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A CELEBRATION OF GOD'S PRESENCE:
PREACHING IN EXTRAORDINARY TIMES

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ABSTRACT

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A Celebration of God's Presence: Preaching in Extraordinary Times

In times of extraordinary challenge, preaching that celebrates God's presence can fill listeners with courage, conviction, and hope to face the monumental. When preaching celebrates God's presence, listeners understand that they do not tackle their challenges alone, whether they are navigating congregational change or climate change. This project follows one preacher's growth in learning to lift up the theological claims of scripture. Written from the within the United Church of Canada, it is intended for preachers who find themselves tongue-tied trying to name grace and articulate the gospel. Here is a rediscovery of the language and poetry of Christian theology, an appreciation of the emotional and existential resonance of scripture and a hearty embrace of the tension between the claims of scripture and current reality. This project is for those preachers who want to face the monumental in their preaching with a monumental proclamation of hope.

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Surprised by Joy – Introduction

It was more than thirty years ago, but I can still recall the feeling, a joy that I could literally feel flowing, an energy and warmth in my veins. That particular Sunday morning was an “intergenerational” service at the church where I grew up which meant no Sunday School, I would have to listen to the sermon. I sat grudgingly in the pew, prepared to spend ten minutes daydreaming, but then came the unexpected. It has been three decades but I can still recall what felt like a sudden collision between my sense of my reality and its challenges, and the preacher’s proclamation. My struggles felt deep to me, even at ten or twelve years old, but all of a sudden I was confronted with what was deeper, with a source of courage, and a conviction I could hold on to, and a hope which felt intuitively resonant. When the ten minutes or so of preaching was up I was convinced: I could “bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, endure all things” (1 Cor 13:7), because the preacher’s words had confronted and challenged me – the preacher’s words had reminded me – of God’s abiding presence and power in my life. I had a new sense of courage, conviction, and hope to persevere through struggle and to meet my challenges.

When it was my turn, then, to mount the steps and stand in the pulpit, I was especially aware of the potential and power of preaching. To think: my words might facilitate a similar encounter between my listeners and the Divine. I, too, could help someone to “bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, endure all things” (1 Cor 13:7) through the clear articulation of the theological claims of scripture. I wanted to preach in such a way that my listeners might find themselves filled with the same kinds of feelings I had once experienced, the joy, the courage, the conviction, and the hope I felt from a palpable experience of God’s presence. I was given permission to believe that I could meet the challenges of living by a preacher with a clear

proclamation and I *so* wanted to be that herald of good news. But instead I stood tongue-tied, a preacher without a proclamation.

The Leadership of Proclamation

Preaching is a verb; its grammar betrays an inherent activity. Preaching is impactful and performative, it has the capacity to *do* a thing, to cause a thing *to happen*. Preaching has the power to cause feeling, it encourages perspective, informs insight, and prompts action.

“Preaching transforms identity, converts in the truest sense of the word, by rewriting our stories in a God-with-us story – beginning, Presence, and end,” writes David Buttrick in *Homiletic: Moves and Structures*.¹ Preaching helps “people experience the assurance of grace in God,” writes Frank A. Thomas in *They Like to Never Quit Praisin’ God: The Role of Celebration in Preaching*.² Preaching communicates, strengthens, seeks, finds, cries out, transforms, converts, proclaims, and allows people to experience in their hearts and minds the assurance of God’s grace, the empowering and comforting presence of that “Holy Mystery that is Wholly Love,” as the United Church of Canada calls the Divine Spirit in our latest statement of faith.³

I had experienced the power of a preacher’s clear proclamation of the theological claims of scripture. I knew what it was to be filled with a sense of courage, hope, and compassion, but I did not know how to consistently preach to the same end. I remember the feedback I received from my first professor of preaching of my in-class sermon: “distinctly lacking in grace.” My goal in joining this program in preaching was simple: to learn how to talk about God (Creator, Spirit, Source of Life, Holy Mystery, Father and Mother of us all) in an authentic and resonant

¹ David Buttrick, *Homiletic: Moves and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 17.

² Frank A. Thomas, *They Like to Never Quit Praisin’ God: The Role of Celebration in Preaching* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2013), 18.

³ United Church of Canada, *A Song of Faith: A Statement of Faith of the United Church of Canada* (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 2007).

and empowering way in my sermons, by leaning on the witness of the theological claims of scripture. I wanted to learn how to leave my listeners with a sense of courage and conviction and hope through an encounter with the God revealed to us in scripture.

The stakes felt (and still feel) high. The members of my congregation are up against monumental challenges – all of us are. Members of the congregation tell me that when they are out with friends they talk about income inequality growing worse; they tell me they are concerned about issues like climate change, mental health, and the world growing more insular; they tell me they worry about loneliness and finding meaning in life.⁴ All of us struggle with real crises and big decisions, with the regular and pressing responsibilities and surprises of adult life but also at this particular juncture in human history, with deep challenges to which we must respond as members of the human family. We are living in extraordinary times.

“But isn’t every age extraordinary?” you might be thinking. I would argue that ours is more extraordinary still. For example, no humans before us have had to face the kind of exponential technological advances that we have – even the development of artificial intelligence – and the subsequent impacts this will have on issues of employment, human identity, how and what we think, privacy, and how we make meaning. In an essay written for *The Atlantic* magazine, Henry A. Kissinger, Eric Schmidt and Daniel Huttenlocher write that, “The challenge of absorbing this new technology into the values and practices of the existing culture has no precedent.”⁵ More monumental still (and terrifying even to think about): the challenge of adapting to human-induced climate change. No humans before us have had to face the imminent extinction of life on this planet as the direct result of their own actions, inaction, and willful

⁴ Congregational Survey, *Worship Matters – What’s on Peoples’ Minds?*, October, 2019.

⁵ Henry A. Kissinger, Eric Schmidt and Daniel Huttenlocher, “The Metamorphosis,” *The Atlantic*, August 2019, accessed December 11, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/08/henry-kissinger-the-metamorphosis-ai/592771/>.

ignorance, but we do. In his remarks delivered at the opening ceremonies of the 2019 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP25 in Madrid), United Nations Secretary-General, António Guterres, noted that “three major reports from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change – on land, on the oceans and cryosphere, and on the 1.5 degree Celsius climate goal – each confirm that we are knowingly destroying the very support systems keeping us alive.”⁶ Guterres continued: “by the end of the coming decade we will be on one of two paths. One is the path of surrender, where we have sleepwalked past the point of no return, jeopardizing the health and safety of everyone on this planet.... The other option is the path of hope. A path of resolve, of sustainable solutions.”⁷ And there are other global challenges that continue to fester, to which we humans living in the early decades of the 21st century must also respond: a growing economic disparity between rich and poor worldwide, persistent racism and sexism, irreconcilable partisan political differences, a global refugee crisis. In the face of such monumental challenges, preachers have a unique and privileged opportunity: to proclaim the presence of the God we meet in scripture, and to impact listeners to tackle the pressing and monumental from a place of courage, conviction, and hope.

My thesis takes for granted that preaching is leadership. In his book, *When God Speaks Through You: How Faith Convictions Shape Preaching and Mission*, Craig A. Satterlee explores the leadership of proclamation. “Preaching is like yeast,” Satterlee writes, “it has power which may appear insignificant but has tremendous effect.”⁸ I wondered how I could unleash this

⁶ António Guterres, “Secretary-General’s Remarks at Opening Ceremony of UN Climate Change Conference COP25.” (Speech, Madrid, Spain, December 2, 2019), United Nations Secretary-General, accessed December 11, 2019, <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2019-12-02/secretary-generals-remarks-opening-ceremony-of-un-climate-change-conference-cop25-delivered>.

⁷ Guterres, *ibid.*

⁸ Craig A. Satterlee, *When God Speaks Through You: How Faith Convictions Shape Preaching and Mission* (Herndon, Virginia: The Alban Institute, 2008), 28.

power in my own preaching to help my listeners navigate extraordinary times and challenges. Satterlee maintains that the way in which we talk about God can be a positive force for change, “preaching disrupts life to create a space in which the Holy Spirit can work, a space in which the community can rethink, revisit priorities, or receive.”⁹ I wondered if preaching with a clear, theological and resonant proclamation, could lead individuals to seek personal and political change and even have an impact on global challenges. Satterlee explains that, “rather than teaching people what they need to do, the church proclaims what God is doing and will do, inviting people to freely join in God’s work in ways they find exciting.”¹⁰ Preaching has historically been a force for change and good in extraordinary times (as it was during the civil rights movement in the United States, for example).¹¹ “[Preaching] names social wrongs and points to ways of addressing them. [Preaching] gives voices to the voiceless and brings their concern into the public square. [Preaching] lifts up the needs of otherwise overlooked members of society, and calls society to respond to them,”¹² Satterlee writes. Preaching can offer an emboldening and empowering leadership in extraordinary times. In *Preaching at the Crossroads: How the World - And Our Preaching - Is Changing*, David J. Lose writes that, preaching “is a matter of hearing the claims and confessions of scripture and making them again in our day and age so they can address and affect our hearers with the good news of what God has done and is still doing for us and all the world in and through Jesus Christ.”¹³ It follows then, that sharing the theological claims of scripture, talking about God in a confessional, and

⁹ Satterlee, 63.

¹⁰ Satterlee, 146.

¹¹ Angela Denise Dillard. *Faith in the City: Preaching Radical Social Change in Detroit* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007).

¹² Satterlee, 113.

¹³ David J. Lose, *Preaching at the Crossroads: How the World - And Our Preaching - Is Changing* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 26.

resonant way, can give listeners the courage, conviction, and hope they need to work for positive change in the context of extraordinary times.

Preaching without a Proclamation

And yet, many leaders in my denomination (the United Church of Canada) struggle to articulate their theological convictions. In a paper written for the College of Preachers, (now retired) United Church minister, Doug Norris, reviewed a sample of sermons from preachers within the United Church of Canada. He found that while “most sermons named God, [they] were frequently almost entirely taken up with the human action or perspective and human efforts to achieve wellness.”¹⁴ Norris explains: “Much of the preaching reviewed faithfully started from the text, but then simply used it as a departure point into a related topic or wandered through the various aspects of the text (exposition) without declaring, in some simple way, the basic messages of Presence, Call, Redemption, Kingdom, etc. Stories, rather than The Story.”¹⁵

The United Church of Canada has what some would describe as a tenuous and nebulous relationship with the doctrine and theology. Members and ministers are constantly reviewing what we mean by the word, “God,” and the language that is best for articulating our beliefs. We affirm the imperative of every new generation to articulate their faith. The Preamble to our most recent confession of faith, the 2006 document called a “Song of Faith,” while stating that, “[t]he church’s faith is grounded in truth that is timeless,” maintains that “[t]hese truths, however, must be embraced anew by Christians of each generation and stated ‘in terms of the thoughts of their own age and with the emphasis their age needs’ (Statement of Faith, 1940).”¹⁶ To question and

¹⁴ Doug Norris, “Questions for our Answers: Theology, Identity, and Preaching in the United Church of Canada,” (paper presented at the annual meeting of the College of Preachers, National Cathedral Washington DC, May 30, 2000), 6.

¹⁵ Norris, 6.

¹⁶ United Church of Canada, *A Song of Faith: A Statement of Faith of the United Church of Canada* (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 2007).

to revisit the basis of our faith is central to United Church DNA, so central, in fact, that some members' curiosity and questioning (8% and counting) has encouraged a philosophical move *beyond* belief in God.¹⁷ Rev. Gretta Vosper is an openly atheist minister serving in a United Church in Toronto whose congregation has embraced post-theism. "God is not necessary for living a life of love," Vosper says, in fact, she maintains: "I believe God is getting in the way of our ability to live a life of love *well*, in particular as a church."¹⁸ In an article written for *Broadview*, our denomination's national magazine, journalist Mike Milne quotes Rev. Bill Steadman: "Lots of people [in the United Church of Canada], I think, express what we traditionally call an agnostic viewpoint, which is, 'I'm not sure I have all the answers about this.' Well, is that heresy or honesty?" he asks.¹⁹

"It has not been the trend of the United Church to claim that...a sharply defined set of beliefs is necessary," Norris explains in his paper.²⁰ Norris quotes Dr. James Christie, Professor of Whole World Ecumenism and Dialogue Theology at the University of Winnipeg, who describes the United Church of Canada as "not concerned so much with having a theology as with doing theology,"²¹ a noble endeavour, in good keeping with the counsel to Christians found in the Book of James that we be (first and foremost) "doers of the word" (1:22). The trouble with only *doing* theology is that when it comes time to articulate *why* we do what we do – the motivation that compels our action – we do not know what to say. But the United Church of Canada's reluctance and reticence to talk about theology is more nuanced still. Norris explains

¹⁷ Mike Milne, "Unsuitable," *The United Church Observer*, November, 2016, accessed March 7, 2020, <https://broadview.org/how-atheist-minister-gretta-vosper-tested-the-limits-of-united-church-tolerance/>.

¹⁸ *Observer* Staff, "Beyond Belief," *The United Church Observer*, October 31, 2013, accessed March 1, 2020, <https://broadview.org/ministers-lose-their-religion-but-not-all-of-them-leave/>.

¹⁹ Mike Milne, "How to deal with clergy who no longer believe in God," *Broadview*, November 8, 2010, accessed February 29, 2020, <https://broadview.org/confronting-the-unbelievers/>.

²⁰ Norris, 2.

²¹ Norris, 2.

that from the denomination's inception our theology has always been conceived of as provisional. We are necessarily reluctant to proclaim theology as it comes to us in scripture and tradition (our conviction of what God has done and is doing) because we believe that our understanding of it will necessarily shift and change. Leaders in the United Church of Canada understand that all our proclamations are tempered with the disclaimer, that "this is all the truth we have for now."²² "This conviction is a foundational 'stone' in the 'construction' of United Church identity to the extent even that candidates for the ministry [are] not required to 'subscribe' to the 20 Articles of the Basis of Union, [the founding doctrine of the United Church of Canada], but to give their candidacy committee the evidence [only] that they found themselves 'in essential agreement' with the statement."²³ In the United Church of Canada, we approach the theological claims of scripture hesitantly, tentatively, believing that "to posit doctrines with absolute authority is unwise and cocky given our changing knowledge and ongoing experience,"²⁴ Norris writes, summing up the mentality of many of our leaders. Perhaps it is because we are the product of the union of three different denominations (the Methodist, Congregational, and two-thirds of the Presbyterian Churches in Canada) that we have imprinted in our denominational DNA a kind of humility and deference when it comes to proclamation, a reluctance to make bold claims lest it rock the boat and threaten to topple us, an unwillingness to say anything too definitive, recognizing that a commitment to unity and compromise were the original keys to our denominational thriving.

In an article written for *Broadview*, Alison Brooks-Starks, a candidate for ordained ministry in the United Church of Canada, records her own challenges with claiming, naming, and

²² Norris, 2.

²³ Norris, 2.

²⁴ Norris, 2.

proclaiming her faith. As a candidate for ordered ministry she knows that during commissioning for ordination she will be asked whether she believes in God (expressed in the metaphorical language of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), and whether she commits herself anew to God, as well as whether she is in “essential agreement” with the Basis of Union, the founding doctrine and the Articles of Faith of the United Church of Canada. But for Brooks-Starks this brings anything but clarity. She writes that, “‘essential agreement’ is not defined anywhere in the [United Church of Canada’s] Manual, which contains both the church’s Basis of Union and its bylaws, and tradition holds that [this] means clergy do not need a literal adherence.”²⁵ A proposal was actually brought forward at the 43rd General Council (the once-every-three-years denominational meeting of the national church) to change the terms used in our ordination vows. The proposal said the current phrasing “creates a crisis of conscience for many candidates.”²⁶ Brooks-Starks explains: “For me, ‘crisis’ accurately describes how the Trinitarian phrasing makes me feel. If I honour other faiths, I cannot say God is limited to these three images, nor do I believe God is a literal deity. Plus,” she goes on to write, “it was United Church theology itself that taught me God is not just ‘Father’ but also ‘Mother,’ and countless other metaphors.”²⁷ All this to illustrate that I am a part of a denomination where naming and claiming a theology – even acknowledging faith in God, Christ and the Holy Spirit during the act of ordination – can throw candidates for ministry into a crisis. If it is the proclamation of theology, of our understanding of God, that distinguishes preaching from other kinds of speech, does our baggage in the United Church when it comes to talking about God mean we are missing an opportunity?

²⁵ Alison Brooks-Starks, “Do You Believe in God? The commissioning question has me reconsidering becoming a minister,” *Broadview*, May 28, 2019, accessed December 11, 2019, <http://broadview.org/do-you-believe-in-god-united-church/>.

²⁶ Brooks-Starks, *ibid.*

²⁷ Brooks-Starks, *ibid.*

The publication in 2008 of United Church minister, Gretta Vosper's, book *With or Without God: Why the Way We Live is More Important Than What We Believe*, opened a conversation about whether theological claims should remain a part of the United Church's proclamation. We want to be welcoming and inclusive as a denomination, we argued, even of people who were not brought up with faith and of people who have no faith. In an effort to support the positive value of inclusion many leaders in the church steered clear of overt God-talk for fear of alienating and possibly excluding new attendees on the edge of faith. There is a sense in the United Church of Canada that Christian theology, doctrine, and proclamation are stumbling blocks and a barrier to people both inside and outside the church. Rev. Gretta Vosper leads West Hill United Church in Toronto, Ontario and was one of the first ministers in the United Church to come out as an atheist. In her book, Vosper urges Christian churches to rid themselves of theology in an effort to become relevant and meaningful to contemporary spiritual seekers. She writes that, "the Christian Church, as we have built it and known it, has outlived its viability. Less and less vulnerable to religion's absolute and supernatural claims, people are no longer content with its ethereal promises."²⁸ Rev. Vosper, and others like her, see theology and the proclamations of Christianity as tools of division. "For millennia these things have divided, excluded, disillusioned, and hurt many, even as they attempted, and succeeded, in including and comforting some," she writes.²⁹ Instead, she says, Christian churches should be more welcoming to people of little or no faith, "those who either do not believe in the supernatural elements of religion or do believe but do not feel [they can] make absolute, universal claims about it," she

²⁸ Gretta Vosper, *With or Without God: Why the Way We Live is More Important than What We Believe* (Toronto, ON: HarperCollins Publishers Ltd., 2008), 2.

²⁹ Vosper, 3-4.

argues.³⁰ Other ministers and congregations in the United Church of Canada have likewise begun to publicly question and move away from trying to talk about God. Southminster-Steinhauer United Church in Edmonton, Alberta, for example, has rebranded itself as “SSUC,” or “Spiritual Seekers United in Community.” They describe themselves as “a community where a diverse gathering of people can explore the best of their humanity and how that might inspire [them] to live with each other.”³¹ They see themselves as “rooted in the best of the Jesus tradition,” but they celebrate “life-affirming wisdom wherever [they] find it.”³² Theology and its proclamation are seen as prohibitive of inclusive, life-giving community.

