

## **“Christian Militancy in an Age of Decline”**

**Friday March 19, 2010**

Metropolitan United Church

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It is a great honour to be with you this evening.

A couple of months ago, Malcolm called and asked if I would give some thought to what I feel that we, as Christians, should struggle to maintain in an age of decline. What gifts to the world, and what insights into the human condition, would be lost if the Christian movement entirely disappeared into the dustbin of history?

The line-up of speakers that Malcolm proposed sounded a bit like the beginning of a corny joke – a Baptist, a Presbyterian, and an Anglican were asked by a United Church minister what they would be willing to fight about...

Tonight, I would like to suggest that one of the great gifts that would be lost – and, to be honest, that I fear is being lost -- is the Bible.

I would like to shape my thoughts, this evening, in three directions. First, to consider the importance of the Bible as a text of cultural significance; second, to consider the way that the Bible functions as a source of theological and ethical discernment; and third, to ponder the power of the Bible as a narrative of eschatological hope.

So, first, to the Bible’s cultural significance.

A few weeks ago, I was asked to write an article for one of our national newspapers on what we should teach kids about religion. The topic that I chose – largely because Malcolm had called a few days before and had me thinking about tonight – was the increasing state of biblical illiteracy in our culture.

I began by relating an incident that took place in my previous congregation, in the west end of Toronto. In that church, there was a weekly group for stay-at-home mothers. It was not a ‘Christian’ or a ‘church’ program, but rather a rental group that used our church facility. Nonetheless, they asked me each year to address some topic related to spirituality and kids in as ‘non-religious’ a way as possible.

One year, we explored the idea of Sabbath rest – a topic which resonated deeply with that group of not always well-rested mothers; another year, we spoke about the ‘fruits

of the spirit' as a list of qualities that any parent would want to encourage in their children – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, and so on.

And, another year, I began our discussion by playing an audio excerpt from Martin Luther King Jr.'s last speech. In it, Dr. King courageously and prophetically proclaimed,

Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land.

I stopped the recording, and asked them what story that King was alluding to in his speech. What was troubling was that they had no idea about the fact that King was explicitly drawing a parallel between Moses' vision of the Promised Land at the completion of the Israelite's wilderness sojourn and the struggle that he and his people had endured for the sake of human and civil rights. Unfortunately, without any awareness of the meaning of King's allusion to the experiences of the Israelites poised at the brink of a new era after having suffered in the wilderness for years, the full meaning of his words was lost.

That experience serves as a reminder that our reluctance about reading the Bible is creating a situation where we are increasingly culturally illiterate. Even for those without faith, biblical literacy is a prerequisite for understanding the greatest accomplishments of our culture.

On this, even the militant atheist Richard Dawkins would agree. Although I have many problems with much of the caricatured nonsense and silly arguments that he presents in his book The God Delusion, it is interesting to note that even Dawkins laments the lack of biblical literacy in our culture. "I must admit," he wrote, "that even I am a little taken aback at the biblical ignorance displayed by people educated in more recent decades than I was" and that "an atheistic world-view provides no justification for cutting the Bible, and other sacred books, out of our education." (pp. 342, 344).

Biblical literacy is a prerequisite for cultural understanding. Art galleries are indecipherable without a passing awareness of the biblical stories. Our culture's greatest works of poetry and literature are incomprehensible without reference to the biblical texts. And this is not only true of Shakespeare, Milton or Donne; but even with modern writers such as John Irving, Maya Angelou and Margaret Atwood -- to name

but a few. All require an awareness of the biblical narratives.

Moreover, the music of popular culture even requires biblical understanding. On one of U2's recent albums "How to Dismantle an Atomic Bomb", the last song was entitled "Yahweh". Most people who listen to the album do not realize that the group is making an explicit reference to the traditional rendering of the Bible's most mysterious name for God, meaning that the song is, in fact, a powerful prayer. Bob Marley's song about weeping by the rivers of Babylon is rooted in the lament of Psalm 137. From Bach to Beyonce, from Mozart to Dave Matthews – all are steeped in biblical allusions.

But the Bible should not be maintained simply for the sake of cultural awareness. There is also a profoundly dangerous dimension to this lack of biblical literacy in our culture. And that danger is that biblical illiteracy leaves us open to incredible manipulation on the part of those who would use these powerful texts for their own agendas.

