

GOD IS WITH US

Reading a story from Max Lucado – ‘Gentle Thunder, Looking for the Messiah – How do you see Him?’ (pages 163-166)

Suppose Jesus came to your church. I don't mean symbolically. I mean visibly. Physically. Actually. Suppose he came to your church.

Would you recognize him? It might be difficult. Jesus didn't wear religious clothes in his day. Doubtful that he would wear them in ours. If he came today to your church, he'd wear regular clothes. He would have a common name. "Jesus" was common.

And then, one Sunday, he shows up.

About midway through the service he appears in the back of the auditorium and takes a seat. After a few songs he moves closer to the front, and then after another he steps up on the platform and announces, "You are singing about me, I am the Son of God."

What would you think? Would you be offended? Would you be interested? Would you believe?

It's easy to criticize contemporaries of Jesus for not believing in him. But when you realize how he came, you can understand their skepticism.

Jesus didn't fit their concept of a Messiah. Wrong background. Wrong pedigree. Wrong hometown. No Messiah would come from Nazareth. He didn't fit the Jews' notion of a Messiah, and so, rather than change their notion, they dismissed him.

He came as one of them. He was Jesus from Nazareth.

They expected lights and kings and chariots from heaven. What they got was sandals and sermons and a Galilean accent.

And so, some missed him.

And so, some miss him still.

We have our own preconceptions, don't we? We still think we know which phone God uses and which car he drives. We still think we know what he looks like But he's been known to surprise us.

We expect God to speak through peace, but sometimes he speaks through pain.

We think God talks through the church, but he also talks through the lost.

We listen for him in triumph, but he speaks even more distinctly through tragedy.

We must let God define himself. When we do, when we let God define himself, a whole new world opens before us. How, you ask? Let me explain with a story.

Once there was a man whose life was a misery. The days were cloudy, and the nights were long. Henry didn't want to be unhappy, but he was. With the passing of the years, his life had changed. His children had grown. The neighbourhood was different. The city seemed harsher.

He was unhappy. He decided to ask his minister what was wrong.

"Am I unhappy for some sin I have committed?" "Yes," the wise pastor replied. "You have sinned." "And what might that sin be?"

"Ignorance," came the reply, "The sin of ignorance. One of your neighbours is the Messiah in disguise, and you have not seen him."

The old man left the office stunned. "The Messiah is one of my neighbours?" He began to think who it might be.

The man was confounded. Every person he knew had defects. But one was the Messiah. He began to look for Him.

With time he saw things in people he'd never seen. And with time his outlook began to change. The bounce returned to his step. His eyes took on a friendly sparkle. When others spoke he listened. After all, he might be listening to the Messiah. When anyone asked for help, he responded; after all this might be the Messiah needing assistance.

The change of attitude was so significant that someone asked him why he was so happy. "I don't know," he answered, "All I know is that things changed when I started looking for God."

Now, that's curious. The old man saw Jesus because he didn't know what he looked like. The people in Jesus' day missed him because they thought they did.

How are things looking in your neighbourhood?

Jesus' first followers responded in awe to the Christ. With the strong wind blowing down on the disciples in the boat Jesus came to them walking on the water – the wind ceased – and those in the boat worshipped Him saying – “You are the Son of God!” To disciples, then and now, Jesus gives peace, forgiveness, faith and the power to witness. Fellowship and joy are marks of the believing community. Modern disciples are also called to embrace Christ – alive in our midst and empowering us for learning, serving and witnessing as a community of God's children.

As we heard from Mac Lucado, we must let God define himself. We must put away our preconceptions. When we do, a whole new world opens before us.

The passage from Psalm 105, read this morning, is a majestic hymn of praise, calling upon the people to recall the great deeds of God, and to proclaim these to everyone.

Today's Gospel begins with the disciples in a boat facing certain death in a horrendous storm. Suddenly, in the darkest part of the night Jesus appears walking on the water. Here Jesus overcomes the power of chaos, represented by the metaphor of water, the seemingly uncontrolled and unknown powers

that threaten us day by day. The disciples, however, do not recognise Jesus, and they scream in fear.

“It’s me,” Jesus says, “Do not be afraid.”

The message to the church, both then and now, is a powerful one: in the midst of storm and chaos and turmoil and fear, Jesus Christ is in our very midst, saying “do not be afraid.” Even when we are feeling overwhelmed and burnt out – Jesus comes to us, to strengthen us to carry on.

As a Uniting Church, we are a church that is not afraid to be bold, courageous, and speak out on issues of injustice. Driven by our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, our commitment to justice is strong and woven right through the hearty of who we are. It is demonstrated every day through the church’s active engagement on so many issues., of which just some are:

- ❖ The Synod climate strategy
- ❖ The Synod Initiatives on Drug Reform
- ❖ Refugee Resettlement
- ❖ Homelessness issues

God, in Christ, moves among us, and we are filled with wonder. The readings this week encourage a broader understanding of God’s reign in our midst, and also illustrate our human limitations in perceiving it. We are called to live as God’s children.

Matthew alone includes the story of Peter also walking on the water. We are told his faith is not strong enough to withstand the storm, and he begins to sink. But significantly Jesus does not abandon him. Either here or later when his faith falters again and he denies Jesus.

The message is clear: God is with us. Wherever we find ourselves, God is with us. When we do not understand what is happening around us, even tumultuous events like the Coronavirus Pandemic, we can take comfort in the simple truth that God is with us. We need not be afraid.

Thinking back to the story told by Max Lucado of the old man whose life was one of misery. He saw Jesus because he didn't know what he looked like. The people in Jesus' day missed him because they thought they did.

What do we need in order to believe, for our confession of Christ to be our own?

What does it mean to be open to the transformation that Christ brings, and then move in new ways and directions with the Gospel – that will drive us forward in faith?