Many in the United Church of Canada have seen people hurt and excluded or have themselves been hurt and excluded by more fundamentalist interpretations of Christian theology. Ralph Milton, a prominent lay leader in the denomination explains, “many United Church folk are refugees from really uptight evangelical churches and they get squirmy when they hear what they sometimes call ‘Jesus Talk.’”³³ In the United Church of Canada, we take seriously the notion that we are judged critically “when we abuse scripture by interpreting it narrow-mindedly, using it as a tool of oppression, exclusion, or hatred,”³⁴ as we write in our most recent statement of faith, *A Song of Faith*. Giving voice to the theological claims found in scripture is powerful. The proclamations of preaching are powerful. Can preachers in the United Church of Canada reclaim the positives of theological proclamation as a means of changing “our lives, our relationships, and our world?”³⁵ Must theological proclamation necessarily exclude and divide

³⁰ Mike Milne, “How to deal with clergy who no longer believe in God: Reaction against a minister who came out as an atheist was swift and blunt. But questions persist about how to deal with clergy who no longer believe,” *Broadview*, May 1, 2015, accessed December 11, 2019, <http://broadview.org/confronting-the-unbelievers/>.

³¹ SSUC: Spiritual Seekers United in Community, accessed December 11, 2019, <https://ssucedmonton.com/about>.

³² SSUC: Spiritual Seekers United in Community, *ibid*.

³³ Ralph Milton, *This United Church of Ours*, 3rd Edition (Kelowna: Wood Lake Books, 2000), 18.

³⁴ United Church of Canada, *A Song of Faith: A Statement of Faith of the United Church of Canada* (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 2007).

³⁵ United Church of Canada, *ibid*.

or can it be invitational? I wondered if it might be possible for the theological claims of scripture to find new relevance, if being given permission to believe might actually be as attractive to seekers as being “given permission to doubt,” (as one member of my congregation put it). Instead of proclaiming faith in God as irrelevant, outdated, and exclusionary, I wondered what my listeners might feel if I tried to name God and God’s presence for our time and place. I wondered if our world might still be experienced as “charged with the grandeur of God,” as Gerard Manley Hopkins puts it in his poem, *God’s Grandeur*.³⁶ I wondered if the theological claims of scripture could be recovered in my preaching as a means of helping people navigate extraordinary times.

The Ministry Context and Background: Personal Context, Congregational Context, Denominational Context, and Political Context

My project for this thesis developed through a series of personal, congregational, denominational, and global incidents and experiences of what I call the “extraordinary” and “monumental.” This work chronicles my effort to try something new and novel (at least for my denomination) in the context of extraordinary challenges, that is, I tried to articulate from the pulpit (rather than talk around) the claims of the Christian faith, as revealed in scripture, for a 21st century, progressive audience. I wanted to test whether a clear proclamation of theology might fill my listeners with a sense of courage, conviction, and hope in the face of struggle. My projects each year of the program were developed in response to a personal query: instead of perceiving theological proclamation as irrelevant, divisive, outmoded, and outdated, I wondered if the proclamations of my preaching could actually empower listeners caught up in the midst of extraordinary times and challenges from a sense of God’s presence? I wondered if preaching

³⁶ Gerard Manley Hopkins, “God’s Grandeur,” in *The Top 500 Poems*, ed. William Harmon. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 792.

that makes deliberate theological claims could encourage listeners to effect positive, compassionate change? Could theological proclamation empower listeners as they “face of the monumental”?

I was concerned about the spiritual price my congregation might pay were I only to approach scripture as if it were a relic of history. I was stuck in a critical approach to faith, and I wanted to reengage with the wonder and hope of theology. I wanted to help my audience to embrace a “post-critical naïveté,” to appreciate truth as more than just the factual and demonstrable, to reembrace faith as an expression of a different kind of truth. In her book, *A Short History of Myth*, Karen Armstrong explains that “by making ‘God’ a wholly notional truth, reached by the critical intellect alone, modern men and women had killed it for themselves.”³⁷ My challenge: learn to articulate the faith claims in scripture in order that my congregation’s faith in the Divine presence and promise might be resurrected.

Personal Context

My project had its genesis in my own personal experience. In my first year in the program my family was plunged into the “extraordinary” through a big move to a new location. My husband was offered a new job, work in a new city – in a different country, in fact – and we were all excited for the new opportunities this would afford him and us. So we moved. put the kids in new schools – I even took a sabbatical from my ministry. But a few weeks after we arrived in this new place, the job that my husband had been promised and offered fell through. All of a sudden he was unemployed and we found ourselves economically precarious, burning through our savings trying to keep afloat financially. I showed up at our local church that year hoping to hear a word – some assurance – that we were not alone as we faced our challenges. As

³⁷ Karen Armstrong, *A Short History of Myth* (New York: Canongate, 2005), 132.

a preacher I was also asking myself, as I read my scriptures, whether I could trust the theological promises of the text to be true for me, in some way, whether I could count on the words of scripture to help me navigate the challenging and the extraordinary.

Congregational Context

I am a minister at Rosedale United Church, an urban congregation in the heart of an old and affluent neighbourhood within walking distance of downtown Toronto. I joined the staff team permanently in 2011 as the part-time Minister for Children, Youth and Families, and in 2019 I became the Acting Lead Minister for Worship and Spiritual Care. The members of Rosedale United Church are largely privileged by race (the congregation is overwhelmingly white), socio-economic status (the Rosedale-Moore Park neighbourhood is one of the wealthier in Canada), education (most members are university-educated professionals) and sexuality (most of our members are hetero-sexual and cis-gender). The residents of the Rosedale-Moore Park neighbourhood send their children to private schools, own summer homes, spend winter weekends skiing, and take expensive vacations. Largely educated professionals, the members of Rosedale United Church were and are leaders at their work and in the community, some chair of hospital boards, some hold senior positions at major banks, or are the presidents and vice-presidents of businesses, lawyers, accountants, and engineers. They are a congregation full of people accustomed to power and to “being on top,” who have, in the last number of years, entered a period of vulnerability and decline: new and younger members are not joining (or donating).

During the years my family faced its own personal and financial struggles, Rosedale United Church was going through some “extraordinary” times as well. In 2015, a small group of disgruntled members forced a congregational vote on the suitability of our lead minister. The

vote fractured the congregation and disgusted many. In the weeks leading up to the vote and after the fact I was especially conscious of the effect of my preaching. It was the first time I had experienced my denomination's inclination toward nuanced and tenuous proclamation falling short. It struck me that the congregation needed courage and hope at such a time, not to be peppered with ponderings. They wanted to be reminded of their convictions as Christians, to know how God was with them in an extraordinary time. The following year the congregation began an Appreciative Inquiry into congregational renewal. Coming to an "increased sense of our Christian identity,"³⁸ was flagged as one of the benchmark goals to which the congregation wanted to work. It was around this time that I applied to the ACTS DMin in Preaching program.

But the year 2019 saw the congregation face the most monumental and extraordinary challenges yet. In the first week of January 2019, the Lead Minister and the Minister of Pastoral Care both announced they were leaving. Neither had consulted with the congregation or with each other. The announcements came abruptly and unexpectedly because neither had signaled to the congregation that change was coming. The Lead, whose stamina and confidence had been eroded when the congregation had voted on his suitability, suddenly decided to retire three years earlier than planned. At the same time our Minister of Pastoral Care, ready to lead, had sought another call (thinking our current Lead would still be in the position for a number of years). Their announcements came within days of each other. The Lead Minister had been with the congregation for 18 years and the Minister of Pastoral Care for 12 years. The members of the congregation were thrown into grief, questions, and chaos. They had not been anticipating a change in leadership. From their standpoint they had just recovered from an internal conflict, they had just completed an Appreciative Inquiry into renewal, they were on the road to stability

³⁸ *Renewal Implementation Detail Planning*, September 9, 2017.

and recovery. A few weeks later our office administrator was fired, and the evening custodian diagnosed with cancer. I was asked to take on the role of “Acting Lead” Minister, a new administrator was hired, and a new “Acting Minister for Community and Youth Engagement,” came on board. In a matter of months, the staff team was almost entirely changed, with no time for a handover or transition. Then, in October 2019, our Director of Music was placed on administrative leave, pending the outcome of a church investigation into allegations of sexual misconduct, brought by a member of the choir. At the end of November 2019, his contract was terminated. He had been with the congregation for 30 years, presiding over a music program renowned in the city. Many in the congregation struggled to reconcile the man they knew with the complaints against him.

Through it all I have wondered about the role of preaching and theological proclamation in the midst of extraordinary challenges. I wondered how my listeners might be empowered by embracing the theological claims of scripture, if celebrating God’s presence could fill my listeners with a sense of courage, conviction, and hope – just as I had been filled by the bold proclamation of the minister at the church where I grew up decades before. What would happen if they heard a clear proclamation of the faith claims of scripture – of the gospel – instead of my questions and critique of the text? What change might take place in my listeners’ hearts and our church community if I could facilitate an encounter with God’s presence through my preaching? I wondered if, in the theological claims of scripture, my listeners’ extraordinary challenges might be met with extraordinary hope and extraordinary conviction and extraordinary courage?

Denominational Context

Bold and unapologetic proclamation of the theological claims of scripture is not in our comfort zone in the United Church of Canada. We pride ourselves on being a non-creedal

church. We do not say you have to believe certain dogma in order to belong. Our approach to faith and spirituality is infused with a sense of openness and curiosity. We are a denomination that embraces questions and critical thinking, with a strong commitment to social justice and radical inclusion as our way of emulating and evoking the radical love of Jesus Christ. We like to describe ourselves as a “big tent” theologically, accommodating a wide spectrum of Christian belief and practice. But, as my advisor put it, we have been so accommodating of critique as to leave almost no room for clear concepts of God. Bold and definitive proclamation is bound to make someone uncomfortable if it pushes people out of the tent. Ralph Milton describes the United Church of Canada’s theological mindset in his book, *This United Church of Ours* (a sort of lay person’s introduction to the United Church):

I’m sure you’ve run into people who seem to use a lot of words like, ‘Jesus,’ and ‘Hallelujah,’ and ‘Yes, Lord.’ You don’t have to talk like that in the United Church. Not that there’s anything wrong with that kind of speaking if it is genuine. United Church people hardly ever use religious words, and I don’t mean that as a compliment. We should really learn to talk about what we believe. That’s one of our big weaknesses.³⁹

The general attitude, Milton explains, is that we feel “we don’t need to impress people with how holy we are.”⁴⁰ Talking about theology tends to be seen as either manipulative or showy. The United Church of Canada is rightly suspicious of theology to which critical thinking has not been applied, but this can translate as reading all theological claims as dubious and suspicious. The United Church of Canada is noted for its freedom and openness, its warmth, its diversity of theological viewpoints, its courage and integrity,⁴¹ but it is also noted for being tongue-tied when it comes to speaking theologically. We don’t want to offend anyone, or to be seen as forcing belief on anyone. Ralph Milton explains,

³⁹ Ralph Milton, *This United Church of Ours*, 3rd Edition (Kelowna: Wood Lake Books, 2000), 18.

⁴⁰ Milton, 18.

⁴¹ Milton, 30.

As individuals, you hardly ever hear a peep out of us concerning our faith. We're often too timid to point to the hand of God active in life around us. We're often too embarrassed to raise the subject of faith, so we miss many opportunities to share good news. United Church people are not good at talking about the things that make them tick.⁴²

Milton goes on,

I wish we could learn to tell stories – to talk openly about what we believe and why we believe it. There are some in the United Church who insist it's best to work for God's *Shalom*, to do God's will, and to struggle for truth and justice. Sooner or later people will realize why they are doing these things and will start to ask questions. United Church people often don't know how to talk about their faith, and that is a serious problem.⁴³

As the first “made-in-Canada” denomination, the United Church of Canada has, throughout its history, mirrored the preoccupations of Canadian society. In 1925 the scripture that best captured the church's ethos was John 17:21, “that all of them may be one,” as we formally united three denominations. From 1945 to 1960 the denomination grew alongside the Canadian population, opening congregations in every new suburb. In 1946 its biggest challenge was a shortage of candidates for ministry.⁴⁴ As the largest protestant denomination in Canada, issues that rocked Canadian society at large, like the challenges of postmodern philosophy and a growing secularism, rocked this “Canadian” church as well. In his anthology, *The United Church of Canada: a History*, Don Schweitzer writes, “In the 1960s questions surfaced, the health of ‘God’ came under scrutiny, and in 1966, for the first time in its history, the United Church of Canada saw a 2000-member drop in its membership...the start of a decline from which it never recovered.”⁴⁵

⁴² Milton, 92-93.

⁴³ Milton, 93.

⁴⁴ Don Schweitzer, Robert C. Fennell, Michael Bourgeois, editors, *The Theology of the United Church of Canada* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier Press, 2019), 84.

⁴⁵ Schweitzer, 98.

The assured theology of the first half of the 20th century was rightly displaced by the questions and critique of contextual voices and experiences, as the United Church of Canada became aware of its own complicity in oppression and injustice, in operating Indian Residential Schools, for example, and of the proclamations and theological claims that had justified that oppression. By the end of the 20th century it was the ethos of Micah 6:8 – the conviction that to be faithful is “to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” – that most echoed our sensibility. Learning about our denomination’s abuse of power among the vulnerable – the abuse of the theological claims of scripture – made me, as a preacher in the United Church, suspicious of the power of proclamation. Then, our denominational comfort with adherence to the “essence” of faith, and with probing the boundaries of what is “essential” has led to some among our membership to declare themselves “beyond belief.” This does not necessarily wrinkle my brow. The United Church of Canada has traditionally offered a safe place for people with questions and baggage when it comes to the proclamations of faith – a safe place for people looking for “permission to doubt” – but still, I wondered, what does the denomination offer to those who might want permission to believe? I wondered how we might talk about God without being either aggressively entrenched in dogmatic belief, or so tentative that we hesitate to say anything theological at all? Because there are now other extraordinary challenges our members are bringing with them to church.

Political Context

Members of our congregation have always brought their personal and private challenges with them to church, but at this particular point in human history members of my congregation are also wrestling with global challenges that will have an existential impact on humanity.⁴⁶ If

⁴⁶ Congregational Survey, *Worship Matters – What’s on Peoples’ Minds?*, October, 2019.

they read or listen to the news, our members come to church worried about how to live with and respond to the reality that humans have irreversibly thrown the earth's climate into crisis.

Conversations at coffee hour reveal a membership concerned about an increasing global economic divide, an increasingly politically divided society, vitriolic, White nationalist speech becoming increasingly politically mainstream, and persistent racism and sexism. I wondered: are listeners met with equally extraordinary proclamation of God's gospel of love? As our members face monumental and extraordinary challenges as global citizens I wondered, what would happen if, instead of giving "permission to doubt," I tried to give my listeners permission to believe? What would happen if I clearly articulated the theological claims of scripture and United Church tradition in my preaching?

Digging Deep – A Literature Review of the Homiletical Issue

The genesis of this thesis project was a feeling, the feeling I got from listening to a preacher with a proclamation. A preacher who engaged with the theological claims of scripture filled me with courage, and conviction, and hope. His words offered a reminder of a truth I already seemed to know intuitively – that God was with me, and so I could face any challenge. This thesis project begins with the feeling of joy I received from a clear theological proclamation, and my own appropriation of it as a truth for me in my life. As a preacher I wanted to understand how my proclamation of the gospel might help my listeners to perceive challenges differently and the literature with which I engaged helped me learn how to interpret scripture and write and preach such that my listeners might feel a sense of courage, conviction, and hope from an encounter with God's word in the words of my sermons. I turned to the wisdom of the African American preaching tradition and its unique contribution of the

celebration sermon, along with reading in the prophetic tradition and in the academic discipline of systematic theology.

During the first year of the program that feeling of joy was my beacon – trying to write for it, elicit it, find it in a text – I spent the year figuring out how to celebrate a sense of joy in God’s presence, rather than avoiding or talking around the concept of God. In an age where listeners are dogged with anxiety, despondency, and fear, joy seemed to me an increasingly radical virtue. Joy belies despair that this world is simply chaotic and unreliable, proclaiming in defiance and with jubilation a conviction in the ultimate victory of an alternate power. It is the proclamation of what is ultimate and it is our listeners’ receptivity to this proclamation that fills them with joy, reigniting a conviction that God’s power is equal to and even greater than all others. Love willing to suffer for another conquers all.

The project I set for myself that first year was simply to expand the way in which I engaged scriptural texts. Instead of only asking of a text, “how is this believable?” I started to ask, “when has this been true for me and my listeners?” I wanted to grow more skilled at making theological claims, to preach hope from an understanding of God’s presence with us. I wanted my listeners to leave worship feeling courageous and confident as followers of Christ. I began to understand that a listener is left with a feeling of joy if hearts and minds can be opened to the promise and potential of God-with-us in our real lives and experiences. Joy comes from resonating with the proclamation that change is possible, new life is possible – even inevitable – with God. “The Word has to be heard in a manner that reconstitutes one’s whole mode of being,” Henry H. Mitchell explains in *Celebration and Experience in Preaching*.⁴⁷ “The preacher’s goal is to be used of God to move the hearer’s supporting core beliefs and entire style

⁴⁷ Henry H. Mitchell, *Celebration and Experience in Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008), 131.

of living closer and closer to the new person in Christ.”⁴⁸ To preach to effect joy is to interpret Scripture and to communicate with listeners in such a way that good news is heard and received.

I needed to learn how to access in my listeners the intuitive “tapes” (or original recordings) of faith, as Henry Mitchell calls them, that intuitive trust in the goodness of the universe that somehow imprints on a psyche. The preacher in my home church had managed to locate an original recording of just such an intuitive tape within me and to play it back for me through the words of his sermon. He put into words my foundational trust that we are not alone, that this is God’s world. How did he preach in such a way that I was able to recover my foundational faith? How could I preach in such a way that my audience could recover their own? To speak to the core beliefs – the foundational and intuitive faith of my listeners – I would need to speak to the reality of their emotional lives, and to write such that their range of emotions would be held in tension with a foundational trust in God’s presence.

In *The Recovery of Preaching*, Henry H. Mitchell talks about the importance of relating on an emotional level with our listeners, “we have to sit where they sit . . . to see from their perspective.”⁴⁹ Instead of trying to figure out how a biblical text could “make sense” for my listeners, I started asking how the trouble and grace in a biblical text would resonate emotionally with my listener. I started to parse the deep, existential issues and suffering that the text and its proclamation engaged. Mitchell talks about preaching to the “whole person,”⁵⁰ that is, not to people’s intellects alone but to what is on their hearts, their deepest struggles. The preacher’s power for listeners living in extraordinary times is to help them recall deep, intuitive, core beliefs – a trust in the goodness of this world – and to help them replay those “intuitive tapes” recorded

⁴⁸ Mitchell, *Celebration and Experience in Preaching*, 131.

⁴⁹ Henry H. Mitchell, *The Recovery of Preaching* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1977), 7.

⁵⁰ Mitchell, *The Recovery of Preaching*, 12.

on their consciousnesses long ago; the wisdom of their ancestors. Mitchell documents his experience in African American churches in the United States where “what is, at least at times, assumed to be mere emotion may very well be an unashamed expression of the soul heritage of a people still wed to aspects of the profound wisdom and faith of the Black ancestors – still healed and helped by the timeless and time-tested interpretations from their peculiar existential stream.”⁵¹ Mitchell traces the African American preaching tradition of celebrating God’s presence to the life-affirming (and ancient) spiritual traditions of West Africa – what he pinpoints as the original intuitive tapes of African American peoples. In extraordinary times and through extraordinary challenges, Mitchell shows how preaching can help people recover and hear the intuitive and spiritual affirmations held deep in their core selves. Accessing these intuitive emotional tapes unleashes joy in a listener and celebration in preaching. “The celebration event as event and not just as comforting thought may then be rerun by the person in the oppressed audience, as a means of transcending the discouragement of later circumstances.”⁵² Joy is found when preaching helps listeners access intuitive truths and faith held deep.