Which, actually, leads to our second point. That is, the Bible is not only a text of cultural significance, but it is also a powerful tool for theological and ethical discernment. In order to realize this powerful dimension of it, however, we must know the text well enough to be able to discern when it is being used properly, and when it is being used in manipulative ways.

It is good for us to remember that the knowledge of the Bible as a tool for discernment is at the heart of the United and Presbyterian traditions. Both of these traditions are greatly influenced by the Reformed emphasis on the responsibility of every person to read and interpret the Bible themselves, rather than simply relying on what others claim that it says. The importance of education and literacy in the Protestant tradition was not simply so that people can be well educated, but rather so that they would be able to read the Bible for themselves and ensure that the clergy were not overstepping their power.

Sadly, in our modern age, we abdicate this responsibility to read these texts, and in so doing play not into the hands of a manipulative clergy, but into the hands of a society which is increasingly divided between a literalistic religious fundamentalism and a secular paranoia when it comes to the Bible.

Those in the so-called 'fundamentalist' parts of the Church, have elevated the literal reading of the Bible to a place of undisputed preeminence, leading their critics to assume that anyone who reads the Bible must have an anti-intellectual preference for literalist understandings of creationism, narrow-minded approaches to issues of human

sexuality, bigoted views of women, and superstitious assumptions about the workings of nature.

Ironically, the method of interpretation that is embraced both by religious fundamentalists and by the modern secular critics of religion is virtually identical. On the one hand, religious militants quote select verses out of context in order to defend their theological positions; and, on the other hand, secular militants quote select verses out of context to illustrate why the Bible is nothing more than a misogynistic, homophobic, genocide-inducing text of terror. Their arguments may differ, but their method is the same -- quote a few verses out of context and then use those words to create weapons to be used against their opponents.

And those of us in the liberal, moderate and mainline parts of the Church have dropped the ball. Ignoring the Bible, we try to adapt the latest business models in our approach to the administration of our church communities, and we embrace rather dilettante-ish pseudo-scientific approaches to spirituality and pastoral care which owe more to introductory psycho-therapy than to the biblical tradition, often with fairly disastrous results. As we have explored these other avenues, our more fundamentalist brothers and sisters continue to assert that they have the Bible on their side but, lamentably, ignore the complexity of the Bible and become preoccupied with defining Christianity not in relation to the biblical tradition, but rather in relation to a set of predetermined perspectives on a narrow range of ethical issues – the role of women, abortion, rights for gay and lesbian people, and the quest for political power.

But this does not need to be the case.

In 1922, the Rev. Harry Emerson Fosdick preached a remarkable sermon entitled “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” It is well worth finding and reading a copy of the sermon online. In it, Fosdick squared off against the rising movement called fundamentalism in the American church, in which a group of Christians had delineated a set of fundamental doctrines about which they would tolerate no debate. Fosdick made a spirited plea for tolerance and liberality in matters of faith, as well as challenging them to realize that science had valid insights that would benefit the quest for religious truth.

We need a modern-day Fosdick to preach such an eloquent sermon, but to change the title slightly – perhaps entitling it, “Shall the Fundamentalists Win Control of the Bible?”

After all, the greatest challenges to the unity of the Church, in this modern age, concern questions about the interpretation and the use of Scripture. From issues related to the

role of women, to issues related to human sexuality, to the ethical limitations that should or should not be placed on scientific processes such as stem cell research, to issues of our relationship with people of other faiths or of no faith, to our assessments of the way to address the inequalities of wealth and poverty-- all of these questions are linked with how the Bible is interpreted and used.

My fear is that those who would like to embrace the liberality of spirit and tolerance for diversity that Fosdick commended, however, have become so afraid of being perceived as Bible-thumping fundamentalists if they quote the Bible, that they silence themselves from conversations in the public square.

But we should not be silent.

And it is only a greater degree of biblical literacy which can help to discern theological and ethical truth in the midst of these debates. It is only those who take the time to read the Bible, in its fullness, who begin to appreciate the nuances, the dialectical tensions, the diversity of perspectives and the startling inconsistencies which the text contains – and which contribute to its enduring relevance and power. It is only those who take the time to read the text – in its fullness – who can truly engage both the narrow-minded religious fundamentalist and the narrow-minded secular atheist to draw out the limitations of their arguments.

So what do I mean by all of this?

An example of the way that the Bible's own internal debates can lead to greater levels of theological and ethical discernment is revealed in the biblical books of Ruth, Ezra and Nehemiah.

