
Trust Love – St. Andrew's-Wesley United Church

December 29, 2019

Rev. Dan Chambers

Scripture Reading:

I John 4:18

Season of Christmas

Trust Love



We humans long for connection. I think that's fair to say. Of course, this longing is exhibited in different ways by different

people in different places at different times, but I think we can detect a pattern.

When we're meeting a person for the first time, it can be amusing how, almost instinctually, we rapidly seek a line of connection. When Colleen was in Grade 10 and we lived in Wales for the better part of a year, a high school student asked where she was from. She said, "Canada."

"Oh," he replied with interest; "What part?"

"Vancouver," she said, "it's on the West Coast."

The student's eyes widened and he asked, in all innocence, "Vancouver? Do you know Brian?"

We meet someone and we naturally look for common ground, a bridge from which a conversation can start; a way of establishing some degree of trust and relationship, even if momentary.

And so we ask where a person is from, or we listen to their interests or their work or the school they attended or where they've travelled and we try to find a point of connection even if highly tenuous,

"Oh, I was there once." Or

"I have relatives from that part of England," or

"I have a friend who went to that school..."

We tend to seek similar connections with ancient manuscripts, like the Bible. We open this dusty document that began as an oral tradition in a different part of the world in a very different

time and wonder, “What in God’s name does this have to do with my life now?” If we read a page or two, that question might only solidify.

But I think that’s what makes the Bible a fascinating collection of books covering a vast thousand year stretch of time: on the one hand, their reality and worldview is incredibly different from ours — we who live in a world where ghost galaxies and black holes, where social media connects and divides, where most people read, most understand the world is round, most know a little something about bacteria and viruses and believe handwashing is a good thing and vaccines save lives.

On the other hand, the human heart is not so different. We love, struggle, are hurt; we search for beauty and goodness and justice. We long for the More. And in that way we can read these ancient stories and find ourselves there.

Like Mary and Joseph, the shepherds and wise ones, we live in dangerous times. Political turmoil, climate change, precarious economic conditions pepper daily headlines.

Some of you may remember Dr. Stephen Toope, a former President of UBC who is now the Vice-Chancellor at Cambridge (unlike a vice-principal in a school or a vice-president in the US, the *Vice-Chancellor* actually has authority. The Chancellor is the figurehead, the Vice-Chancellor is the one who does all the work, has the most authority, and is responsible for the financial and administrative well-being of the university, and graduates the students).

Some of you also may know that Dr. Toope is the nephew of the

Rev. Tom Miles, our own Minister Emeritus. It's because of this connection that Janet and I enjoyed meeting Dr. Toope in his office in Cambridge.



Because it's directly relevant for our considerations today, and because these observations are entirely appropriate as we consider the year of 2019 and look toward 2020, allow me to quote at some length a speech he gave at Cambridge last March addressing the topic, "Can Universities Foster Change?"

— His answer is yes, they have, they can, and they must.

He said, "We live in what I call, borrowing from WH Auden, an 'age of anxiety'.

A time when the world faces challenges of unprecedented complexity.





As the population expands to the point where the planet's resources simply cannot cope, many regions of the world lack the basic necessities of life.

Just last year [2018] we saw Cape Town come perilously close to being the first major city in the world to run out of water.

In other parts of the world, [last] January saw unprecedented extreme heat in Australia, while in the United States, temperatures plummeted to levels below those in Antarctica.

Floods and droughts, fires and famines.

It can seem like the end of days.

He continues...

We are seeing war, hunger and financial disaster leading to mass migration of refugees on a scale unseen since World War Two.

Mass migration follows conflict and famine, and we will undoubtedly see a rise in the number of so-called 'environmental migrants', or, more accurately perhaps, 'climate refugees', as the world's weather patterns become increasingly unstable and the sea-levels rise.

Migrants leave their homes in fear, and those in safer places fear migrants.

Fear feeds itself, and in what becomes a self-perpetuating cycle, political extremism, religious fundamentalism and intolerance abound.

Ignorance, mistrust, and cultural isolation persist, and despite a world more connected than ever before, we are seeing it fracture.

The urgency is obvious to us all” he says, “So the world needs critical thinking more than ever before.”

Because Stephen is a faithful Anglican who has given sermons on occasion, including at St. Andrew’s Wesley, I think he’d also say that the world needs the love and wisdom of God more than ever before, and a people shaped by that wisdom and love.

In fearful and troubling times, trust gets locked in the backroom by forces that are eager to prey on fear to increase their own power. When you find a way to manipulate people by prying open their dungeon of nightmares, divisions are drawn, territories defined and defended, walls erected, guns loaded. When people operate from fear, someone always gets sacrificed as a scapegoat, and then we all lose.