In *Celebration and Experience in Preaching*, Henry H. Mitchell acknowledges that the goal of preaching is to change a listener’s behaviour, to liberate a person’s way of being in the world. Every sermon should have a “behavioral purpose,” he maintains, the scriptural text issues a command listeners should embody, trust and obey.⁵³ Mitchell explains,

to preach is to be used by the Holy Spirit that the gospel is communicated, to the end that hearers are saved and then helped to grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord. It is the hope of every preacher that every sermon will be used by the Spirit to move Christians to grow from point A to point B, in the direction of the life modeled by Jesus Christ. And every sermon should have one such behavioral goal as stated or implied by the biblical text.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Mitchell, *The Recovery of Preaching*, 15.

⁵² Mitchell, *The Recovery of Preaching*, 58.

⁵³ Mitchell, *Celebration and Experience in Preaching*, 14.

⁵⁴ Mitchell, *Celebration and Experience in Preaching*, 13.

The goal of preaching, according to Henry Mitchell, is to bring about an *experiential* encounter with the proclamation of a text, so that the listener does not just understand its truth intellectually, but can feel its truth in their body and emotions, and that is what unleashes a feeling of joy in the knowledge of God's presence. Writing for emotional, rather than intellectual assent alone employs vivid details and images so listeners gain a sense of vicarious identification with the characters or situation, and by writing in homiletic moves as opposed to points.⁵⁵ The importance of speaking to deep concerns is raised here too: "every sermon should come from the gut-level convictions of the pastor, and those are transmitted without self-conscious effort."⁵⁶ The transformative power of a sermon preached in extraordinary times lies in its ability to help the listener to celebrate God's presence. The good news of the gospel is the sudden consciousness of what God in Christ has done and is doing for them. When listeners experience the faith claims of scripture as though the text is speaking to their lives, and situations, joy is unleashed. Mitchell explains:

The experience-based gospel proposed here is to stimulate the growth of gut-level trust in God by providing vicarious involvements in the encounters where faith has been caught and taught. In terms of transactional psychology, it means being used by God to stimulate the recording over of the intuitive 'tapes' of unbelief with new 'recordings' of profound trust in God. This message to the intuitive consciousness (where faith is stored) should be affirmed by the emotive *celebration* of the gospel truth.⁵⁷

The goal is to help listeners to trust in the God revealed to us in scripture, especially in times of extraordinary challenge. "The term experiential encounter is used here to denote a homiletical plan in which the aim is to offer a direct or vicarious encounter with and experiences of truth already fully certified as biblical, coherent, and relevant to need," Mitchell writes.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Mitchell, *Celebration and Experience in Preaching*, 20.

⁵⁶ Mitchell, *Celebration and Experience in Preaching*, 30.

⁵⁷ Mitchell, *Celebration and Experience in Preaching*, 121-122.

⁵⁸ Mitchell, *Celebration and Experience in Preaching*, 137.

In *How Shall They Preach*, Gardner C. Taylor also talks about how the “extraordinary” can be met and challenged by a preacher’s deep sympathy with listeners. He notes that a preacher must need to hear his or her message as much as their audience does. “To hear and suffer deeply with the still sad music of humanity and then to offer to it the wonderful Gospel of healing and wholeness is the preacher’s privilege,” Taylor writes.⁵⁹ Taylor echoes Mitchell in conceiving of preaching as emotional work as much as it is intellectual work. Preachers need emotional self-awareness: “They [must be] intimately in touch with the deepest sources of themselves,” Taylor writes, “that river of universal being that flows even below the unconscious. From it they dredged feelings that transcend the immediate and personal.”⁶⁰ The preacher’s job in the face of the extraordinary is to present a dialectic tension, the theological claims of scripture in tension with current challenges and realities. Taylor explains: “It is the purpose of God not to stamp out and obliterate the kingdoms of this world, they are to be redeemed and are to ‘become the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ’ in which he shall reign for ever and ever.”⁶¹

My second year in the program focused on naming how God is present with us as we “face of the monumental.” I have been using this phrase in quotation marks throughout this paper because it is not my own. The words come from an art exhibit I saw at the Art Gallery of Ontario in the fall of 2018 called “Facing the Monumental,” by the multi-disciplinary Indigenous Canadian artist, Rebecca Belmore. The sculptures, videos, photographs, installations and poetry on display in the exhibit offered a record of her creative reaction and response to a range of contemporary issues: the international refugee crisis, the plight of missing and murdered

⁵⁹ Gardner C. Taylor, *How Shall They Preach* (Elgin, IL: Progressive Baptist Publishing House, 1977), 38.

⁶⁰ Taylor, 65-66.

⁶¹ Taylor, 86.

Indigenous women in Canada, the pernicious effects of colonialism and white nationalism, and the grim reality of human-induced climate change. I found the title of the exhibit to be an accurate summary of what it is to be a preacher in “extraordinary” times: to “face the monumental.”

As my congregation grappled with decline and embraced renewal, I tested whether the intentional proclamation of the theological claims of Scripture would leave my listeners feeling more connected with their Christian identity and church community. I wanted my listeners to leave the sanctuary after my sermons with a sense of God’s purpose and possibility in their lives – a feeling of courage, conviction and hope that they could face the monumental and extraordinary. When my hearers faced a confluence of personal and private challenges alongside global and existential threats – when my hearers were living in the context of the extraordinary – I wanted my preaching proclamation to be suitably extraordinary as well. How would my listeners be affected, how would they approach their challenges differently, if given “permission” to believe that God was present with them?

In *Blue Note Preaching in a Post-Soul World: Finding Hope in an Age of Despair*, Otis Moss III talks about the importance of bringing what he calls a “blues sensibility”⁶² to a sermon, where the “Blues is a cultural legacy that dares to see the American landscape from the viewpoint of the underside.”⁶³ Monumental proclamation of God’s presence starts with facing the monumental. Moss’ “blue note” preaching aims for clear naming of evil and suffering and an equally clear naming of God’s response. “The call of the preacher is to stare in the darkness and speak the Blues with authority,”⁶⁴ Moss writes, it is to “witness the work of God in darkness

⁶² Otis Moss III, *Blue Note Preaching in a Post-Soul World: Finding Hope in an Age of Despair* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), 4.

⁶³ Moss, 5.

⁶⁴ Moss, 19.

and even in the abyss.”⁶⁵ Moss sees Jesus as the original “blue-note” preacher, and so “the preached word, when played, performed, and preached with the Blue Note Sensibility, has the audacity to reclaim Jesus as Savior and liberator of marginalized people.”⁶⁶ “The task of the preacher is to wrestle with the Blue Note of life and find the assurance of grace in the gospel.”⁶⁷ To “face the monumental” as a preacher in extraordinary times is to name our challenges with a “blues sensibility,” but also to name grace. Moss challenges preachers to find the message of God in us – what he calls the “kulibah” word. “We are called to give a *kulibah* word, a word that will move in one’s Spirit so that people will take flight, fly from their breakdowns to a breakthrough.”⁶⁸ I struggled with this part, how to bring my listeners to a breakthrough, to build people up to face the monumental just by sharing the theological claims of scripture. I needed to learn how to talk about God in a way that did not sound cliché and hollow to my audience.

Frank A. Thomas’ book, *How to Preach a Dangerous Sermon*, speaks directly to the context of facing the monumental in extraordinary times by engaging moral imagination instead of despair. Thomas speaks to an American context but the methods he encourages preachers to use to tackle the “monumental” are universally applicable. Thomas challenges preachers in extraordinary times to engage with *moral* imagination. We are called as preachers to remind our congregations of the fundamental truths of faith. Thomas writes: “Moral imagination is the ability of the preacher, intuitive or otherwise, in the midst of the chaotic experiences of human life and existence, to grasp and share God’s abiding wisdom and ethical truth in order to benefit the individual and common humanity.”⁶⁹ Thomas lists four qualities of moral imagination: to

⁶⁵ Moss, 19.

⁶⁶ Moss, 11.

⁶⁷ Moss, 25.

⁶⁸ Moss, 25.

⁶⁹ Frank A. Thomas, *How to Preach a Dangerous Sermon* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2018), xxiii-xxiv.

envision equality and represent that by one's physical presence; to use empathy as a catalyst or bridge to create opportunities to overcome the past and make new decisions for peace and justice; to find sources of wisdom and truth in ancient texts, the wisdom of the ages; and to engage the language of poetry and art that lifts and elevates the human spirit by touching the emotive chords of wonder, hope, and mystery.⁷⁰ Thomas talks about the importance of expanding empathy beyond our own experience – especially in extraordinary times. “If we are looking for freedom, it is important to look to the moral imagination of the marginalized, disenfranchised and vulnerable in any society and culture, along with those who have the moral imagination to understand, empathize, and work for the freedom of those outside their group.”⁷¹ In extraordinary times preachers need to challenge idolatrous and diabolic imagination; imagination obsessed with fame and fortune or that strips humanity of its sacredness.⁷² Preaching can be a tool to grow moral imagination if it can avoid “the extremes of Pollyanna, ‘kum by yah’ platitudes based on scriptural truths that sound syrupy and sweet, [and] the condescending sacred prophetic judgments offering the common currency of blame and damnation,” Thomas writes.⁷³ Preaching a “dangerous” sermon, preaching that “faces the monumental,” engages this middle ground.

In *They Like to Never Quit Praisin' God: The Role of Celebration in Preaching*, Frank A. Thomas explains the nuts and bolts of preaching as a celebration of God's presence, the how-to of designing a celebration sermon and guidelines for celebration. Celebration preaching appealed to me because of the forthrightness of its proclamation. I can get bogged down by challenges in our world, thinking of how we can solve them, but as Frank Thomas explains, the

⁷⁰ Thomas, *How to Preach a Dangerous Sermon*, xxi.

⁷¹ Thomas, *How to Preach a Dangerous Sermon*, xxvi.

⁷² Thomas, *How to Preach a Dangerous Sermon*, xxix.

⁷³ Thomas, *How to Preach a Dangerous Sermon*, 3.

“African American preacher [seeks] not to give answers to the problems of suffering and evil in life, but [to] help people experience the assurance of grace in God,”⁷⁴ that would challenge the hegemony of injustice. “The preacher [gives] assurance to people that God [is] with them, in and through the suffering, and would ultimately liberate them from the suffering; the point [is] not abstract answers to suffering and evil, but an experience of assurance, hope, empowerment, and victory. The focus is not on cognitive explanation, but an experience of God in the midst of suffering and evil.”⁷⁵

In the past I had always gotten tripped up trying to make biblical stories make “sense,” but I was learning now to look at the emotions in a text and how these might resonate with my listeners. Thomas was a student of Henry H. Mitchell, and outlines the five elements of attending to emotional process in sermon writing. Like Mitchell and Taylor, Thomas would have preaching rooted in the language and culture of its audience. Dialogical language means “the language of the preacher is concrete, rooted in the experience of the listener; and evolves a response by appealing to the same.”⁷⁶ Preachers must appeal to core belief (the intuitive faith Henry Mitchell talks about). Thomas affirms that “the role of preaching is to attempt to over-record the tapes of fear, hatred, prejudice, unforgiveness, anxiety, and so on, and strengthen tapes of hope, love, forgiveness, and the like by reaching the core belief with the gospel.”⁷⁷ Following Henry Mitchell, Frank Thomas is concerned with emotive movement, writing for emotional resonance, not points. Thomas explains, “the sermon is a series of ideas and images (moves) expressed in bundles of language that generate a certain nuance or shade of meaning that

⁷⁴ Thomas, *They Like to Never Quit Praisin' God: The Role of Celebration in Preaching*, 18.

⁷⁵ Thomas, *They Like to Never Quit Praisin' God: The Role of Celebration in Preaching*, 18.

⁷⁶ Thomas, *They Like to Never Quit Praisin' God: The Role of Celebration in Preaching*, 22-23.

⁷⁷ Thomas, *They Like to Never Quit Praisin' God: The Role of Celebration in Preaching*, 24.

registers in the emotive.”⁷⁸ The content and the means of delivering sermon content must be united. Thomas counsels that the “situation-complication-resolution-celebration” method of structuring sermons is the most effective rhetorical strategy when writing for emotional resonance. The situation-complication-resolution-celebration structure turns on the creative use of reversals. “The preacher’s ability to offer an assurance of grace is grounded in the ability of the preacher to deal with reversals and paradox,”⁷⁹ Thomas writes.

This celebration of God’s presence in preaching is effective for preaching in extraordinary times because it is positive and affirmative – inducing courage, conviction, and hope in its listeners. Celebration preaching is based in the good news of the gospel, “that in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the dominion of God met and conquered the dominion of [evil], whereupon salvation was made available to all,” Thomas writes.⁸⁰ We structure our sermons for celebration because of a deep conviction of there being a power that orders and overrules all things, a power greater than “the powers that be.” “When God raised Jesus from the dead, the church understood that no power, no opposition, and no forces of evil could defeat the redemptive purposes of God in Jesus,” Thomas writes.⁸¹ Preaching to celebrate God’s presence in extraordinary times helps a congregation to remember this and to celebrate God’s transformative possibilities. “One experiences oneself as victorious (that is, saved, set free, healed, encouraged, and so on) regardless of the external tragic circumstances of life,”⁸² Thomas explains about the end goal of celebratory preaching.

⁷⁸ Thomas, *They Like to Never Quit Praisin’ God: The Role of Celebration in Preaching*, 26.

⁷⁹ Thomas, *They Like to Never Quit Praisin’ God: The Role of Celebration in Preaching*, 28.

⁸⁰ Thomas, *They Like to Never Quit Praisin’ God: The Role of Celebration in Preaching*, 35.

⁸¹ Thomas, *They Like to Never Quit Praisin’ God: The Role of Celebration in Preaching*, 39.

⁸² Thomas, *They Like to Never Quit Praisin’ God: The Role of Celebration in Preaching*, 49.

Thomas teaches preachers the principles of celebrative design. Evil cannot be treated as an abstract concept, nor can the assurance of grace; both must be named in order that they might be experienced as overcome by an audience. Celebrative design impacts people by positive affirmation, not negative condemnation. In extraordinary times it is helpful to note that “people are motivated by the affirmative means of love, joy, hope, and celebration,” Thomas writes.⁸³ The use of the situation-complication-resolution format introduces suspense and tension and then celebrates its resolution. Since taking the Preaching as Celebration class with Frank Thomas, I have used his preparation methods in my sermon planning – prayer, free association, homiletical exegesis, and his “Preaching Worksheet.” According to Frank Thomas, preachers should ask one question each time they sit down to compose a sermon: “How does the message of the text give assurance of grace to the existential human condition of suffering? In other words, what good news does this text bring to the experiential suffering, tragedy, and evil in the world?”⁸⁴ Frank Thomas’ “Preaching Worksheet” helps preachers arrive at a clear takeaway for their audience. It gets us thinking and asking: “After hearing the sermon, what do we want people to do or become?”⁸⁵ And, “If I accomplish the first clause, then so what? What difference will it make in the lives of people?” he writes.⁸⁶ Henry H. Mitchell and Frank Thomas taught me to see faith as living, and God as an active presence now, and not just a relic of a bygone era. From these two teachers I learned an openness to interpreting scripture as myth, that is, as a description of “an event which, in some sense, [has] happened once, but which also [happens] all the time” (as Karen Armstrong puts it).⁸⁷

⁸³ Thomas, *They Like to Never Quit Praisin’ God: The Role of Celebration in Preaching*, 64.

⁸⁴ Thomas, *They Like to Never Quit Praisin’ God: The Role of Celebration in Preaching*, 89.

⁸⁵ Thomas, *They Like to Never Quit Praisin’ God: The Role of Celebration in Preaching*, 97.

⁸⁶ Thomas, *They Like to Never Quit Praisin’ God: The Role of Celebration in Preaching*, 97.

⁸⁷ Armstrong, 7.

In my third year of the program I began to engage preaching as social transformation. I wanted to study the impact of theological proclamation on my hearers' sense of personal empowerment in relation to personal and global challenges, through my clear articulation of the claims of scripture and Church tradition. Given my local context and our global context, I wanted my listeners at Rosedale United Church feel that God changes lives, relationships and our very world; I wanted my listeners to be able to identify and name God's transformative presence in their lives. I wanted my sermons to ignite in my listeners a sense of agency – to feel and act out of their power – through the clear proclamation of the good news of God's grace.

Walter Brueggemann's *The Prophetic Imagination* taught me about two critical stances to engage when preaching in extraordinary times – a critique of a wider culture grown numb to pain and suffering (or too satiated to feel), and a reenergizing of that same culture through the witness of Scripture's prophetic imagination. Brueggemann reminds the preacher in extraordinary times that one of our greatest enemies is "enculturation," the inability to see the status quo for what it is. "The task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us,"⁸⁸ he writes. This evoking of consciousness through preaching helps to dismantle enculturation and help us to see what could be. "Prophecy is born precisely in that moment when the emergence of social political reality is so radical and inexplicable that it has nothing less than a theological cause," Brueggemann writes.⁸⁹ Listeners need nourishing with alternative and competing visions of reality – visions that empower with a sense of courage and conviction and hope that God is with us. Brueggemann writes, "criticism is not carping and denouncing. It is asserting that false claims to authority and power cannot keep their

⁸⁸ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 3.

⁸⁹ Brueggemann, 8.

promises.”⁹⁰ We deconstruct the old world in order to release the world that has been stifled from full expression.

Essential to preaching in extraordinary times is taking a side, saying explicitly that we stand with God and all that reveals God’s Spirit: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Gal 5:22-23). Preaching in extraordinary times wakes listeners up to the hungers and hunt for wholeness in our world, it is passionate in the way Jesus was passionate, politically and morally – counterculture in its compassion. Brueggemann explains, “there is new energy in finding one who can be trusted to be more powerful than the one who ostensibly rules the light.”⁹¹ Brueggemann uses the prophet Jeremiah’s lament, his grief, as an example of the kind of passion, or pathos, that should be evoked by preaching in extraordinary times to shake listeners out of numbness and satiation. Preaching cannot be afraid to call out the ways that lead to death and alienation. “Those who do not face endings will not receive the beginnings,”⁹² Brueggemann writes; “numb people do not discern a fear of death. Conversely despairing people do not anticipate or receive newness.”⁹³ Brueggemann talks about the importance of energizing through hope. “The hope that must be spoken is hope rooted in the assurance that God does not quit even when the evidence warrants [God’s] quitting.”⁹⁴ Remembering and reorienting ourselves to the radical criticisms of Jesus and the anguish of the prophets is another means of preaching in extraordinary times.

Deep Calls to Deep – Reading Beyond Homiletics

⁹⁰ Brueggemann, 11.

⁹¹ Brueggemann, 15.

⁹² Brueggemann, 57.

⁹³ Brueggemann, 60.

⁹⁴ Brueggemann, 67.