The story of Ruth is a short narrative about a young Moabite woman who returned with her mother-in-law Naomi to Israel when Naomi's husband and two sons die. On the surface, it seems like a wondrous story of loyalty and of love – Ruth's loyalty to her mother-in-law leads her to meet, and eventually to fall in love with the kind character named Boaz, and they live happily ever after and have a child named Obed.

So far so good.

But Ruth is more than a little love story. It may, in fact, be a very subtle but powerful rebuttal to the actions of Ezra and Nehemiah.

And what are Ezra and Nehemiah all about? Ezra and Nehemiah recount the events surrounding the people's return from their Babylonian exile. As they returned, the people sought to rebuild the Temple, restore the city of Jerusalem, and renew themselves as a social and religious community. As they did so, one of the great questions that confronted them was how they were to comprehend the meaning of the exile, especially in light of their self-understanding as the covenant people of God. God had, they thought, promised to protect them in that land flowing with milk and honey; and God was, they had thought, faithful to the covenant. So how were they supposed to comprehend the exile -- when God had seemed so unconcerned, unable to protect them, and absent?

This was not a frivolous question. The exile had been such a painful experience that it was the duty of the people to discern what they must do to avoid having to endure such a wrenching experience ever again.

And so, under the leadership of men such as Ezra and Nehemiah, the people came up with a number of answers. And one of their major conclusions was that the reason why they had been forced to endure the exile was because they, the people -- and not God -- had broken covenant. They, and their kings, had permitted the worship of other gods to compromise their community.

And who, they asked, was responsible for importing these other gods?

The conclusion that they reached was that it was ultimately the fault of the foreign wives. In the latter chapters of both Ezra and Nehemiah, we read about the people of Jerusalem making the decision to expel the foreign wives and the mixed race children from their midst, thereby purging their community of such corrupting influences and, in so doing, purifying themselves.

They are not pleasant passages to read. And, unfortunately, it is a situation that has been repeated numerous times, both in religious and non-religious communities throughout the ages. Let's solve our problems by finding a group that we can blame for all of our problems -- and then scapegoat and expel them. In Nazi Germany, it was the Jews, the gypsies, the homosexuals. In Marxism, it was those who would opiate the masses with religion. In Mao's China, it was the religious leaders and the intelligentsia. In our time, it is either the freeloading welfare recipients or the greedy corporate CEOs, depending upon your perspective. If only we could get rid of 'them', we will be pure, strong and holy again. Our community will be preserved; God will bless us; and all will be well. So go for it, Ezra and Nehemiah, blame the women. Kick them out. Then everything will be all right.

But around the same time that these purges were taking place, someone told another little story -- about a woman named Ruth, who was one of those foreign wives.

And the radical challenge that the Book of Ruth poses to Ezra and Nehemiah is found in the very final verses of Ruth. In one of those seemingly meaningless biblical genealogies that we tend to skip over, we come to the final verses of Ruth -- "Perez became the father of Hezron, Hezron of Ram, Ram of Amminadab, Amminadab of Nahshon, Nahshon of Salmon, Salmon of Boaz, Boaz of Obed, Obed of Jesse, and Jesse of David."

Did you get it?

The startling challenge that this quaint little love story poses to the entire patriarchal purifying purges of Ezra and Nehemiah is this -- Ruth was David's great-grandmother.

And who was David? David was the greatest Israelite who had ever lived, whose descendant would restore the fortunes of Israel and establish an everlasting kingdom. David was the great hero of their history. And Ruth was his great-grandmother.

So maybe kicking out the foreign women is not such a great idea, Ezra and Nehemiah. Because, in so doing, you would have kicked out the great-grandma of the greatest Israelite that ever lived.

And it is the tension that exists between these stories that begins to unleash the invitation to ethical discernment in these texts. Either one of these stories, on its own, contains truth. On the one hand, Ezra and Nehemiah remind us that certain standards must be established, lest we tolerate practices that will undermine the strength of community. Most of us, in our modern age, are horrified that Ezra and Nehemiah would blame and expel the foreign wives -- but if our congregation willingly welcomed an outspoken white supremacist or a dangerous sex offender without establishing healthy boundaries, we would be irate.

But, on the other hand, Ruth reminds us that when we draw the lines of community too firmly, we risk excluding those who will bring great blessing to our communities.