Janet and I heard the MP for Cambridge speak at the University Chapel in October. He has heard from several non-British born people of darker complexion that, with Brexit, racist remarks have risen. In a pub, or while waiting for a bus, they have heard the biting question, “What? Are *you* still here?”

And we all lose.

The irony is that in times of fear, our faith demands we go beyond fear. When darkened skies foretell troubled times, the angel appears and says, “Fear not!”

Fear not. As if we can control fear by putting it on a leash. Yet again and again and again the Bible, the angel, Jesus speak that reverberating message, “Do not be afraid...”

Even though there is much to fear in our troubled world.

Bad things can happen and do – this was true in first century Palestine at least as much as it is true now. We are not always safe. And yet, and yet...fear not. I am with you. I go before you always.



There is a remedy for fear. It's not foolproof, but it seems to be the only way, which is what this birth is all about, this child born unto us who changes everything. As impossible and improbable and over simplistic as it sounds, the remedy for fear is love; love and it's entourage of empathy, compassion, understanding, kindness, vulnerability, and hospitality.

It's completely counter-intuitive, but when there's much to fear and the natural response is to clench a fist, our move, as

Christians, is to unclench, to risk being open and vulnerable. Crazy as it seems, that's the move of faith.

Love and its close friends rely on one thing: trust. Trust is the umbilical cord for love. And trust in an age of anxiety is easily severed and hard to come by.

When frozen by fear, we cannot trust; and when we lose an ability to trust, the lamplight of love grows dim.



Look hard in society, and maybe you'll still find an occasional nativity scene, or images of Mary and child, or when we sing carols about the babe in the manger we're reminded that at the heart of Christmas is a radical trust. It's as if the songs and images put the question to us, "How can we trust God the way a child trusts a loving, caring mother?"

"Faith," Mark Oakley said, "is the sense that, ultimately, Reality is trustworthy." Our life may be coming apart at the seams; we may be hit with a radically unfair dose of hardship and loss. And maybe some have let you down: the government, your church, your family, partner, friends... Yet into that tangled web

the angels and prophets and Jesus still say, “Don’t be afraid.”
Ultimately, despite all the facts, Reality is still trustworthy.

How else might we avoid bitterness, resentment, and a sour heart?

Janet and I have several good friends who are older than we are. They have been our mentors for many years and now they mentor us in the ways of aging.

One mentor in particular has always been an encouraging friend and substantial advisor, but it seems as he has aged, has lost colleagues and dear friends, he’s decided to set aside all hesitation to express love. Even though the male European culture tends to be more reserved, less obvious, more oblique in expressions of love, care, tenderness, he’s chosen to pull out all the stops. Never a visit goes by without him saying, in one of several different ways, “I love you. You both are precious to us.”

We all need mentors or friends who remind us about our best selves.



Rabbi Birnham is a dear friend of mine. Years ago, when I served St. David’s, he served the synagogue across the street, Har El, “the mountain”. One day as I was driving to the church

he was walking to the synagogue. It must have been winter, as he was wearing a long, black coat and a scarf wrapped around his neck. I beeped the horn to wave, he saw me, smiled and blew me a kiss. Right there in public. With traffic stopped at the light one direction and driving by the other direction, he blew me a big kiss, and it must have landed because I laughed out loud.

Who does that? Who stands on the street corner and blows a kiss to a guy in a car?

The Rabbi does. Free from fear, “who cares what anyone thinks?”, he acted from a place of playful spontaneity, and it was beautiful; I felt as if a wind of freedom blew through me.

It’s the kind of trust that invites a free spontaneity, and that freedom makes room for love. Embodied love.

Granted, he was not standing with a line of protestors in Hong Kong, or on trial for treason in Putin’s Russia or under the foot of a policeman in Uganda arresting him for homosexuality. But we start where we are. It’s hard enough to trust even when the political climate is relatively safe, even when the police are usually on the side of justice, even when we can walk out of our front door and not have to worry, I hope, about being shot, mugged or raped. And yet...it’s still hard to go past our restraining inhibitions, our self-image, our hesitation to disturb the harmony of social expectations. Trust is needed.

Love is in demand these days. And it is contagious. Going beyond fear helps others move with confidence and ease. Trusting love helps others be free. In this “age of anxiety,” the words “Do not be afraid” are radical and challenging. And once

again we find ourselves connected to, and challenged by, our stories of faith.



Fear not. Start where you are. Start now. This Christmas; this New Year, in order to embody love, we first need to trust love.

By the grace of God, may it be so.