Preaching in extraordinary times means saying something definitive about our hope and faith, but we cannot proclaim what we cannot articulate. Engaging the theology and doctrine of the Christian tradition can give us language to use when we do not know how to put our faith into words. In Anthony B. Robinson's *What's Theology Got to Do with It? Convictions, Vitality, and the Church*, he notes,

that an integral and absolutely vital relationship exists between our core conviction, our theology, and our health as congregations, where we are reasonably clear about our core convictions and their relevance to our life and purpose as church, chances of vitality are great. Conversely, where we are fuzzy about our core convictions and unsure of their meaning or value, disarray is likely.⁹⁵

It is in our church doctrine and theology that our proclamation finds grounding where faith seeks understanding. It is our doctrine and theology that provide the rationale for our courage, solid reasonings for our convictions, and a testimony that witnesses to hope. Grounding our proclamation in the doctrine and theology of church tradition frees our proclamation for expression: it gives us the words when we are speechless and a vision to inspire us. The doctrine that expresses our theology binds us to the wisdom of the ages, and to our deeper "why" as Christians when we find ourselves full of questions. This is not to say that doctrine and theology are just easy answers, rather, they act as our touchstones. Robinson explains: "Being clear about our identity and purpose, our core convictions, and where our rope is tethered enables vital life."⁹⁶

Doctrine and theology present us with an exciting opportunity – an expression of how we conceive of ourselves and specifically (for my context) how Christianity has been interpreted and lived out within the United Church of Canada. The United Church of Canada has typically been

⁹⁵ Anthony B. Robinson, *What's Theology Got to Do with It? Convictions, Vitality, and the Church* (Herndon, Virginia: The Alban Institute, 2006), 4.

⁹⁶ Robinson, 4.

skeptical of publicly articulating our beliefs. It feels to us like drawing a line when we want to be inclusive of everybody, including people who do not believe as we do. Robinson explains that “for many congregations a better choice is to think about their church as...a centered set;”⁹⁷ rather than worrying whether we are leaving people out by articulating our convictions, Robinson encourages us to ask instead: “are we moving people away from or toward the centre?”⁹⁸

In their book, *Preaching the Big Questions: Doctrine Isn't Dusty*, Catherine Faith MacLean and John H. Young maintain the importance of theology for navigating the challenges of extraordinary times. “It is in hard times that people lean into what they believe,” they write,⁹⁹ because our doctrine and its theology put us in touch with our Source and our Strength. As MacLean and Young explain, these act as the foundation of our Christian formation, ethical living, and pastoral care. Our doctrine and expression of theology give us a language to help us express what we are all about. “Doctrine is meant to open our minds, to present possibilities, to engage us in transformation,”¹⁰⁰ according to MacLean and Young. Proclamation grounded in the church’s revelation through scripture and experience is proclamation that fuels resistance and inspires persistence and work to bring about change. MacLean and Young explain: “preaching doctrine gives words to the why of the opinions and allows those opinions to be considered and faithful. Listening to well-taught doctrine helps us explain our counter-cultural behaviour, both to ourselves and to others.”¹⁰¹ Ethical action in the world is nourished and sustained when it comes from a sound theological root system. Theology “offers us the means through which to

⁹⁷ Robinson, 15.

⁹⁸ Robinson, 35.

⁹⁹ Catherine Faith MacLean and John H. Young, *Preaching the Big Questions: Doctrine Isn't Dusty* (Toronto, ON: United Church Publishing House, 2015), 2.

¹⁰⁰ MacLean and Young, 17.

¹⁰¹ MacLean and Young, 7.

make sense of our own lives, of our personal high points and our times of crisis.”¹⁰² Doctrine and theology are rubrics for understanding our meaning and potential. In extraordinary times they help us not only to understand what we are up against, but also to understand how we are being supported.

Since my denomination’s inception in 1925 we have produced four statements of faith, all of which include a theology of preaching. In the *Twenty Articles of Doctrine*, formulated in 1925 as a part of our Basis of Union (the founding constitution of our denomination) under “Article II,” “Of Revelation,” we state that “we believe that [God] has been graciously pleased to make clearer revelation of [God’s self] to [people] who spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.”¹⁰³ Our most recent statement of faith, *A Song of Faith*, published in 2006, states that it is not only through preaching, but through “music, art, and sacrament, in community and in solitude, [that] God changes our lives, our relationships, and our world.”¹⁰⁴ God’s presence is here, with us, we affirm, speaking in all kinds of ways, and God’s presence is transformative. Here was this tradition and witness, then, from my own denomination, a history on which I could call and fall back on: the United Church of Canada states that we do, in fact, believe that people can and should encounter God through preaching in order to be built up, to hear good news and a sense of salvation, and in order to change their lives, their relationships, and the world. In fact, the church believes that preaching is just one of *many* ways in which God encounters humanity, but preaching absolutely offers an encounter with God and God’s possibility and creative potential. Preaching’s ultimate effect is the transformation of hearts, minds and societies, by

¹⁰² MacLean and Young, 8.

¹⁰³ United Church of Canada. *The Basis of Union: Twenty Articles of Doctrine in The Manual* (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 2007).

¹⁰⁴ United Church of Canada, *A Song of Faith: A Statement of Faith of the United Church of Canada* (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 2007).

calling to the past (in our Scriptures), witnessing to our present (and God’s presence), standing forward, and “facing the monumental.”¹⁰⁵

In *Practical Theology: An Introduction*, Richard R. Osmer links the application of theology to the practice of leadership. Theology becomes a tool for the interpretation of our lives and contexts and its proclamation can lead a group or individual through deep change to transformation. Osmer sees our lives as contemporary texts that can be interpreted and understood, deconstructed, and reconstructed through theology.¹⁰⁶ Theology provides people with a map which may be the only guidance they have through new and extraordinary challenges. Theology offers people footholds and handholds as they navigate rough and steep emotional, psychological, and ethical terrain. Theology can be a light to our way. What if, during the extraordinary times in our lives, we were to hold on to the wisdom, as Osmer sees it, that “God is the author of the created world, affirms it as good, and provides it with order and form[?] The wisdom literature draws out the implications of this understanding of creation for everyday life, when the ‘mighty acts’ of God are not in view.”¹⁰⁷ Preachers lead in extraordinary times by calling listeners back to the wisdom of theology – bringing it to mind, even when it is out of sight. “Wisdom comes from God,” Osmer writes. “When sages [or preachers] gain insight by observing and reflecting on life, they are not constructing this wisdom on their own. They are discerning a moral structure that is built into creation itself. Creation speaks to people wise enough to listen,” Osmer writes.¹⁰⁸ And a preacher’s proclamation is rooted in this listening for and recalling of theology.

¹⁰⁵ Rebecca Belmore, *Facing the Monumental*, ed. Wanda Nanibush (Toronto, Ontario and Frederickton, New Brunswick: Art Gallery of Ontario and Goose Lane Editions, 2018), 17.

¹⁰⁶ Richard R. Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 32.

¹⁰⁷ Osmer, 92.

¹⁰⁸ Osmer, 93.

Say Something! – Project Plan and Process

I came into the ACTS DMin program wanting to know how to talk about God authentically and resonantly for a 21st century audience in my sermons. As a preacher I kept coming face to face with extraordinary situations politically, socially, environmentally, locally, nationally, globally, in individual members' lives and as a congregation, and even in my own life. In the years before I entered this DMin program, many vocal leaders in the United Church were dealing with extraordinary challenges by *not* talking about God. Some were dealing with the extraordinary challenge of declining membership, for example, by moving away from talking about theology, in the hopes of being perceived by potential new members as less focused on “divisive” issues and more inclusive, and maybe more appealing to agnostics and atheists. After the terrorist attacks in Paris in 2017, for example, one minister in the United Church of Canada wrote an open letter to our national Moderator, who had posted a prayer to our denomination's website in response to the tragedy. The minister objected to addressing the prayer to God. “I question the merit of such a response,”¹⁰⁹ this United Church minister wrote about the moderator's prayer, “it underscores one of the foundational beliefs that led to the horrific killing in Paris: the existence of a supernatural being whose purposes can be divined.... This belief has led to innumerable tragedies throughout the timeline of human history,” she wrote.¹¹⁰ As I faced the extraordinary, personally, in my congregation, and as a global citizen, I wondered about a different approach: instead of avoiding theology, or disowning it (when faced with the extraordinary), I wondered what would happen if I was explicit in naming and celebrating God's presence? My project plan and process started to take shape. The eight sermons required for this

¹⁰⁹ Gretta Vosper, “A Letter to Gary Paterson Regarding Paris.” (Letter, Toronto, ON, January 8, 2015), Gretta Vosper: Minister. Author. Atheist., accessed December 12, 2019, <https://www.grettavosper.ca/letter-gary-paterson-regarding-paris/>.

¹¹⁰ Vosper, *ibid.*

thesis would focus on eight different experiences of the extraordinary and would attempt to hold these in tension with an articulation of the equally extraordinary promises of faith. As a lectionary preacher the extraordinary situations and challenges I addressed were based on current events or congregational incidents informed by an extraordinary challenge or trouble I saw in the assigned scriptural text.

Year One – The Joy of Preaching

In the first year of the program, each of my sermon assignments would test how my writing technique could either encourage or hinder my listeners; would they feel met by a sense of God's presence? Could I engender joy in my listeners by helping them to hear and embrace the conviction and hope of our scriptures, the faith that we are not alone? My first sermon assignment would study Preaching and Interpretation and how interpretation for a congregation's context, the liturgical season, time, place and one's own story and experience influence a listener's reception of the gospel. For someone trying to unleash a feeling of joy in my audience, I chose to work with a challenging text – Ezekiel 33:7-11 – but a text that would allow me to lift up the first extraordinary situation I wanted to explore: the extraordinary challenge of taking responsibility for a broken world. The text's proclamation is that God sends prophets to act as sentinels for a world gone awry: "So you, mortal, I have made a sentinel for the house of Israel," God says to Ezekiel (33:7).

I delivered the sermon just weeks after North America had witnessed a rally of White supremacists in Charlottesville, Virginia (and had heard the President of the United States virtually applaud the supremacists' cause), and also in the aftermath of several devastating hurricanes made more powerful and destructive as a result of human-induced climate change. I saw a parallel between the people of Israel's sense of forsakenness in the face of monumental

challenges and our own despair at being able to meet the challenges of our time. I saw an inkling of joy in the theological claim of the text that God is with us through God's prophets. The declaration of a "sentinel" for the people is good news: "so you, mortal, I have made a sentinel for the house of Israel," God says to Ezekiel (33:7), "whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me," God says, "that the wicked turn from their ways and live" (Ezekiel 33:11).

In the second sermon assignment I would study how preachers make God's grace intelligible and meaningful to listeners in a 21st century context, working with the assumption that the more accessible the language of Biblical grace is to a listener (through alternate language, image and analogy), the more readily it is heard and received. The passage I originally chose was Matthew 25:1-13, the Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids. With lamps and oil as a symbol for loving kindness, the parable wants to convey the message that, when it comes to ushering in God's realm, our actions matter. The bridesmaids need to keep the oil in the lamps burning. While not an inherently joy-filled story, I felt it was important for me, personally, to work with this passage (as opposed to others on offer for that particular Sunday's lectionary) because it allowed me to lift up the second extraordinary situation I would explore: the extraordinary challenge (in a broken world) of not succumbing to despair. I tried to make the text accessible to my audience by asking myself why the foolish bridesmaids would have shown up to wait for the bridegroom unprepared. I wondered whether they thought their light would not make much difference against the darkness? I could personally resonate with the sense that my actions do not matter in the grand scheme of things and I wanted to counter this kind of glumness with a sense of joy by embracing the idea that our contributions to the greater good have impact.

In my final sermon assignment, I would find the “joy” in the task of congregational renewal by linking church renewal and reinvigoration to a return to our foundations, with God’s love and justice proclaimed as the foundations of the earth. I wanted the congregation to feel a sense of joy in the fact that they were on sure footing as they pursued the task of renewal, even though it might not always feel that way. The text I chose for the third sermon assignment that first year was 1 Samuel 3:1-10 (11-20). I had not initially considered the books of First and Second Samuel to be stories of renewal, but they do in fact chronicle Israel’s transition from the leadership of judges and priests to rule by a king, which they hoped would bring a renewed commitment to making manifest God’s love and justice. At the time, the members of my congregation were engaged in a deliberate application of the outcomes of an Appreciative Inquiry into renewal. The central thesis of 1 Samuel is that rulers who listen to and obey God’s commandments to love and seek justice will experience renewal and growth, while those who misalign themselves will fail, “for the foundations of the earth are the Lord’s,” it says at the outset of the book of 1 Samuel (2:8). While this verse was not a part of my text, it informed my interpretation and helped me explore the third extraordinary situation on which I wanted to focus: the extraordinary challenge of church renewal.

Year Two – The Artist amongst my People

For my second-year project I decided I would work at articulating God’s presence by “theologizing” our church slogan in my sermon assignments. Rosedale United Church’s slogan is, “Learn, Grow, Serve,” and one of the takeaways from our Appreciative Inquiry into renewal was that we should work on “coming to increased clarity around our identity as a Christian church.”¹¹¹ My sermons would look at what we were *learning* about God, how we were *growing*

¹¹¹ *Renewal Implementation Detail Planning*, September 9, 2017.

as disciples of Christ, and how we were being called to *serve* our community based on our theology. The project of theologizing the slogan would encourage me to work at resonant and clear proclamation, while bolstering my congregation's identity as Christians at a time when our identity felt fuzzy. When the task of congregational renewal was interrupted by the sudden and unexpected departure of almost the entire staff team, I wondered: what does our sense of who God is and what God is about have to do with who we are? All of a sudden, we were all truly facing a challenge that felt as monumental and more pressing than our quest for renewal. I wanted my congregation to feel the equally monumental and extraordinary power of God present with them through the words of my sermons as I lifted up the theological claims of scripture.

During the second year of the program I would also try to get the congregation more comfortable with explicit talk about God by offering small groups that met over the course of the year to talk on a more personal level about what we were learning, how we were growing as disciples of Christ, and the church's call to serve. The groups were an effort to create more comfort and dialogue around the basics of Christian identity, starting with the persons of the Trinity. I wanted to get people in the congregation thinking that faith is something we talk about, not something we avoid talking about out of fear of making people uncomfortable. Instead of people in the congregation thinking that theological talk might alienate seekers, I wanted to see whether theology could be a way to bring people in to church, as evocative language that has the potential to help them interpret their lives and experience, rather than exclusive language that keeps people out. I wanted to find out how a clear articulation of the theological claims of scripture and United Church of Canada tradition would impact my hearer's sense of empowerment when faced with monumental challenge.

The text I chose for the fourth sermon assignment was Mark 7:24-37, Jesus' encounter with a Syrophenician woman's faith and his subsequent healing of a deaf man. Knowing the task I had set for this sermon was to highlight what we were *learning* about God, I wrestled with the text's presentation of Divinity. It is one of the fundamental tenets of the Christian faith that (for us) Jesus reveals God, but in the story of the Syrophenician woman's faith, Jesus is portrayed as holding certain prejudices. The scripture story allowed me not only to talk about what we were learning about God, but also to lift up the fourth extraordinary situation: the extraordinary challenge of white privilege and racism. It was the inclusion of Jesus' encounter with the deaf man in the lectionary text that helped me find a theological claim that felt authentic and still true to the witness of the text. The God I saw *revealed* in Jesus was a God who transforms and heals hearts bound up in extraordinary challenge, in this case the extraordinary challenge of racism. Here was the good news: as Christians we are people who (through God) have the capacity to be healed and transformed. Over the course of the story, something softens in Jesus and his reaction to the woman at the end is not what it was at the beginning. I chose to see God's love like a shunt that opened Jesus' heart and allowed him to see more clearly. The evidence for this came through in his subsequent interaction with the deaf man. Jesus chooses the words, "be opened," as he heals him instead of saying the more obvious, "listen," or "hear." I wondered if Jesus chose those words because he himself had just had an experience of being opened by God. I hoped my congregation would learn that God's grace can transform even the most pernicious prejudices, and that this might help them feel a renewed sense of call to transformation and the courage, conviction and hope to do so.

In the fifth sermon assignment I was meant to address *Jesus* and how we are *growing* as his disciples. Again, I would be preaching from the lectionary. The text I settled on was Mark's

story of the widow's offering, Mark 12:38-44. As a story of faithful sacrifice it seemed the perfect illustration of Jesus' person and work and our own calling as disciples, but falling as it did on Canadian "Remembrance Day" – our commemoration of the World Wars – I struggled with how to *celebrate* the notion of faithful sacrifice (this particular sermon was for my Preaching as Celebration class). After much turmoil, I was able to find something to celebrate in the widow's (and Jesus') demonstration of *trust* in God. As disciples of Christ we are called to emulate Jesus' trust, God is with us in the same way God was and is with Jesus. In this sermon assignment I lifted up the extraordinary challenge of feeling vulnerable when faced with the monumental.

I preached the sixth sermon assignment that second year the Sunday after my colleagues each announced their resignations and I was asked to take on the role of acting Team Leader. The announcements from my colleagues came as a total surprise – totally out of the blue – neither was I expecting to be asked to step into the role of acting Team Leader. I chose the Isaiah passage designated as the Old Testament reading in the lectionary for Sunday, January 13. Its powerful proclamation of God's presence helping us navigate turbulent and rough "waters" seemed the perfect image and metaphor to speak to my congregation's circumstances. The extraordinary challenge I would explore in this sermon was navigating the unexpected. I paired this text with Luke's depiction of Jesus at his baptism. My imaginings of the questions Jesus might have been asking, standing at the water, waiting for baptism, became an echo of my congregation's questions in the face of the monumental and extraordinary. I did not end up speaking to my proposed focus as I meant to – the *Holy Spirit* and how the Spirit inspires us to *serve* – though I kept this intention in mind while writing and found that my audience ended up with their own thoughts and inspiration on the matter.

For my work with the small groups that year, I met with two groups, one with five members and the other with three. I brought to our meetings open-ended questions and activities to get members thinking in personal terms about the concepts of the Trinity. I set out words and phrases describing each person of the Trinity that I had pulled from the United Church of Canada's various Statements of Faith. I asked members to choose the words and phrases that spoke to them and had them explain why. I then asked about their earliest experiences of God/Jesus/Spirit and how their experiences and beliefs have changed over time. It was the first time many of them had had the opportunity to articulate their beliefs.

Year Three – Time to Celebrate

In the third year of the program my project was to intentionally craft my sermons for good news, using the principles of celebrative design I had learned in year two of the program, in order to foster in my listeners the sense that God is actively engaged with us and at work to change lives, relationships and our world. I began to write for emotional resonance. As the congregation moved into an even deeper time of struggle (with our Director of Music on leave, pending an investigation into sexual misconduct and our leadership still very much in transition), I wanted to put into practice preaching that would empower my listeners by calling back to intuitive faith – that we need not despair at our challenges, but partner with God in mending our world.

My project for the final set of sermon assignments was to strengthen the endings of my sermons. Now was the time for me to put into practice the skills I had learned over the previous two years of study. I would work at ending my messages with a clear celebration of God's presence, leaving my audience with a sense of courage, and conviction, and hope, an expression of the faith that God is active and engaged in helping us meet the challenges of transformation.

The content of my third-year courses – Preaching as Social Transformation and Preaching about Women in the Old Testament – meant I would need to keep both the extraordinary and monumental challenges of our time and in the life of my congregation in tension with the extraordinary and monumental theological claims of my texts.

