is that when we're bored or complacent, it takes a stick of dynamite to move us. I think a multitude of angels might make me sit up and take notice. I think if I was an astronomer, a supernova star, appearing one night when it wasn't there the night before might move me to ask some hard questions.

Do you remember that it wasn't until Dawn Burnell-Powers and David Ewart brought their United Church doomsday scenario to our attention three years ago, that we got serious about making real changes in ministry here at LVUC?

The second thing I'm noticing is not Simeon and Anna's boredom. I don't think they were bored at all. I think these two wise and gentle seniors had a deep spiritual practice that prepared them to see what they saw in the infant Jesus. Highly skilled in the practice of prayer, highly practiced in the discipline of scripture, highly dedicated to the life and work of the temple, Anna and Simeon's spiritual practice led them to behold the mystery of new light in a dark world.

I have a very familiar conversation with people outside the church pretty regularly; people who are rightly suspicious of organized religion serving any useful purpose in the welfare of communities. It's a conversation about beliefs – belief in an actual God, belief in any of the historicity of the biblical stories, belief in the infallible word of the bible. I always ask them to describe the kind of God they don't believe in. Invariably they talk about a God I don't believe in either, and we end up talking theology. I will ask what troubles them about the stories. Invariably they talk about the virgin birth, the miraculous feeding of the 5000, the silly evidence that the earth was made in 6 days. I will then wonder outloud with them the purpose of myth in the absence of science and journalism and history. And when they challenge the bible's accuracy and infallibility, I will ask quite purposefully what they know of the bible, where it came from, how it was recorded, how it was documented.

I usually say what I want to say this morning. I don't give a whit what you believe about any of this. I don't care whether you believe in a virgin birth, that Jesus died for your sins, or that women should wear hats in church. What matters to me is how you practice what this baby came to represent, what he modeled. How do your beliefs call you to be? What do your beliefs lead you to do? And how do you strengthen your practice so that you are not blown off course by winds of change and so that you can recognize Christ in our midst, should he arrive in a baby carriage, pushing a shopping cart, or wearing the clothes of a sex trade worker.

Jesus did not commission his followers to go and make members of the church. He sent his followers to make disciples. And for the next few weeks, we are going to explore what following this baby who has changed our lives actually means. Foss believes there are six marks of a disciple, six characteristics, six practices that focus our following, like the magi from the East. Want to hear what those marks are?

Foss believes those who follow Jesus, those who want to be Christ alive in the community undertake six practices: we pray daily; we worship weekly; we regularly read and study the scriptures; we make spiritual friendships; we serve the world; we give generously of our financial resources. Six marks that help focus our path as Christians - not just some of us, all of us. Friends as followers of this tiny infant, we are all involved in the mission and ministry of Christ's community, with all of who we are and what we bring.

Today we enter our season of discipleship and in the coming weeks, Christina and I will unpack these marks of discipleship more fully so that we experience those moments that take our breath away, like a baby in a stable, like a star shining in the east, like an angel on a hillside, can have a practiced response.

It is not our beliefs that will sustain Christ's church. It is the strength our Christian spiritual practice. Amen.