

“Out of love for the truth and from the desire to elucidate it ...”

October 29, 2017

Scripture Lesson: 1 Kings 5: 1-5; 8: 1-13

Prayer of Illumination:

God of Life, may the words of my mouth,
and the meditations of all our minds and hearts,
lead us to deeper understanding of you,
and the love you call us to live. Amen.

I wonder if they sang “Holy, Holy, Holy” when they dedicated the temple! There is a sense to the reading of the story of the grandeur and glory of God’s presence - complete with the wingspan of the seraphim and cherubin. Today our story speaks of a important time in the Hebrew narrative. The Long Term Planning Committee of the Israelite nation has long had the idea of building a temple - a house where God will dwell forever and ever ...

Today, our story speaks of a turning point in the Hebrew Narrative. As I read this story, filled with expectation and with a sense of completion and triumph, of arrival, there is a note of sadness to hearing it because we know how the story unfolds beyond this. In years to come, the temple is destroyed, they are sent off into exile, etc - and a faith that was dependent on the temple being the dwelling place of God - struggles to survive its destruction.

It is hard to hear this excitement and joy - knowing what is to come - and yet the flaws in the theology of the temple construction are conveyed in the final verses of the reading.

The reading ends with speaking of God’s presence being in the dark cloud. The image of the cloud has been used all along to speak of the majesty and unknown sense of the Holy. Solomon may be pleased that he has built the house for God - but it does not contain all of God.

Solomon may or may not have learned - like many have learned before and since - that as soon as humanity tries to define and therefore limit God, we limit or lessen our sense of the presence or power of the Holy.

This is an interesting lesson to hear today because this is Reformation Sunday. On October 31, 1517 - 500 years ago on Tuesday - an unknown monk in Wittenberg, Germany - Martin Luther - nailed to the door of the church in Wittenberg his 95 thesis; 95 issues that he had with the theology and practice of the church. Most of the 95 have to do with the practice of selling indulgences - a payment to ensure a place in heaven. The

other major theme in the thesis is the role of the priest.

He begins his declaration with the words, “Out of love for the truth and from desire to elucidate it, the Reverend Father Martin Luther, Master of Arts and Sacred Theology, and ordinary lecturer therein at Wittenberg, intends to defend the following statements and to dispute on them in that place. Therefore he asks that those who cannot be present and dispute with him orally shall do so in their absence by letter. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.”

This act launched what is known as the Protestant Reformation - an important time in church history as the tree of the Christian Church branched off in a new direction. While we might lament the disunity marked by competition and self-righteousness of various branches of the church, we do recognize that the Reformation offered a path for difference of thought and practice.

There were other leaders in the Reformation. One of my favourites is Ulrich Zwingli - a Swiss theologian who contributed a reformed understanding of the sacrament of communion. He advocated for the sacrament to be seen as symbolic - the bread and wine are bread and wine and do not become the actual body and blood of Christ.

The Reformation carried into other parts of the Christian church and John Wesley was a leader of it in England. His teachings became the basis of Methodism; Methodist churches in Canada became part of the United Church of Canada. John Wesley had a brother Charles who communicated the reformed theology through writing many hymns - including Love Divine that we sang earlier.

Two of the main principles of the Reformation were the authority of Scripture and the priesthood of all believers. The authority of Scripture was a reset from the increasing authority given to the pope. Scripture was to be taken seriously - but not necessarily literally. John Wesley developed a quadrilateral that spoke of how scripture, reason, experience and tradition were each weighed in discerning truth.

The priesthood of all believers was a major shift in understanding of humanity's relationship to God. The relationship was direct. A priest was not needed as an intermediary; God's grace and forgiveness did not need go through a priest, but was accessible by all. It is this conviction that means that it is only Ruth, Rebekah and Luke get to call me father. The understanding of ministry and leadership continue to evolve. Within the United Church there is currently a church wide vote - remit - going on about our understanding of ministry - particularly our various categories of ministry that have emerged and evolved relate to each other.

“Out of love for the truth and from desire to elucidate it ...” That motivation and goal of Martin Luther continues to be the foundation of the reformed tradition that continues to evolve and emerge. The reformation has taken many paths and so there are many denominations within the reformed movement.

While there haven't been as many theologians enter the Reformation Hall of Fame in the past couple of centuries, the work of reformation has continued through many voices - scholars, pastors, and wise voices asking questions.

While we may associate wisdom with Solomon, the story we have heard today reminds that God will not dwell in the same place for ever and ever. Our understanding of God evolves and changes. When humanity thinks that it understands or controls God than all we have done is created an idol. Not all idols are bronze statues, they can also be words and concepts and doctrines. And in spite of us, the Holy finds new ways of being known.

There are a number of church historians and theologians who have observed that the Christian church and even before that - the people of God have gone through a major shift, a major re-positioning about every 500 years. Martin Luther initiated the last one - 500 years ago.

Are we on the edge of something new? The last 500 years have seen changes in the life of the church - but also incredible shifts in our understanding of the universe. I had a conversation with someone the other day who so succinctly captured for me the need for a reformation in how we understand the Holy. This person said, “I just can't get into an old man in the sky telling us “Don't do that.”

I have thought for awhile that perhaps the biggest challenge for humanity at this point in history is to have our understanding of God, the Holy evolve and grow. Some of the language and images of the past have become such idols, so non-compelling that many have moved beyond them - but had no help in a new imagination of how we understand the Holy. As we live in an interfaith context, we have to move beyond the limits of believing that the God of my church is better than the God of your temple, or the God of your mosque or the God of your cathedral . . .

Yesterday, I saw on Face Book a quote by Bishop John Spong - a 20th and 21st century reformer who said, “God is not Christian. God is not a Jew, Muslim, Hindu or Buddhist. I honor my tradition. I walk through my tradition. But I don't believe my tradition defines God. It only points be to God.

Last spring, we had a faith conversation after church about the controversy that Greta

Vosper has generated within The United Church of Canada. She is the minister from Scarborough who has said that she is an atheist. While she is using that term in a technical sense of not believing in one understanding of God, the common understanding of the word is to believe in no God.

As a follow up to that conversation, we will be having another faith conversation about the different theological understandings of God. One of the those understandings is panentheism - which is an understanding that the divine pervades and interpenetrates every part of the universe and also extends beyond time and space. The Holy is not so much seen as a being, but as an energy, a force.

Last weekend I learned that Ken Robinson has recently written an extended essay - maybe even what we call a book on panentheism. I look forward to reading it. It just goes to show - How did that song go Ken - "I count if I am ninety"

"Out of love for the truth and from desire to elucidate it ..." We give thanks that we are part of tradition that is reforming and renewing and that has the ability to not be limited by creeds and dogmas which have given life in the past - but which may have faded in their relevance. We pray that we will continue to love the quest for truth and have the courage to listen, to think, to experience, and to be open to what the Spirit is empowering us and calling us to be.

We don't know if Holy, Holy, Holy was sung at the opening of the temple, but in hindsight I wonder what would have happened if Solomon had trusted that god is not a building, but a people. As our mission moves forward, may we always remember that the church is a people. Let's see and imagine where the Spirit will lead for the next 500 years. Amen.