For the seventh sermon assignment I worked with the bold claim of the psalmist: “I am fearfully and wonderfully made” (Psalm 139:14). The claim immediately resonated with my core intuitive belief. “Yes,” I thought, “the psalmist’s proclamation is also my own; I am fearfully and wonderfully made!” But as a white woman, economically privileged, and able-bodied I recognized that the psalm’s declaration has also been validated for me by society at large. I sensed in the proclamation a tension, that perhaps here was the declaration of someone making a proclamation of their worth in the face of the active negation of the same from other people and institutions in society. I wanted to uncover for my audience the joy unleashed in protest, that they might hear the proclamation, “I am fearfully and wonderfully made,” as an act of opposition to forces that negate the lives and experiences of others. In this sermon I focused on the extraordinary challenge of standing up to a society that devalues our worth.

Leonora Tubbs Tisdale lists one of the characteristics of prophetic preaching as being “concerned with the evils and shortcomings of the present social order.”¹¹² As I looked at the stories about women in the Old Testament and decided on which text to preach, the story of the sacrifice of Jephthah’s daughter seemed to present itself in lights. This was the text with which I chose to engage in my final and eighth sermon assignment. In the sacrifice of Jephthah’s daughter I saw a story about a human extinction that paralleled the current and real trajectory of human extinction due to the intensification of global warming. I wondered where God – the

¹¹² Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, *Prophetic Preaching: A Pastoral Approach* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 10.

Spirit – was in the story of Jephthah’s daughter in the same way that I wondered where God is in our own story of generational sacrifice. In this sermon I would lift up the extraordinary challenge of climate change. I wanted my sermon to end with a celebration of the Spirit’s presence, but a celebration that would reveal the Spirit’s presence as the voice of protest.

In my third year of the program I also ran a small group that gave people the chance to talk specifically about the theological claims they were hearing in my sermons. We not only spent time talking about what they were hearing, but about how the scriptural claims affected their sense of empowerment in the face of their challenges. I interviewed the members of the group individually at the outset of the year and again after a few months to determine the impact of my proclamation on the perception of their challenges. It was schooling in the art of theological reflection. Listeners gathered to talk about whether, how, and where they saw these claims playing out in their lives and how these claims unleashed their sense of agency and power in the face of the monumental and extraordinary. The goal was to create a facility with seeing and naming God at work in the world and in our lives, in the theology they heard me proclaim from the pulpit. If members of the group could not hear it in my preaching, they would not be able to work with it in their own lives, encouraging me to really work on my technique in crafting good news.

Feedback in all three years of the program was attained by questionnaires. In the first year I solicited feedback only from the Parish Project Group (the PPG) and from three members of the congregation. In years two and three everyone in attendance on the day of a preaching assignment were given a questionnaire to fill out. The change that I wanted to see over this course of study was in my own ease and ability to name and proclaim the theological claims of scripture, that the members of my congregation might have greater ease and facility in naming

and celebrating God's presence in their own lives. In order to make this happen my listeners needed opportunities to encounter God through my preaching, and to hear my intentional proclamation of scriptural claims. Sermon questionnaires and interviews with the people who signed up for my small groups would help me assess the impact of my proclamation on my hearers' sense of empowerment in the face of their challenges. A final survey given to everyone who was a member of my Parish Project Group during the three years, or a part of one of my small groups, put the final say on the impact of my efforts into the hands of my listeners.

Shifting the Needle – Results and Evaluation

What exactly did I learn through these three years of study? "Did the needle shift?" as my advisor puts it. What changed for me as a result of my projects and my course of study into the art of preaching? Personally, I have seen a shift in my ability to proclaim God's presence in extraordinary times. I moved from being tongue-tied to a herald of good news (at least compared to myself at the beginning of this program). Because my project was personal, primarily related to my own growth, my results are accordingly personal, measured by what my listeners heard, its impact on them, and their subsequent perception of their challenges in light of God's gospel.

Over the course of the first year of the program my growth and change came through the adoption of what I call a "biblical mindset." I began to inhabit a new perspective and to see the world differently. I began to operate from the standpoint that "the foundations of the earth are the Lord's," and that mindset influenced my preaching. In my second year in the program my growth and change came from my attempts to "face the monumental," when I began to clearly articulate in my sermons our monumental challenges and trouble, but also to challenge myself to name God's monumental promises – the theological claims of the scriptural text. In the third

year of the program I crafted my sermons to celebrate God's presence as emboldening and empowering. God is with us, yes, but in extraordinary times, as we face the monumental, God is with us as the Spirit, empowering us for social transformation and a prophetic reimagining of our world.

The Foundations of the Earth are the Lord's

The moment it happened, the moment when I really began to see the world – my reality – with a biblical mindset and through the lens of scripture was Christmastime during the first year of my DMin program. I was walking through our new neighbourhood (the one we had moved to for my husband's work, the job that ended up falling through). It was a dark time in my life, personally, but walking through the neighbourhood the lights with which people had decorated their houses suddenly seemed to me more than just pretty decorations to brighten the long December nights. All of a sudden they seemed to contain for me a proclamation – a declaration – to help me recall this deep truth of human existence: that God's light shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome it (John 1:5). Evil and menace also seemed powerful forces that fall and into the winter in national and global political events, but here was this proclamation of light: goodness is stronger. The lights seemed to me a promise: I could trust that the foundations of the earth are the Lord's. The Christmas carols I sang that year seemed to reinforce the existence of these two realms, one only apparently powerful but the other *truly* so, "Joy to the world! The Saviour reigns!"

Prior to coming to this realization and mindset I had been preaching from the standpoint of skepticism. I had approached every text about which I would preach with the same question: how can this be true? How is this text rational? Logical? How does it stand up to the scientific method? Halfway through the first year of this program I started to shift and to approach

scripture with a new question, not “how can I believe this?” but “how does this text *resonate*, emotionally, existentially?” I began to evaluate the theological claims in a scriptural text as emotional and spiritual testimony. I stopped trying to explain *how* the claims of scripture could be true and began instead to hold them in tension with the competing claims in our world. I began to ask: when and where have I known this claim to be emotionally and spiritually resonant? In my first sermon assignment that first year I preached on Ezekiel 33:7-11, where the characters in the text raise the following question: “how then can we live?” (Ezekiel 33:10). It was the Hebrew people’s question, living in exile far from the Temple: “our offenses and sins weigh us down, and we are wasting away because of them,” they say, “how then can we live?” (Ezekiel 33:10). I recognized in this question an echo of my own deep, existential questions, and of the people in my congregation.

“A strong response to the reality of challenging times,” the PPG wrote, “with good news expressed as the call to look for who has shaped us, and who we ‘lookout’ for,” they wrote.¹¹³ The Parish Project Group “noticed the *intent* around meaningful God-talk,”¹¹⁴ but also that I did not quite get there – why? Feedback from a member of the congregation summed it up: “The hard parts of the text...were avoided,” he wrote.¹¹⁵ Similarly the hard parts and challenges in our own lives were not overtly named and addressed. “I could have used more unpacking about what made the particular moment extraordinary,” he wrote.¹¹⁶

It took me two attempts to pass my second sermon assignment that first year. By the time I preached my redo of the second sermon assignment that first year, I was beginning to undergo my shift in mentality, in fact, it was having to redo that assignment that helped me grow. I was

¹¹³ Doug Norris, *Parish Project Group Form*, September 10, 2017

¹¹⁴ Norris, *ibid.*

¹¹⁵ Jason Meyers, *Congregation Sermon Evaluation Form*, March 11, 2018.

¹¹⁶ Meyers, *ibid.*

asked to be more deliberate in confronting the “trouble” in our world and to hold this in tension with the faith claims of scripture as opposed to softening or avoiding both. I had been trying to articulate God’s presence in the face of challenges I would not name outright and even twisted my interpretation of scripture to avoid. Redoing the assignment helped me to learn that “facing the monumental” is what unleashes powerful proclamation from the tension that exists between what is and God’s promised future.

I took this insight to my second attempt and immediately saw in my new text an empowering claim: One need not be resigned to the way of the world, the scriptures seemed to say to me; never lose faith in God’s capacity to surprise us. In my second attempt I would interpret the story of the Magi’s visit to Jesus as a means of asking why Christians make such a fuss about Jesus? Why this entourage? Why the gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh? My proclamations were growing stronger: “Church people make such a fuss about Jesus because in his life and death he shows us that we are not alone, that this is, in fact, God’s wondrous world,” I wrote in my redo.¹¹⁷ “It is our conviction that God raised Jesus to new life and so we have faith that what we call the ‘ways of the world’ are not the final way and that they will not receive the final say,” I wrote.¹¹⁸ It was a much more effective sermon, but still the joy my listeners may have felt was not as soaring as it could have been had I strongly and fearlessly named contemporary opponents to God’s realm, those “Herods” of today. I was lifting up the theological claims of scripture for the first time in my preaching ministry, but lifting them in opposition to what? I knew the “trouble” I was preaching about in my *own* mind, but I would only reference it obliquely in my sermons and my listeners needed specifics. “I was waiting for

¹¹⁷ Kristin Philipson, *Elective Sermon Assignment, Year I*, January 7, 2018.

¹¹⁸ Philipson, *ibid.*

you to say something, anything, about the ‘Herods’ of our day,” my Professor wrote.¹¹⁹ “You spoke about an important issue but you stopped short of making it sufficiently real for the present context,” she said.¹²⁰ I struggled with how to make the prophetic and the challenging bring my listeners an inner sense of joy.

In my third sermon assignment of the first year of the program I was able to put into practice the idea of inhabiting a biblical mindset. I was reading through the book of 1 Samuel in preparation for my third sermon assignment and a line of text jumped out at me: “the foundations of the earth are the Lord’s.” What a claim! And what if, in my thinking and writing, I accepted this claim as an emotional and spiritual truth? The PPG said it was the most comfortable of my sermons, that “comfort came through [my] voice.”¹²¹ A peer reviewer wrote, “I thought that the audience who heard about God’s love and God’s justice through your sermon were able to enjoy God’s peace,”¹²² however, he also made the point that, “people experience God when they [are] actually [called to] do God’s work.”¹²³ In his review of my work he wrote that the sermon was “topical without being actionable.”¹²⁴ “The objective was met, but I also could have used a little more ‘trouble’ to describe the circumstance in which we need renewal,” a younger member evaluating me wrote of my third sermon. “What would a renewal of discipleship look like in this place?” he wondered.¹²⁵

As I summed up in my integrative paper that year, I learned that the more our theological claims are held in tension with the challenges in our world, the more joy the listener feels, not that they are convinced of their capacity alone, but that they are newly convinced of God’s.

¹¹⁹ Gennifer Brooks, *Sermon Comments*, January 12, 2018.

¹²⁰ Philipson, *ibid.*

¹²¹ Kirsten Clarke, *Parish Project Group Response Form*, January 14, 2018.

¹²² Jongduk Kim, *Peer Review*, February 23, 2018

¹²³ Kim, *ibid.*

¹²⁴ Kim, *ibid.*

¹²⁵ Jason Meyers, *Congregation Sermon Evaluation Form*, March 11, 2018.

Preaching that fosters an encounter with God, and that leaves its listeners with a deep sense of joy, is preaching that grapples with and acknowledges a listener's most existential questions. Alyce M. McKenzie quotes Annie Dillard when she notes that preachers, more than any other writer, must "write as if [we] were dying. At the same time, [we must] assume [we] write for an audience consisting solely of terminal patients. That is, after all, the case. What would [we] begin writing if [we] knew [we] would die soon? What could [we] say to a dying person that would not enrage by its triviality?"¹²⁶

Facing the Monumental

In my quest to find where joy lives in a sermon, my first year in the program had taught me that I was avoiding something. A chance visit to the Art Gallery of Ontario, helped me to find the words. I mentioned stumbling upon an exhibit by the Indigenous artist Rebecca Belmore called "Facing the Monumental." The title of the exhibit was a reference to the artist's perception of her calling. Her work tackled racism, colonialism, missing and murdered Indigenous women in Canada, the plight of refugees worldwide. A photo accompanied the exhibit of a figure in a safety vest facing the vastness of the wide, blank, landscape. She had written a poem that was printed on the gallery wall: "for decades/ I have been working/ as the artist amongst my people/ calling to the past/ witnessing the present/ standing forward/ facing the monumental."¹²⁷ "That is what preaching is all about," I said to myself. And all of a sudden I knew what my preaching had been missing in the first year of the program: a clear facing and naming of "the monumental." I needed to *face* the monumental, the monumental challenges brought up in scriptural texts and the monumental in our own world, and so that is what I did. In

¹²⁶ Alyce M. McKenzie, *Novel Preaching: Tips from Top Writers on Crafting Creative Sermons*, (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 18.

¹²⁷ Rebecca Belmore, *Facing the Monumental*, ed. Wanda Nanibush (Toronto, Ontario and Frederickton, New Brunswick: Art Gallery of Ontario and Goose Lane Editions, 2018), 17.

the second year of the program I made a made concerted effort in my sermons to name deep challenges – racism and prejudice, trust in vulnerability, navigating troubled “waters” as a metaphor for tough and troubling times – but my sermons also attempted to articulate another “monumental:” God’s monumental promises and grace that I found in the theological claims of scripture.

In my fourth sermon assignment I tackled the story of Jesus’ encounter with the Syrophenician woman in Mark 7:24-37. “In Jesus’ mind there were clear boundaries to his ministry, there is this wall in his mind, and the Syrophenician woman finds herself on the other side of it,” I wrote.¹²⁸ I faced the monumental head on, relating the trouble in the biblical text to a parallel trouble in our world. “White people continue to be blocked – impeded – walled up when it comes to seeing people of colour as part of the family and not permanent outsiders,” I wrote.¹²⁹ What force is powerful enough to break down such a monumental barrier? “Prejudice is a powerful force,” I wrote,¹³⁰ “but here, in this place, we believe in a force even more powerful. It is God’s grace that Jesus reveals when he does a sudden reversal in the story. When he changes course and decides to help” the woman.¹³¹ The PPG wrote that “the sermon brought ‘nourishment’ and ‘grace’ to the congregation.”¹³²

Kristin saw ‘prejudice,’ starting with the prejudice of Jesus in the text, as the crux of the reading. She carefully led us through prejudice in our larger denomination, our local congregation, right into the prejudice we all carry in our hearts. She courageously revealed her own which gave us permission to go there personally. She showed us the human side of Jesus. Thus we were opened to receive the grace inherent in the text and mediated through her.¹³³

¹²⁸ Kristin Philipson, Sermon Assignment, Core II, September 9, 2018.

¹²⁹ Philipson, *ibid.*

¹³⁰ Philipson, *ibid.*

¹³¹ Philipson, *ibid.*

¹³² Anne Simmonds, *Parish Project Group Response Form*, September 9, 2018.

¹³³ Simmonds, *ibid.*

Facing the monumental and proclaiming God’s monumental promise and assurance helped the congregation to encounter God’s presence. One listener wrote that they had learned that “the power of God has no limits, [but] I do, and perhaps the greatest gift of God is God’s grace when I need it due to my limited view,” they wrote.¹³⁴ Listeners were challenged into “recognizing my ‘hidden’ prejudices” (as one listener wrote),¹³⁵ though a few were pushed too far: “[This sermon] made me feel bad and uncomfortable,”¹³⁶ one listener wrote; “I am here trying to be caring and loving and saying the United Church is racist is not helpful.”¹³⁷ Another wrote, “there are so many challenges in believing and following Jesus in today’s society – emphasizing passages with Jesus as a racist is not helpful.”¹³⁸ But another wrote that the sermon helped them to “be open, [and] more understanding;”¹³⁹ to “realize our prejudices and work to overcome them.”¹⁴⁰ Another wrote of the “need to be aware of [the] ever present reality and power of preconceived notions in our lives and how they hold us back from living life fully in the way God wills for us in openness and love.”¹⁴¹

Life imitated art in my second sermon assignment in the second year, the fifth of the program. Overwhelmed by pressure I left for the church the morning I was set to preach the assignment without a workable manuscript. I had all the pieces of my sermon on paper, but they were not coming together. I was truly “facing the monumental:” potential failure. But in the car on the way to the church a monumental word came to me: trust. Lo and behold, it was the interpretive key I needed to help me bring the pieces of my sermon together, which took as its

¹³⁴ *Congregational Sermon Evaluation Form*, September 9, 2018.

¹³⁵ *Congregational Sermon Evaluation Form*, September 9, 2018.

¹³⁶ *Congregational Sermon Evaluation Form*, September 9, 2018.

¹³⁷ *Congregational Sermon Evaluation Form*, September 9, 2018.

¹³⁸ *Congregational Sermon Evaluation Form*, September 9, 2018.

¹³⁹ *Congregational Sermon Evaluation Form*, September 9, 2018.

¹⁴⁰ *Congregational Sermon Evaluation Form*, September 9, 2018.

¹⁴¹ *Congregational Sermon Evaluation Form*, September 9, 2018.

text the story of the widow's offering and Jesus' witnessing of her gift, Mark 12:38-44. I ended up speaking without a manuscript. In the text Jesus struggles with trust in the face of the monumental. He knew he was nearing the end of his ministry and he could feel it. Could he trust God to be with him? In my sacred imagination Jesus was asking himself this question as he watches the widow face the monumental, her poverty and hunger, with a monumental trust. She gives all that she has to live on to the Temple offering. "When our hands are open to give they are also open to be held" by the Divine, I wrote.¹⁴² I embodied my proclamation – literally – as I opened myself, preaching without a manuscript, trusting that God would hold me. "Her open palm was a powerful symbol of vulnerability and hope in a world facing even more monumental challenges moving forward. It was grace, encouragement and a lesson for all of us in trust in and celebration of the 'Spirit' who is never found wanting; always willing to take our open hand," the PPG wrote.¹⁴³

Listeners heard a definitive proclamation. "God gives us strength to face the challenges life presents us," one listener wrote.¹⁴⁴ "Facing the monumental with open hands, an open heart, and love and trust in myself that I am not alone," said another.¹⁴⁵ After the second sermon assignment my listeners wrote of feeling a sense of courage, conviction, and hope in their faith through my attempt at authentic proclamation in the face of the monumental. "When she unfurled her hand, she let God take her hand," one person quoted; "very powerful! When we are facing the monumental, be open to God. This will open your heart to hope, faith and love," they wrote.¹⁴⁶ I can face "the monumental with open hands, an open heart, and love and trust in

¹⁴² Kristin Philipson, *Elective Sermon Assignment, Year II*, November 11, 2018.

¹⁴³ Anne Simmonds, *Parish Project Group Response Form*, November 11, 2018.

¹⁴⁴ *Congregational Sermon Evaluation Form*, November 11, 2018.

¹⁴⁵ *Congregational Sermon Evaluation Form*, November 11, 2018.

¹⁴⁶ *Congregational Sermon Evaluation Form*, November 11, 2018.

myself that I am not alone. [I can] give with an open hand and heart and I will receive and be filled,” wrote another.¹⁴⁷ Another listener said that the sermon was, “a reminder that even when confronted with the monumental, ‘we can overcome.’”¹⁴⁸

The week prior to preaching my sixth sermon assignment was the week my two colleagues both announced they were leaving the congregation. Preaching from the lectionary, I worked with both the Old and the New Testament texts, from Isaiah 43:1-7 and Luke 3:15-22; the Hebrew people wondering if God is with them as they navigate turbulent “waters,” and Jesus standing at the edge of the same river at his baptism and (in my sacred imagination) wondering the same. My growth in pressing at the claims of the text and my use of metaphor and image to create familiarity and identification (the Jordan river stood in for the “unexpected circumstances” that cross our paths and God – as proclaimed by Isaiah – as the One who helps us navigate the waters) helped my congregation to see and hear that God is with them, by the Spirit moving in and through them. I faced the monumental: “Can we really believe that...[God is] with us, when we pass through the waters, as we navigate this river? Or are all the pretty words of our faith just ink on paper and nothing more?”¹⁴⁹ The PPG summed up their response:

We were deeply impressed and grateful for Kristin’s leadership after the congregation experienced two pieces of shocking news. She deftly crafted a sermon that deeply explored the meaning of the two lectionary readings, and also framed the imminent change to the congregation in a way that signaled strength, imparted hope, and empowered the community as a whole. She was vulnerable in front of the congregation in sharing a deeply personal [story] of loss. She told her entire story in a way that let the congregation see themselves not as helpless victims of circumstance, but as powerful messengers of God who have the innate capacity to help themselves and others through challenging times.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁷ *Congregational Sermon Evaluation Form*, November 11, 2018.

¹⁴⁸ *Congregational Sermon Evaluation Form*, November 11, 2018.

¹⁴⁹ Kristin Philipson, *Peer-Reviewed Sermon Assignment, Year II*, January 13, 2019.

¹⁵⁰ Anne Simmonds, *Parish Project Group Response*, January 13, 2019.

Listeners heard a definitive word and could move forward with courage, conviction, and hope. “Can I navigate a rough passage?”¹⁵¹ one listener wrote, “will God help? Yes.”¹⁵² One listener felt encouraged in “being a supportive voice for others whenever I can. Small gestures add up for someone in a difficult place,” this person wrote.¹⁵³ Another asked: “How can I be God’s instrument?”¹⁵⁴ “A very bold and beautiful sermon. [It] made clear and personal how God acts through us to be present here and now,” said one listener. Another said they heard “that each of us in our actions to others in times of difficulty are ‘the words made flesh.’ Without reaching out to others in pain, the word is only that and not real.”¹⁵⁵

Celebrating God’s Presence

In the third year I moved to celebrate God’s presence in my sermons. Sermon seven (the first of that third year) took as its text and celebrated this claim: “I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made” (Psalm 139:14). What a proclamation and declaration, especially when we know that society celebrates some bodies, but denigrates others as not worth celebrating because they are “not normal.” I inhabited the biblical mindset and accepted as emotionally and spiritually true the proclamation that we are fearfully and wonderfully made. I held this in tension with the monumental we face in current society: some bodies are not celebrated as “fearfully and wonderfully made” because they are not considered “normal.” And here I moved to celebrate God’s presence in the call to social transformation. God calls us to challenge those who say certain bodies are not fearfully and wonderfully made. I wrote in the sermon:

I wonder if you’ve ever had that experience of your body – your being – not conforming to somebody else’s definition of normal. And yet, when you think back, what strikes you is not your body’s sense of what it lacked but it’s capacity; your body’s capacity for

¹⁵¹ *Congregational Sermon Evaluation Form*, January 13, 2019.

¹⁵² *Congregational Sermon Evaluation Form*, January 13, 2019.

¹⁵³ *Congregational Sermon Evaluation Form*, January 13, 2019.

¹⁵⁴ *Congregational Sermon Evaluation Form*, January 13, 2019.

¹⁵⁵ *Congregational Sermon Evaluation Form*, January 13, 2019.

healing, your body's capacity for growth. Whatever you were experiencing your body had a built-in resiliency; it could conjure up virtue – patience and courage and hope. Your body made connections; you found a way through. 'I am fearfully and wonderfully made,' you proclaimed, not because your body conformed to some outside idea of normal but because you'd witnessed in yourself the innate and sacred – you, as conceived by your Creator – strong, brave, full of capacity, fearfully and wonderfully made.¹⁵⁶

The PPG felt that the sermon achieved its goals, “in fact, it went well beyond this, in that it touched the hearts of listeners and embodied the gospel as proclamation in a truly beautiful way,” they wrote.¹⁵⁷ “[God] wants us to challenge norms,” one listener wrote.¹⁵⁸ “God knows me and understands me when I find myself in challenging situations or new realities,” wrote another.¹⁵⁹ “God embraces the outsider,” one listener wrote of their takeaway.¹⁶⁰ Another wrote that they learned “that we are crafted to withstand what life requires from us. We need to realize this because we are made by God.”¹⁶¹

In my final sermon assignment, I addressed what I consider to be the most pressing, extraordinary, and monumental challenge of our day – climate change – through a text of terror: Judges 11:29-40. I related Jephthah's sacrifice of his daughter to our current generations' sacrifice of our young and of the planet in our quest for immediate gratification as opposed to sustainability. It was a difficult text in which to celebrate God's presence; God seems so absent from this text. But when I looked more closely, I saw God's presence in voices of protest in the biblical story, the voices of Jephthah's daughter's companions and the lament they would not let die. In our own time I celebrated the Spirit's presence in our lament and protest against the sacrifice of the earth and the potential sacrifice of subsequent generations. My listeners were

¹⁵⁶ Kristin Philipson, *Sermon Assignment, Core III*, September 8, 2019.

¹⁵⁷ Anne Simmonds, *Parish Project Group Response Form*, September 8, 2019.

¹⁵⁸ *Congregational Sermon Evaluation Form*, September 8, 2019.

¹⁵⁹ *Congregational Sermon Evaluation Form*, September 8, 2019.

¹⁶⁰ *Congregational Sermon Evaluation Form*, September 8, 2019.

¹⁶¹ *Congregational Sermon Evaluation Form*, September 8, 2019.

moved to face the extraordinary challenge of the climate crisis with courage, conviction, and hope. “The difficult text became very relevant and we definitely felt her intended proclamation. She embodied her message, which was that the Spirit is alive and well in the world and working through our feelings and passions evoked by the text,” wrote the PPG.¹⁶² “I feel challenged to renew my intention to address the climate crisis as best I can as an element of faithful stewardship of our planet,” one listener wrote.¹⁶³ “Today’s sermon really opened our hearts and made us realize that we can make positive change in the world,” wrote another.¹⁶⁴

Surprised by Proclamation – Homiletical Significance

At a time when I was personally faced with extraordinary challenges, when my congregation faced extraordinary change, and when global challenges felt extraordinarily intense and pressing, I learned to “face the monumental,” to lift up the theological claims of scripture and to celebrate God’s presence. My listeners were filled with the courage, conviction, and hope that come from an encounter with God through preaching.

I learned to adopt and preach from what I call a biblical mindset, a mimicking of scripture’s poetic method of holding parallel and conflicting ideas in tension. This is the mindset of the Book of Lamentations, for example, when the prophet Jeremiah describes the “extraordinary” that he is up against: “I remember my affliction and my wandering, the bitterness and the gall. I well remember them, and my soul is downcast within me,” he writes (3:19-20). But then, in the next breath, in the next line, he holds this reality in tension with a deep, core belief: “Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: Because of the Lord’s great love we are not consumed, for [God’s] compassions never fail. They are new every morning,

¹⁶² Anne Simmonds, *Parish Project Group Response Form*, October 27, 2019.

¹⁶³ *Congregational Sermon Evaluation Form*, October 27, 2019.

¹⁶⁴ *Congregational Sermon Evaluation Form*, October 27, 2019.

great is your faithfulness,” he writes (Lam 3:21-23). Preaching for courage, conviction and hope in extraordinary times means adopting this kind of mindset, holding parallel and competing realities in tension and pressing the theological claims of scripture. Job gives us another example. “Have pity on me, my friends,” he says, from deep in his own extraordinary challenges (19:19). And yet, in the lines that follow he goes on to press this claim: “I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth” (Job 19:25). Preaching from a biblical mindset means trusting the proclamation of scripture, as Mary does, that “nothing is impossible with God” (Lk 1:37). As a preacher I cannot explain how God’s promises work, but I can witness to where and when I have seen them in action in people’s lives and in our world.

The most significant learning for me came from talking with the members of the small groups I led during the second and third years of the program. Members reinforced for me that most people who come to church are longing for an encounter with God. In many cases they already view the world from a kind of biblical mindset, but sometimes proclamation can still sound hollow. “Sometimes I absolutely need to hear these words [the theological claims of scripture], see them, feel them and know that they are real. And I do. Sometimes they feel like hollow, unfair lies,” said one member of my PPG.¹⁶⁵ “Sometimes yes, and sometimes not so much,” said another member of my PPG about the resonance of the theological claims of scripture.¹⁶⁶ “Over the years at certain times when my heart has been opened either by pain, joy, or prayer/meditation these words have dropped in as great comfort,” she said.¹⁶⁷ Another member of the PPG said that the theological claims of scripture do not always resonate for him, “but in a broader context, such as a sermon or meditation, skillfully used [they] can increase the

¹⁶⁵ Laurie Hurst August 29 19 email to Kristin Philipson

¹⁶⁶ Anne Simmonds August 29 19 email to Kristin Philipson

¹⁶⁷ Anne Simmonds August 29 19 email to Kristin Philipson

impact of the message. It fails when used as...‘comfort food.’”¹⁶⁸ Members long for meaningful proclamation, and the meaning comes from preaching that speaks directly to the real, monumental challenges of people’s lives. One woman expressed her longing: “I’m really disturbed by a lot of things going on in the world right now,” she said.¹⁶⁹ In order to resonate proclamation needs to speak to real trouble and suffering in our lives. One member of the PPG wrote,

I think these passages [of proclamation] are beautiful and in some way I wouldn’t even begin to want to have to explain, are true as well. So, when such readings may be proclaimed in the liturgy I think the work of the holy spirit is proclaimed. But I don’t expect them to proclaim that life is life without struggle or dire times - just that somehow, it is a proclamation about not being alone in the struggle and finding meaning in life in that.¹⁷⁰

Monumental hope can only be proclaimed when a preacher truly faces the monumental.

It was during the small group sessions that I heard more about the kind of struggles people bring with them to church, struggles that they hold in tension with the claims of scripture. “I’m 67 and thinking about what challenges lie ahead.... I’m wondering how I will be able to deal with declining abilities over the coming years,” one woman told me.¹⁷¹ “[My daughter] is on the spectrum and helping her to find something post-science degree, fulfilling for her career-wise, I’m trying to figure out how to help,” another woman said.¹⁷² In addition to personal struggles, people sit with their worries about our wider world: “What is our role and how can we be most effective in dealing with the global crisis? We can’t take on the world, but maybe we shouldn’t be saying that,” a different woman said.¹⁷³ For theological claims to have real impact preachers

¹⁶⁸ Bennett, *ibid.*

¹⁶⁹ Joannah Lawson, *Small Group Meeting*, November 26, 2018.

¹⁷⁰ Judith Leckie August 29 19 email to Kristin Philipson

¹⁷¹ Karin Shaddick, *Interview*, August 22, 2019.

¹⁷² MaryAnn Crichton, *Interview*, August 30, 2019.

¹⁷³ Clare Barry, *Interview*, August 30, 2019.

must first articulate the monumental struggles in people’s lives. That is what moves proclamation from trite and cliché to truly impactful.

Celebrating God’s presence is not simply a celebration of life being easy and smooth for us, it is a celebration of God-with-us no matter what we are going through. The small groups confirmed for me the power of proclamation in helping my listeners feel a sense of God’s presence and in filling them with courage, conviction, and hope. After my seventh sermon, where I lifted up the following claim from scripture – “I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made” (Ps 139: 14) – one small group member described the impact of this proclamation. “It gives you strength. I’m a single mother of two adopted kids. I was the first female engineer partner in my firm. I can relate to being outside of normal. Strength increases your spirituality,” she said.¹⁷⁴ We revisited the impact of proclamation after my second sermon, where I lifted up God’s Spirit as the voice of lament and protest. “Yes – hearing the proclamation I felt I could do something – be an activist,” one woman said.¹⁷⁵ “The Spirit I hear as capacity, the source of strength,” she said.¹⁷⁶ Proclamation “gives everyone encouragement to stand up so we can make a difference,” another group member said.¹⁷⁷ “I’ve always been an activist and outspoken, reminding myself of these things is positive and helpful. We all have the potential to be leaders,” she said.¹⁷⁸

I sent a final anonymous survey in January 2020, to everyone who had been a member of my PPG or my small groups over the three years of this project – 21 people in total. Feedback shows the effectiveness of theological proclamation as a means of empowering listeners with a

¹⁷⁴ MaryAnn Crichton, *Small Group Meeting*, September 26, 2019.

¹⁷⁵ Susan Vance, *Small Group Meeting*, November 7, 2019.

¹⁷⁶ Vance, *ibid.*

¹⁷⁷ MaryAnn Crichton, *Small Group Meeting*, November 7, 2019.

¹⁷⁸ MaryAnn Crichton, *Small Group Meeting*, November 7, 2019.

sense of courage, conviction, and hope. I presented the group with the following statements to either affirm or disagree with (the results are in bold):

1. Over the past three years, Kristin’s sermons have helped my sense of God’s presence to grow. **Strongly agreed: 10; Agreed: 8; Neither agreed nor disagreed: 2; Disagreed: 1**
2. The proclamations of Kristin’s preaching have helped me to navigate challenging situations in my personal life. **Strongly agreed: 5; Agreed: 10; Neither agreed nor disagreed: 5; Disagreed: 1**
3. The proclamations of Kristin’s preaching have helped me to navigate challenging situations as a member of this congregation. **Strongly agreed: 5; Agreed: 9; Neither agreed nor disagreed: 7**
4. The proclamations of Kristin’s preaching have helped me to navigate challenging situations in our world. **Strongly agreed: 10; Agreed: 9; Neither agreed nor disagreed: 2**
5. The proclamations of Kristin’s preaching have bolstered my sense of courage, conviction, and hope. **Strongly agreed: 10; Agreed: 8; Neither agreed nor disagreed: 2; Disagreed: 1.**
6. I have a greater sense of my own capacity to make a positive contribution to challenging situations, because of the proclamations of Kristin’s preaching. **Strongly agreed: 10; Agreed: 7; Neither agreed nor disagreed: 4**

In times of extraordinary challenge, preaching that faces the monumental with the monumental claims of scripture can leave listeners feeling “uplifted, positive, optimistic, [and] renewed,” said one member of my PPG.¹⁷⁹ “Regardless of what we face God will support us,” he said.¹⁸⁰ The proclamation of the theological claims of scripture gave me “courage and patience to battle through.... It helped reset my mind,” said a small group member.¹⁸¹ “I felt hopeful and there was a sense of faith, which is more of a reach for me. It was powerful,” said another.¹⁸² What better feeling to have – what joy – in the face of the monumental!

¹⁷⁹ Michael Vuchnich August 29 19 email to Kristin Philipson

¹⁸⁰ Vuchnich, *ibid.*

¹⁸¹ MaryAnn Crichton, *Small Group Meeting*, September 26, 2019.

¹⁸² Susan Vance, *Small Group Meeting*, September 26, 2019.

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Appendix A

Congregational Sermon Evaluation Forms – Year One

Sermon Evaluation Form - Sermon 1

Date: September 10, 2017

Name of Listener: Jason Meyers

Sermon Title: #Adulting

Sermon Text: Ezekiel 33:7-11

Feedback:

1. What was the objective of this sermon? Was the objective met?

To acknowledge the weight of responsibility. To teach that prophets throw lifelines so that burdens are not born alone. To help people feel stronger than perhaps they feel. I think this was a pastorally sensitive sermon that would have spoken to the congregation in ways that made sense to them.

2. How was the biblical text employed in this sermon? (Was it confronted, avoided, distorted, transcended?)

Key phrases were used. Used the text to dig into the historic context, then relate back to present time. The hard parts of the text related to wickedness and death were avoided.

3. Did the sermon address contemporary needs?

Yes, dealt with the pressures of modern life. Also, the cultural trend to prioritize self-reliance over interdependence, and the spiritual weight that comes with that.

4. Did the sermon move smoothly from biblical text to the needs of people in today's world?

Yes, and very gracefully.

5. How was the liturgical occasion addressed? (Was it acknowledged, amplified, distorted, ignored, transcended?)

Spoke of the transition to ordinary time in the church year, but also how the current context was anything but ordinary. I could have used more unpacking about what made the particular moment extraordinary.

6. How did the text and the liturgical occasion relate?

Ezekiel's people were not in ordinary time either - living in exile.

7. What did the preacher expect from you?

Look for the prophets in our own lives that can through us a lifeline back to the strength and power found in God.

8. The strongest aspect of this sermon was?

Incorporation of modern struggles, language, metaphors.

Sermon Evaluation Form - Sermon 2

Date: January 7, 2018

Name of Listener: Dr H Anne Richards

Sermon Title: The Gift of the Magi:

Sermon Text: Matthew 2:1-12

Feedback:

1. What was the objective of this sermon? Was the objective met?

Don't accept the tired jaded assumptions "The way of the world "

Be open to being surprised.

God will often be part of this new "way of being "

2. How was the biblical text employed in this sermon? (Was it confronted, avoided, distorted, transcended?)

The gift of the Magi, very well employed.....surprise, conflicting Herod's grasping power, fearful

3. Did the sermon address contemporary needs?

Excellent...hockey, with detailed description, #metoo,

4. Did the sermon move smoothly from biblical text to the needs of people in today's world?

Recognition of declining Christian tradition & church attendance

5. How was the liturgical occasion addressed? (Was it acknowledged, amplified, distorted, ignored, transcended?)

Well. The surprising nature of a tiny babe being celebrated. Mention of the academic excellence of the Magi, the magic of the occasion

6. How did the text and the liturgical occasion relate?

The challenge of Matthew's community sustaining faith that Jesus was Lord, the questions from the Magi for directions to the babe Jesus, that questions are appropriate but that a sense of wonder & openness to "surprise" is vital

7. What did the preacher expect from you?
Be open to wonder; understand that change is the norm

8. The strongest aspect of this sermon was?

The link from the text to everyday happenings with surprise & changethe women's' hockey, #metoo,, declining Christianity....happenings either unlikely or uncomfortable

Sermon Evaluation Form - Sermon 2

Date: January 7, 2018 (sermon preached)

Name of Listener: Stephen Bell

Sermon Title: The Gift of the Magi:

Sermon Text: Matthew 2:1-12

Feedback:

1. What was the objective of this sermon? Was the objective met?

Objective to discuss the need and importance of people to inspire and learn and redesign. To break the social norm and context of what is common expectation. To create a new and fresh perspective on common or regular ideas.

2. How was the biblical text employed in this sermon? (Was it confronted, avoided, distorted, transcended?)

The biblical text was creatively employed, discussed and made relevant with current events, social features and themes. Use of artistic and sporting scenarios are effective to relate to a younger and more modern audience.

3. Did the sermon address contemporary needs?

Yes, it related to a younger fresh audience through use of thematic materials a younger generation would understand and draw similarities from. Social media and

4. Did the sermon move smoothly from biblical text to the needs of people in today's world?

Yes, I thought the use of modern thematic material was effective, especially when discussing materials predominately from the old testament.

5. How was the liturgical occasion addressed? (Was it acknowledged, amplified, distorted, ignored, transcended?)

It was clearly presented and asked related questions. The sermon challenged the younger and modern audience

6. How did the text and the liturgical occasion relate?

The text related and liturgical occasion was effectively drawn from multiple current sources. It drew me in from sports referencing to historic artistic scenarios.

7. What did the preacher expect from you?

I felt the preacher expected me to understand and relate to the material through challenging and motivating questions. The sermon was impassioned, inquisitive and insightful.

8. The strongest aspect of this sermon was?

A clear and sensitive, yet inspiring sermon. By taking old testament material and challenging it through modern relevance and similarities it created a fresh perspective. This challenges the listener to further draw discussion. The sermon inspires and motivates the listener to challenge the status quo of and further develop modern methods of discipleship and worship.

Sermon Evaluation Form - Sermon 3

Date: January 14, 2018

Name of Listener: Dr. H Anne Richards

Sermon Title: Let All Ears Tingle

Sermon Text: 1 Samuel 3:1-20

Feedback:

1. What was the objective of this sermon? Was the objective met?

The old must be changed when it is necessary....i.e. renewal

2. How was the biblical text employed in this sermon? (Was it confronted, avoided, distorted, transcended?)

Very clear link to God's message to Samuel that there must be "renewal" of the temple

3. Did the sermon address contemporary needs?

Strongly.....most mainstream churches are in decline & need renewal. This is threatening.....listening to God will bring comfort & direction. Examples from Jack Layton, & #metoothe need for change led by visionary & ethical leaders with courage....powerful

4. Did the sermon move smoothly from biblical text to the needs of people in today's world?
Yes Strong biblical history knowledge gave extra credibility

5. How was the liturgical occasion addressed? (Was it acknowledged, amplified, distorted, ignored, transcended?)

Liturgical occasion was central & appropriate

6. How did the text and the liturgical occasion relate?

Need for change, sometimes because of abuse of power but sometimes because of no longer being appropriate (e.g. huge church)

7. What did the preacher expect from you?

Proceed with renewal, with energy, faith & listening to God

8. The strongest aspect of this sermon was?

Strong link to contemporary status of mainstream churches

Sermon Evaluation Form - Sermon 3

Date: January 14, 2018 (sermon preached)

Name of Listener: Stephen Bell

Sermon Title: Let All Ears Tingle

Sermon Text: 1 Samuel 3:1-20

Feedback:

1. What was the objective of this sermon? Was the objective met?

The object of the sermon was to maintain renewal and excitement at the thought of a new perspective and testimony. The object was accurately met through political and modern reference

2. How was the biblical text employed in this sermon? (Was it confronted, avoided, distorted, transcended?)

The Biblical text of Samuel was employed with correct details and reference. It was transcended, discussed and elevated in its original discussion. The sermon was easily relatable by drawing the congregation into strong comparisons. Also historical reference to the time was insightful and helpful for further understanding.

3. Did the sermon address contemporary needs?

Yes, accurately, through the direct comparison to such things as the Golden Globes.

4. Did the sermon move smoothly from biblical text to the needs of people in today's world?

Yes, the sermon challenges and accurately motivates the audience. It asks the questions of renewal, and strongly address the delicate issues of change and growth or renewal.

5. How was the liturgical occasion addressed? (Was it acknowledged, amplified, distorted, ignored, transcended?)

The occasion was accurately addressed and amplified.

6. How did the text and the liturgical occasion relate?

The text and liturgical occasion are accurately related and compared. The listener sees Gods love and justice are related and inspired. The sermon asks the listener to look into renewal to repair and restore. To find capacity to grow.

7. What did the preacher expect from you?

To share the feeling of joy and challenge the listener to hear the ways God Speaks to one individually.

8. The strongest aspect of this sermon was?

The impassioned speech and questioning techniques through the use of modern context. I appreciate the fresh perspective, and friendly enthusiasm of the speaker.

Sermon Evaluation Form - Sermon 3

Date: January 14, 2018

Name of Listener: Jason Meyers

Sermon Title: Let All Ears Tingle

Sermon Text: 1 Samuel 3:1-20

Feedback:

1. What was the objective of this sermon? Was the objective met?

To preach that renewal is possible when listening for, and acting upon God's word in love and justice. Yes, the objective was met, but I also could have used a little more "trouble" to describe the circumstance in which we need renewal from in the present time.

2. How was the biblical text employed in this sermon? (Was it confronted, avoided, distorted, transcended?)

The text provided the central metaphor of the sermon "ears tingling" and set up the need to listen for God, just as Samuel listened to God.

3. Did the sermon address contemporary needs?

Yes, especially in noting the congregations desire for renewal. I feel like the congregation could have been pushed a little more here. In addition to tweaking the music, what would a renewal of our discipleship look like in this place?

4. Did the sermon move smoothly from biblical text to the needs of people in today's world?

Definitely. Smooth transitions where both the text and present day were elevated off the page.

5. How was the liturgical occasion addressed? (Was it acknowledged, amplified, distorted, ignored, transcended?)

As noted, the congregation has embarked on a renewal project.

6. How did the text and the liturgical occasion relate?

Samuel's community was in need of renewal and so was the congregations.

7. What did the preacher expect from you?

Listen for God's word which is always calling towards love and justice. Building a firm foundation is needed for renewal.

8. The strongest aspect of this sermon was?

Timely contemporary imagery, Golden Globes, etc.

Appendix B

Congregational Sermon Evaluation Forms – Year Two

Congregational Sermon Evaluation – Sermon 4

Sermon Summary Sheets

September 9, 2018, Rosedale United Church

What are we learning about God (Mark 7:24-37)

Amazing Grace

Sermon preached in connection with Core II: Preaching as Performance

What new insight will you take with you from today's sermon about God:

Not much but like discussion of what God's grace is

Presence thru Jesus - always wanting us to be better, make better choices

God challenges us in our faith in a good way

Hidden prejudice is powerful

The power of God has no limits, while I do and perhaps the greatest gift of God is God's grace when I need it due to my limited view

Prejudiced

Ready to help

No one is perfect

He is always with us

Christ is fallibly human.

God is in our interactions and communications with others

God's grace at work in Jesus when he encountered Syrophenician woman

That even God, as embodied by Jesus, had moments of prejudice/reflected beliefs of his time

That he too has stuff to work on and is not perfect and can grow for the better

Don't expect perfection; key messages are to watch for and overcome weaknesses, differences, mistakes to arrive at a better state

We all have unexpected prejudices. Hopefully we overcome them!

Inclusiveness

All are accepted regardless of shortcomings - even Christ needed to learn to be open to the 'other'

All are equal before God: wealth and ethnicity do not make a difference

Not so much new, more reminder and reassurance that He is all forgiving, all knowing and always showing us the way and in doing so, guiding us to be the same.

Taken aback that some forms of prejudices were incorporated, unknowingly, in the Bible

What new insight will you take with you from today's sermon about living out your faith?

To be open always, even when we think we already are...be opener!

Recognizing my 'hidden' prejudices. Working on positive imaging

Again a powerful reminder to be guided by God's teachings and love and grace and to be kind and loving of others and myself.

I will reexamine my assumptions about others

Avoid preconceptions when interacting with people who are different

Be open to thought before making decisions

Be more of a helper

Despite knowing that I may bear some prejudices it is at times difficult to contain them in certain circumstances

Be open and aware, both of self and others; be alert to what are differences that are real and should be acknowledged and those that are not and should be ignored

Made me feel bad and uncomfortable; I am here trying to be caring and loving and saying United Church is racist is not helpful

There are so many challenges in believing and following Jesus in today's society - emphasizing passages with Jesus as a racist is not helpful

Be open, more understanding. Open to forgiveness

We are all children of God

Need to think more about different races in the church and accept them without prejudice

Be aware of my own hidden prejudice

Do not judge people, do not put them into a box

Try harder not to have pre-conceived ideas about people

Do not be prejudiced

There is no limit to my need and ability to keep growing in my faith and my connection to God and ability to live out God's way

Colorblind

Realize our prejudices and work to overcome them

Never judge

Bible stories speak directly to contemporary experiences and can help with personal explorations

Remembering and behaving according with this insight (God is in our interactions)

Need to be aware of ever-present reality and power of preconceived notions in our lives and how they hold us back from living life fully - in the way God wills for us in openness and love

To continue to treat/know that everyone has a common humanity

Congregational Sermon Evaluation – Sermon 5

Sermon Summary Sheets

November 11, 2018, Rosedale United Church

How are we growing as disciples of Christ? (Mark 8:38-44)

Facing the Monumental

Sermon preached in connection with Year 2 Elective: Preaching as Celebration

What new insight will you take with you from today's sermon:

In our vulnerable openness God is with us. Our openness makes it possible to give and to receive. This is our gift from God.

God gives us strength to face the challenges life presents us.

Facing the monumental with open hands, an open heart, and love and trust in myself that I am not alone. Give with an open hand and heart and I will receive and be fulfilled.

I want to slow down and recognize the moments God may be asking me to give more than I think I have and trust that He will fill me to do so.

Faith in times of challenge.

We all have the capacity to give and to overcome when we remember Jesus is with us. Excellent reflection!

A reminder that even when confronted with the monumental, "we can overcome."

When we open our hand, God is always there to take it and guide us. Congratulations, Kristin! You did a great job.

"When she unfurled her hand, she let God take her hand." Very powerful! When we are facing the monumental, be open to God. This will open your heart to hope, faith and love.

We can always do more to help!

The importance of being aware and open to others.

Be open like the teacher with the family who gave her time to the Brownies. Go with the flow. Do not overthink. Think of others first. Active listening. Believe in the positive influence of others.

Vulnerability is a strength. Be open to it. Accept it and trust you will emerge whole again. Great job, Kristin, good pacing...sensitivity. I enjoyed it.

Reflection was lovely, Kristin, thank you, good job! I listened raptly to hear how the widow's coins, trust, and my insight even would fold into something to take with me, to understand yes,

to me, be open, be vulnerable, be quietly observant too I take with me. Thank you. PS. Writing, forming my thoughts was a good exercise. Makes memory stronger!

A monumental gratitude for our family, community and country as we face the world as it is today. Our church is very much a part of our solace and strength, perhaps without our realizing the significance of it in our daily lives. Thank you to everyone for making this day so full of meaning and purpose.

It is much better to share, even though we may not have much,

I particularly like being given the analogy of the water flowing into the hole on the beach. It was such a powerful, yet simple image that I suspect the message will be reinforced every time I see it. I feel I have a lot of work on my own ability to trust in humanity's ability to tackle such big issues as climate change, refugee crises, food insecurity, etc. While I believe in God's abundance and grace, I have a ways to go in this faith journey. This sermon definitely helped me think about some of the spiritual work I want to pursue. I appreciated the clarity of the message and also the concept of the open hand while giving is also open to taking, perhaps accepting another hand into it.

That sometimes God needs us not to open up our wallets, but rather our calendars - to give time we didn't think we could spare!

Generosity of spirit so evident from the widow.

I particularly appreciated the "new angle" on the poor widow and the possibility that she could have influenced Jesus at that critical time in his life.

Speaking without a "script" is refreshing for both the speaker and the "audience."

Trust. Even if the outcome is unclear - regardless of good or bad - in the end everything happens for a reason.

Be patient and unselfish.

To be open to experiences in the face of living in a stressful world.

Congregational Sermon Evaluation – Sermon 6

Sermon Summary Sheets

January 13, 2019, Rosedale United Church

Who are we *servicing* and how is that service inspired and sustained by the Holy Spirit? (Luke 3:15-22, Isaiah 43:1-7)

Can I Believe?

Sermon preached in connection with Colloquy, Year Two

What new insight will you take with you from today's sermon? What did you hear?

You made this message so relevant to our lives as humans.

The sermon reminded me that it is also important to look back on past times in my life that my faith has helped me through as a reminder that I can draw on that resilience in the future.

Navigation of life's journey (like a river) – faith as a tool to help – Jordan River (resource to help navigate life) words of faith = belief in what we cannot see (proof as substance we can grasp/hold on to through life's toughest times. Faith (feel strength we need to navigate life's uncertain times) = belief in what we cannot see

That we are supported by all of God's love through the community and support of all of God's people, our fellow Rosedale people

The challenges are always there, tackle them head on, with faith, and you will find the path to succeed. I heard that there is support from within and from those around us.

Makes the Bible relevant for today. Amazing river analogy.

That God's word, God's promise is made real by what other people do for us, and what we do for others, in our daily lives.

I heard that although the road isn't always easy that I'm not alone – and to trust that I'm not alone. There are times when I've doubted this!

It gave new meaning to the phrase "the Word made flesh." And reminded me that God is not apart from us, but is us. Our responsibility is to live God.

That each time we reach out to offer our love and support we are bringing God's words to life.

How do you navigate challenges in life – health, death, loss?

As you face various forms of adversity, remember that you do not face these alone. Reach out and seek the support of others. A moving and personal story of someone sharing how they faced adversity and moved forward.

That God is there through all our trials and tribulations. God walks with us.

Believe and you WILL achieve...when life seems beyond your capacity. Faith in a process can get you to the “other side.” The use of water (in the Jordan) as a metaphor for handling life’s challenges. Christ will never leave us – use the holy water to cleanse our soul.

There is always a way with new opportunities. To have always a strong belief in yourself.

Reflection – no title in the programme. Setting – nature. Problem solving: “navigate tumultuous.” What compelled Jesus to go to Jordan River? Burning questions – old testament and today – will God be with us to help navigate difficult times? Examples: illness etc. (negative) times? Witness today... (positive)

Believe that God is with us as we navigate the uncertain and challenging waters of life. There will be spiritual help along the way. Companionship from God and his children will help with navigation.

God’s presence through the waters comes to us (often) through the words/actions/support of people around us. Watch for them.

That I am not alone in undertaking the huge task of writing a second edition of the book (Mind Abuse), I had published in 2000.

Holy Spirit revealed in the actions of others.

I was reminded of the medieval play of Everyman. Kristin made her own questions that people ponder through the generations.

Opening prayer for sermon. Appeal – localities known and barriers and challenges. Faith and words help in times of challenge. Faith (God) is with us when we are baptized. How to navigate in times of trouble/challenge? Posed questions. Provided answers. (Accept God). Bring it to a personal level. Ministers Provide support and guidance and sharing personal experience.

We need to have faith that God will help us through difficult life experiences. He has been with us many times.

There is meaningful support by working through our faith, but that it is also made manifest in simple and not-so-simple help given by our family, friends, and neighbours.

I am not alone in wondering if it is all “pretty words.” I heard that community is the manifestation of God’s love.

Significance of Jordan River to Jesus and the Jews.

A refreshing review of an old story. The speaker’s passion and belief are persuasive.

Many times we choose to circumvent the issue. Our faith allows us to go right through trusting that through our trials will come the light.

It is so important to have faith, even in times of doubt.

The metaphor of the steppingstones in the river was a powerful way to rethink how to meet life’s challenges. I heard that there is always a way through life’s challenges.

Belonging to this church is a privilege with speakers like Kristin.

Refreshing old insights. The power of words – I identify with the experiences expressed – the losses and the crossing of the river – to healing and meaning.

The strength of the congregation can help us individually and collectively overcome challenges. This will be important as we face the changes ahead of us as a congregation.

The importance of willingness to ask God for help and guidance and strength.

I heard your most personal and powerful story. I could not understand how Jesus could cross the river as God in the Easter story could not help him. But then hearing your experience of the step by step crossing you made gave me hope and I sure am proud of you. Thank you for showing your vulnerability and faith.

A new approach. Comparison of water to challenges ahead.

That each of us, in our actions to others in times of difficulty are “the words made flesh.” Without reaching out to others in pain, the word is only that and not real.

Visual, real (forest path) cut off by threatening stream. Historical meaning of Jordan River – to Israel. God with us – from ancients.

I love her stole. It was like her sermon, wilderness but more importantly, the water. Words of power. Path to walk, bubbly water runs through. Can I walk on the stones through it? I at the edge, can I make it? Believe the words of faith and I can make it!

A wonderful sermon – it felt like a mystery, all the threads pulled together as it progressed. Your images were potent and by the end, so deeply personal and vulnerable. I was impressed. Can you be that vulnerable and open while also philosophical and profound regularly? My new insight: there is God in my sustaining relationships. I shouldn't look to an outside force, but the people and things around me for faith.

Challenges – good and bad – must be faced and regardless of situation. God will be with you (minister facing new opportunities). Kristin's sharing of personal situation makes the sermon more relevant.

I heard that I am not alone in despair in making choices and in living each day. There is a warm lift that invites me and sustains me and I have only to move toward it.

Enthusiastic witness to the delivery of God's promises.

A resounding affirmation of faith.

Power and substance of God's word "I will be with you." Interesting question raised about what Jesus might have been feeling as he journeyed to the River Jordan.

A very bold and beautiful sermon. Made clear and personal how God acts through us to be present here and now.

A strong and united community is the sum of the contributions of each individual.

I don't think I had looked as deeply into the significance of the river as crossings in one's life. Thinking in this way makes me think of all the rivers crossed, and being crossed in my life and in those of my family. Kristin's openness about his miscarriage and stillbirth has extra meaning for me as our daughter-in-law has had exactly the same experiences (the second also at 20 weeks).

What new insight do you have for living out your faith?

The importance of being present to each other in community is what makes "God alive in each of us."

God is always with us as we navigate life like a river, full of twists and turns, we are never alone, when we hold on tightly to our faith in his Word, guidance, presence within us and around us.

Trust in the support of others. Offer your support to others.

Find your path each day.

That I must make every effort to let God move me to respond to the needs of others and in so doing, respond to my own need for meaning.

To not be afraid, and to trust that God is with me.

My faith, my bearing witness, requires that I am present for others, for the world, that I actively participate in “being.”

Not new, but renewed – live with love each day. P.S. your sermon brought me to tears.

There is support when you need it and don’t forget to give support as well, you are not alone.

You never have to face adversity alone.

Always know that God will never leave me or my family.

Have deep faith and confidence in God’s guidance through “troubled waters” to the calm shores. Substance within life matters in our ability to navigate through “troubled waters.” Make my “words of faith” reality with action.

To be open and curious about everything.

Can I navigate a rough passage? Will God help? Yes.

Reflect on the message in times of trouble with our fellow Christian beings.

Being a supportive voice for others whenever I can. Small gestures add up for someone in a difficult place.

Remember more often the support of God and this congregation that I have.

Being present to others at all times. One never knows what help a few words can be to someone who is suffering, often in silence – silence is also supportive.

The importance of mutual support.

Faith is not a point of time. It is a journey, a way of life. Planning, preparation and practice of faith so that we are ready when confronted with challenges, sorrow, grief...

How can we work out God’s purpose by being the support for those who are “crossing the river”? Note: I always appreciate the mix of intellect, biblical content and practicality in Kristin’s sermons.

I am reaffirmed in my belief in the power of community.

Reminder that God's ever-present love is expressed and manifested by other people around me.

Trust and time will show.

We are not alone.

A reminder to reach out to family and friends in good times and bad to give and seek support.

Having hope in the future.

I need to be more outwardly sensitive to support others.

The importance to stay close to people at the moment of their crossing through "the waters."

Whether we realize it or not, God walks with us and helps us through the difficult times.

There is always hope. Ministers are there for support always.

Even though most people these days are very inward-looking and there is no cultural tradition to reach out to others to show caring (i.e. it is perfectly acceptable to ignore others in difficulty) I need to continue my tiny crusade to do small things for others in distress – it is meaningful to them, to me, and makes the Christian word live.

Substance more important than "pretty words" of comfort. Ok to have doubts – when our path is intersected. "Heavens opened" for us is, in fact, us – others in our world. (This reconfirms my belief that God exists in and between us).

I can navigate what is ahead of me, with faith. Appreciate water, drink it in, wash in it, watch it flow in the wilderness.

I guess this: see the power of even fleeting interactions, when they bring kindness. Also, look for God in my daily life. I will think more about not being alone – being accompanied by God in my life.

God will be with me – in the good/difficult trials of family and everyday life.

I will try to be more confident in what I believe and seek out those with whom I can make this journey. It is important to not be alone.

To reach out to others with a smile and sensitivity to their possible needs.

Not an answer, but Kristin created a holy time – for once no one moved or talked during the postlude – it became a moment of deep reflection.

Powerful example of “how the heavens can open” for each and every one of us in our lives when we experience unexpected challenges/loss/change.

How can I act as God’s instrument?

Never be afraid to reach out and touch someone with the simplest of enquiries – “how are you today?”

Appendix C

Congregational Sermon Evaluation Forms – Year Three

Congregational Sermon Evaluation – Sermon 7

Sermon Summary Sheets

September 8, 2019, Rosedale United Church

Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18

Fearfully and Wonderfully Made!

Sermon preached in connection with Core III, Year Three

What new insight will you take with you from today's about God and about living out your faith?

The miracle of birth, growth and decline is a natural cycle that God stewards...

God loves and welcomes all. He is blind to physical differences as we should be (both physical and philosophical).

God embraces the outsider.

Be very careful to embrace all. Do not condemn those who take another path.

I will choose to read Psalm 139 this week.

Help those who have endured challenges to find resilience.

It is o.k. to be outside what is considered normal.

God loves us all.

Each dad is a gift to treasure. It is a beautiful world.

[God] does not care about us “fitting” into the standards (cultural norms) but that we celebrate who we are (our truth).

[God] wants us to challenge the norms.

Living in his light means living in our power (our true selves/our truth).

Living in God's light with authenticity and vulnerability (Beauty in both what is beautiful and what people fear).

God does not define “normal;” people define “normal”

Check my thinking more carefully. Let not misguided thinking give rise to bias, prejudice or close-mindedness. Contemplate God.

God knows me and understands me when I find myself in challenging situations or new realities

First poem good direct advice! (Remember how to live).

Why don't you mention “God”? He's in the hymns

I need preaching based on the Bible stories, not vague concepts

Patience, love, courage, forgiveness, understanding

Powerful personal example on your part, Kristin

The need for compassion and tolerance

A reminder of how important acceptance of peoples' differences is

To be more conscious of not judging what is “normal”

Very insightful sermon. Lots to chew on over the week.

How he made us all un-equal but unique

To be open!

The issue of who God considers normal

The reminder about the importance of resilience

He didn't make us all equal as you are you and I am I, but He did make us all fearfully and wonderfully created

A powerful reminder that we are all fearfully and wonderfully created

God is ever loving

That we are crafted to withstand what life requires from us. We need to realize this because we are made by God.

For God there is not “normal;” we are all fearfully and wondrously made

Accept all people – get to know them on their terms – accept yourself the same way

I think the sermon was too long, good but need to cut some parts out, e.g. story re: New York rape case. Need to keep the whole service within time – longer not better.

More love towards “not normal” people

God created more of the “abnormal” than the “normal.” We should celebrate our differences rather than dwell on our similarities

My faith has supported me throughout my “abnormal” periods and events, from adoption at 6 months, various childhood diseases, divorce, unemployment, cancer

A great sermon from you. It is the first time in quite a while when I heard clusters of congregants gathering to talk after Church about their experiences that related to your message! On a personal level your words touched me as well. We have to have the courage to speak out when we hear others say inappropriate things.

Today’s was an extremely moving and thought-provoking sermon. First, thank you for sharing your very personal story that so perfectly exemplified your message about being “outside the norm.” I think everyone in the sanctuary was moved by it, but it took some courage. It was interesting how your message hit different people. I started talking with...and we shared how the message had touched us. I don’t feel I have often found myself in such a deep discussion with others after a sermon – it spoke to us in several different ways. For me, when you spoke about how many of us have perhaps felt that we were outside the norm or excluded from it, I took pause when you included being profoundly sad for a period of time when everyone else around you seemed happy. It made me think of my daughter-in-law...who had the miscarriage followed by the stillbirth (at 20 weeks which I gather is when it is considered a stillbirth) last year. (I know I have shared that with you a while ago.) She was indeed profoundly sad, and found it extremely difficult to be around family, neighbours or friends who had had recent successful birth experiences, which I understood, but I hadn’t thought before about the feeling of exclusion she must have felt from the “happy” outside world, even outside of those with new babies. The struggle continues to be getting through this time.

I don’t think the sermon really gave me any insight about God, but the entire service spoke to me about living out my faith, including the wonderful blessing of the backpacks (and handbags!). I know I will be calling...this week to see how she is doing now that both of her boys are in school every morning – there is only one year of kindergarten in Alberta, and it is for half days. I am also going to be thinking about others who might be feeling that they are not “fearfully and wonderfully made” and giving them a call too. Reaching out to others is something I often want to do but almost as often don’t get around to, and it is definitely part of living out my faith.

The sermon stimulated much discussion following the service about the messages in Psalm 139 and how people had previously interpreted it. Many were looking at happenings in their life with a deeper or different understanding following the sermon. This was followed by discussion on

what is “normal” behaviour and how using that term discriminates as someone who is not defined in those terms is then “an outsider or deemed not normal” The examples used in the sermon made the message all-inclusive for a variety of areas. (divorce, sick, etc.)

Fearful and wonderful—a good thought provoking focus

Singing Louis Armstrong’s “How wonderful a World” opening after the scripture was a great way to help one focus on the message

Insight about God?

Do not judge.

God is always there to be with us through thick or thin and is not judgmental.

God is saying we all have the capacity to heal and have grow fearfully and wonderfully as God is always with us. It is a “fearful and hope” message

Insight about living out my faith?

Fearful and wonderful does not equal normal. Calling something “normal” is a powerful way to make one conform to the standard defined by someone else.

Challenge what is defined as “normal” as it is judgmental and excludes if not deemed the norm.

It reinforces we are all God’s creation and loved by God so whatever each of us does, we should not be judgmental but look for God’s love and gifts in that person. i.e. respect all

Congregational Sermon Evaluation – Sermon 8

Sermon Summary Sheets

October 27, 2019, Rosedale United Church

Judges 11:29-40

Let the River Run!

Sermon preached in connection with Elective Course, Year Three, “Preaching about Women in the Old Testament”

What new insight will you take with you from today’s sermon, about God and about living out your faith?

Great sermon in connecting the dots to our own issues in present day. How an uncomfortable story can bring insight on how to move your faith forward.

Very interesting and relevant interpretation of what is initially a disturbing story in Judges. I feel challenged to renew my intention to address the climate crisis as best I can as an element of faithful stewardship of our planet.

The stories are deeper than they seem – we must look beyond the superficial to find the message. We need to take the time to think and consider – with busy actions alone we’ll miss important thoughts. I must do more to care about climate change and the future. My few small steps are not enough – we must be bold.

Good linking of war with Ammonites and price to pay with global warming. Beware the price you pay!

Like the reference to the climate crisis. Re: Women in the Church – best resource: Liz Muir’s “Women in the Christian Church: 2000 years of history.”

That it’s more important today than ever to work together globally, perhaps only God (the Spirit?) can help us do this. Seems more like how our interpretations of God have evolved over the centuries – today’s story makes me think of honour killings in other faiths – so it’s also a matter of how even today, God is interpreted in so many ways, which is hardly a surprise. It is important to do what is right (i.e. climate!) with other people – listen to the Spirit (conscience?) and find other people (at church? in our community? politicians?) who will do the same. This is difficult! It’s not always clear what the right think is – must pray for guidance.

The eye opener for me today is that the stories are not just about God’s actions but rather they are a reflection or natural consequence of our own. God truly allows us to make our own mistakes. He did not, in the story, insist that the daughter be killed. He allowed it to happen, but did not dictate it. Admittedly, I am still thinking this through. I see in a real way how important taking an activist approach is versus sitting back and just learning/listening. Today our daughter was baptized, and it was very special for all of us. Today’s sermon really opened our hearts and made us realize that we can make positive change in the world.

We need God’s presence manifest as we bring forth his glorious world. I know I have been called. I remain fearless in serving God, my Heavenly Father.

We must be open to God’s Spirit as we respond instinctively to injustice, cruelty and selfishness – our conscience is God’s Spirit! Decisive action, even small decisive actions, about injustice, short sightedness, entrenched beliefs in spirit in action.

The immediacy at consequences of actions require paying attention to the stirrings within and acting. The Holy Spirit is active in the world although we may not recognize it when we feel it or hear it. I need to be more conscious of my actions – think before acting.

Is it fear, denial, arrogance that prevents us from connection to our spirit and the Spirit of God? God is love, and perhaps energized by the Spirit. Impossible to have faith if money is your God.

Outrage at the treatment of women is the Spirit flowing in you. Embrace it and take action. Sometimes the message of scripture is difficult to understand. Spirit of God is the spirit in you. You are God and God is you. Pay attention to your feelings, that is the Spirit in you. Put off self-gratification for the betterment of your community.

Feelings of discomfort, rethinking priorities are evidence of the Spirit working within us – very important insight. There are several messages one could have taken from the reading. The more traditional interpretation is that girls are property of the father, that he can dispose of her at will, that girls must obey their fathers. Kristin’s interpretation is far more positive and helpful for

humanity. The consequences of misguided priorities which is so relevant today and throughout the ages. It would have been helpful to have spent a bit more time supporting the interpretation Kristin took before relating the message to the issue of climate change.

To listen to my gut – intuition just may be the Spirit moving me. God is with us always even in our darkest moments – urging us to be awake and engaged. Living out my faith is not solely about the everyday but about preparing and ensuring a future for the earth and for humanity.

God is in us. Sometimes we miss it when we only look at events and not consider our values and reactions. Inspiration to act on our indignation and concerns.

What an amazing sermon. Amazing. It took my breath away. God speaks to us in ways where we really need to stop and listen. Sometimes when we are most challenged is when lessons can be learned. It is time to let the Spirit bubble up and fight for justice.

Insight – that the protests I make are legitimate! The Spirit rises despite the fear of being called a fool. Thank you for bringing the meaning of women's lives from the OT. Please, more of these stories and how they can be positive. PS I followed the text from Judges and wondered why you omitted the references to “virginity.” Is this reference to sexuality a “distraction” from the story? Just wondering.

God can be used to justify many things. When we open ourselves to God's message it will guide us in the right direction. It's not just a Sunday thing. We should keep our faith every day.

Amazing interpretation of a difficult scripture and relating current issues. Not everything is about now; need to think of the future and take care of the precious gift of this planet. Think about actions and effect on future.

God speaks to us sometimes obliquely, so we have to listen carefully and work on understanding. Faith isn't always easy. I love the thought that outrage is Spirit. It inspires me.

Where is the Spirit? Rather than feeling hopeless about all that is wrong in our world, the angst, the anger, the fear, the anxiety is the Spirit and that will start us to become active in protecting the environment, protesting against governments and starting to demand change.

The Judges reading is a story to teach us about the very destructive and negative reality of obsession for power. The “spirit” is the integrity of my conscience. Remember your responsibility to future generations. This responsibility can require sacrifice for our generation to enrich the future for the next generation.

Danger of rash decisions. God is forgiving and does not require “unjust” sacrifice. Remember to be compassionate and forgiving.

Reminder: the price of immediate gratification. The importance of reacting from my own values and beliefs.

He doesn't expect you to fulfill unreasonable promises. Think about what you promise and the consequences.

In the Bible, God has an ugly vicious side (why not stop Jephthah, as he did Abraham) and this side of theology is so ugly that no one knows what to do with it except ignore it. It made the scripture seem irrelevant – as if you struggled to find relevance in the actual story and so decided to speak about a personal passion instead and try to force a link.

The reading was unfortunate. I do not believe this was a message about God but rather a show of commitment by the protagonist to sacrifice his daughter and obedience to God by following through with the act. God played a passive role as the symbol of supreme worship. I was absolutely shocked that like in other old testament stories God stops the sacrifice – and tells the protagonist you have done the supreme sacrifice – that is enough evidence for me. Not sure I appreciated the political message and the shaming for not agreeing with the sermon on climate change. I was hoping for a more religious and spiritual service. I will continue living out my faith – by living in the Spirit of the Lord's way.

Appendix D

Congregational Survey, Worship Matters – What’s on Peoples’ Minds?

What do you overhear people talking about at the coffee shop...at work...at the gym? What do you spend lots of time talking about with your friends?

Financial Issues: income inequality getting worse, competition for ‘things’ and ability to join groups or clubs for children, People express concern and anxiety about themselves or their children. Parents wonder whether their children will have as good a life situation as they have had. They also wonder if they can maintain their own position. For example, will they get “disrupted” out of a job? Are we in such an economic bubble at RUC ,and in our surrounding neighbourhoods/City, that we are insulated from the pain being experienced in other geographic regions or rural areas of the country where there is a legitimate fear that they are being (or have already been) left behind? Are we sufficiently empathetic?

Health: youth mental health, adult mental health, general health, how life is stressful and is not how it appears

World becoming insular – where has our global community gone? Trump world: How is it that religious right don’t share our values?

Climate change and crisis - how to change our current course individually and collectively? People are conflicted on many fronts – they are concerned about the environment, but they also enjoy material items (cars, SUVs, planes, comfortable homes) that use lots of energy. Some worry that we are hypocrites. Almost 9% of Canada’s gross domestic product comes the oil industry. But our oil is “dirty” oil because it largely comes from the oil sands, right (or maybe not right)? Is it better for us to import oil from countries with abysmal records in human rights? The country seems so divided on these questions – is there any middle ground? What should we say to workers in the oil industry – go find different work? Is that realistic? Is it fair? What does “fair” mean in today’s context, anyway? Does anything have to be fair anymore? Are environmental issues so urgent that fairness has to be redefined and we have to recognize that there are going to be many casualties along the way?

Politics: US politics and fear it will affect Canada, the Canadian (federal and provincial) and American political scenes

Aging: unique perspective on life while aging

Connections: what real friendship really is, my love for my children, extended family, friends and our environment and the great opportunities we have living here in Canada

Indigenous peoples: Can it be right that, year after year, so many have no safe drinking water, or adequate housing, or sufficient schooling for their children? As a church, a country, or as individuals, where should charity start and where should it stop? What should be our priorities? Do we first face inward or outward? What’s right?

Where do we find the moral compass in all of this? Do the teachings of Jesus have relevance in the context of the difficult day-to-day life questions that face all of us and our world?

Schools and Childcare

Renovations

Sleep

What do you wish we talked about at church?

Mindfulness

Self-compassion

Mental health

The intersection of politics and religion. What can we, as individual Christians, do (if anything) to lessen the huge divide in Canada right now?

Personally (I may be in a minority of one here), I find it interesting when a Bible story is selected, interpreted, and (if possible) made relevant to our lives today. I also appreciate Bible readings being put into their historical context, particularly when this helps explain what may sound jarring to us today.

I also find it helpful when a church practice is explained (e.g., a prayer, or type of prayer; a piece of music; a time-honoured ritual, etc.)

What are some challenges you're struggling with right now? What do you worry about?

How to live my best life before the finality of death

Finding meaning in daily grind

Aging

Dealing with materialism

My health; my family's health

Older people... there's a silent elephant in the room of thousands and millions of lonely older people who do not have enough respect, love, care, listening and even material comforts. I believe it's a very important topic especially with much of our congregation being older, and of course society getting older in general.

Concern about human impact on the environment & the hope that we can mitigate this with powerful group effort

People in our community who are lonely while others are stretched so thin with seemingly no time to reach out to others in need

One thing I wonder about (I think I'm past worrying on this one) is what our church, and other churches, will look like in 10, 20, 30 years from now. I may not be around to see it, but I am definitely curious. About 30 years ago I read a book by Reginald Bibby, and he certainly predicted things accurately to this point!

Sleep, exhaustion

Relationships

Kids behaviour

I am being challenged right now by a family matter which is causing me great heartache. And I know I am not alone in this experience. I have been reflecting on something you already know - that we often do not know what people in the pews are struggling with. This speaks to the issue of pain and sorrow in our lives and also, for me, ties into the issues of aging, change and loss - spiritual issues which always need addressing.

What are some hot-button issues you'd like to hear a spiritual take on?

End of church? How to preserve Judeo-Christian values in next generations

Loneliness at all ages

Dealing with grief

Finding ways to set worry aside

Managing challenging family dynamics in the immediate family and extended family eg. letting go of grievances, forgiving oneself as well as others

It seems that in modern Canada, it is often viewed as impolite to discuss religious matters. Secularization is definitely the defining trend. Is this healthy (e.g., more accepting of all) or harmful (e.g., denying a key human right or need)? Given world history, and even recent events (e.g., residential schools), can Christianity be reasonably viewed as a threatening religion to others? Examples of politicians paying a price for their religious views arose in the recent federal election: e.g., Elizabeth May ("I would consider Jesus Christ a hero of mine") and Andrew Scheer (pro-life, not willing to march in a Pride parade, etc.). Was this right or wrong? Consider also the legislation in Quebec imposing a "Quebec Values" test on immigrants (e.g., women have rights that are equal to the rights of men), and regulations that would prevent religious symbol-wearing people (e.g., NDP leader Jagmeet Singh) from being a school teacher

there, or holding down a government job. Is Quebec right or wrong? Is it for us to say, or is it only for Quebecers to decide? What do we/the United Church think about all of these issues?

How to put negative news into perspective

How to bring joy in our lives and the lives of strangers

Acceptance, finding peace

What do you find inspiring right now?

Hong Kong protesters

Time in nature (many people said this)

Small acts of kindness; a greeting in the morning; a smile

The power of the collective voice, especially young people on the topic of climate change

So many people willing to give their time, money, and inspiration to making the world a better place

Courage

People somehow getting through extremely challenging situations (many said this)

People helping other people

Empathy

Creativity

Humility

What would feel like nourishment for your soul?

Being in nature (many said this)

Being off-line

Being with animals

Mindfulness during day to day life

Small group discussions

Positive humour eg. a good belly laugh

Always sermons and some music such as spirituals, classic hymns, etc,

Women supporting women, being part of a group (many said this)

Cooking

Poetry

I come to church seeking a quiet space - one reason why I usually sit in the balcony - and to hear biblical insights and wisdom. It is nourishing to me to sing familiar hymns and to hear the voices of old speak to us. I do not come to hear a certain issue addressed but rather to hear how the words of the scriptures speak to us today... how God is with us and works through us. I respect and cherish the tradition of the church and feel that I am also open to innovation.

What feels spiritual to you right now?

Authentic conversation

My work in palliative care

Close friends, family closeness

Breathing

Meditating, praying, listening for God's messages (usually in the form of my mother's voice)

Attending a church service at RUC often feels spiritual to me: prayers, hymns, sermons, rituals. Maybe it's just the comfort of the familiar, but I believe it is more than that. For me, there are moments that truly feel spiritual.

On occasion, a work of art – sometimes visual, but more often than not a performance piece (e.g., theatre, music, dance, opera, etc.) – can feel spiritual to me. Literary works can also feel spiritual to me – so creative, and so extraordinary.

I come to church to listen, to worship, and to hear a message of hope which will provide comfort and strength for the week ahead. In short to be fed spiritually. I also come to be with the other members of my church family to hear about their lives, to support them, to work together within and outside our church.