So how do we steer between the need to establish healthy standards for safe communities, and the need to include the outsider? It is only when we keep these texts in dialogue with each other that we begin to realize that they are inviting us into very deep levels of ethical and theological discernment. And this tension between Ruth, Ezra

and Nehemiah is only one of the many tensions that exist within the pages of Scripture. While I will not get into it tonight, I would invite you to ponder, some time, why the biblical canon contains four Gospel accounts, which differ radically in their presentation of the story of Christ. They did not, as we would likely try to do, mash the four accounts down into one seamless mush. Might it be that the presence of four Gospel accounts invites us to ponder whether the fullness of truth may only be discerned when a diversity of voices are in conversation with each other?

A third important gift that the Bible offers to our world is its role as source of eschatological hope.

What does that mean?

Eschatology is the study of final or ultimate things. Traditionally, eschatology has concerned itself with four ultimate matters – death, judgement, heaven and hell. However, the term can also be used in relation to questions about the ultimate destiny of our lives, of humanity and of the world.

As we all know, there are many different religious predictions about the events that will signal the end of the world. Late-night evangelists strive to prepare people for the end of the world. Hollywood thrillers are filled with references to 666, to the four horsemen of the apocalypse, and to cryptic scenes about shadowy characters breaking the seven seals – all of which draw heavily on imagery from Revelation. However, we tend to forget that these seemingly frightful images were not meant to be fodder for Hollywood horrors.

Rather, the visions of Revelation were intended to encourage people to live in hope, even in the face of the rising oppression which was being meted out by the Roman Empire. In a time of imperial claims of ultimacy and of growing persecution, the early Christians were invited to catch visions of a time when a peaceful lamb would triumph over the horrifying beasts of power that seemed to be prevailing; of a time when the forces of justice would triumph over the oppression unleashed by the four horsemen of the apocalypse; of a time when the violence of the earth would be healed by the presence of a community in which the light and love of God would reign supreme.

And lest one think that such a hopeful vision is outdated or irrelevant, consider how this eschatological hope was revealed in the words of Desmond Tutu a few years ago.

The American author Jim Wallis writes of a trip to South Africa that he made before the apartheid system was dismantled. A political rally had been cancelled by the white

government, so Desmond Tutu invited the crowds into the cathedral for a 'service of worship'. Riot police and armed soldiers were gathered around the cathedral, and were standing along the walls of the cathedral, taking note of what the various speakers said.

At one point in the event, Bishop Tutu rose to speak, and confidently proclaimed that the "evil" and "oppression" of the system of apartheid "cannot prevail."

Tutu then pointed his finger at the police who were recording his words. "You may be powerful, indeed very powerful, but you are not God!" he proclaimed. "And the God whom we serve," said Tutu, "cannot be mocked!"

"You have already lost!" he thundered. Then, apparently, he came out from behind the pulpit and seemed to soften, smiling at the crowds and at the soldiers. Since they had already lost, he went on, "We are inviting you to come and join the winning side!"

Apparently, the whole place erupted, the police scurried out, and the congregation rose up in triumphant singing and dancing.

Tutu's vision was rooted in eschatological hope – in a vision that proclaimed to the powers of this world, you will not ultimately prevail. And so, we invite you to come and join something great, something just, something that will, ultimately, be beautiful and good.

Contrast that vision with a conversation that I had a few years ago while on a canoe trip, in Algonquin Park, with a group from my previous congregation. There were about fifteen of us on the trip, ranging in age from an 11 year old girl right up to an almost seventy year old man.

One night, we were all sitting out on a rock at our campsite, looking up at the stars and having one of those conversations that only happen on summer nights with friends under a vast canopy of stars. At one point, we started discussing how long we thought it would be before humans were travelling amongst the stars. Some thought it would happen in a hundred years; others thought that it might take five hundred or a thousand; some thought perhaps even longer than that.

The 11 year old was a great kid from a wonderful family, had come on the canoe trip with her dad. She had every reason to be hopeful about life. And yet, her answer was very different. She did not think that we would ever travel in the stars. Rather, whether it is our abuse of the environment, or the wars that we wage, or some terrible disease, she was convinced that we as humans will wipe ourselves out first.

I have often pondered her words, as they reminded me that the way that we are teaching our children to confront the challenges that face us, as a race, is sometimes faced with a sense of fatalism rather than a sense of hope. But without hope, what will motivate our children have to address the injustices, the diseases, the environmental challenges, and the political conflicts that confront us?

Without hope, Martin Luther King Jr. would not have caught sight of the promised land. Without hope, Desmond Tutu would not have worked towards the dismantling of the apartheid system. And without the eschatological, ultimate hope that the biblical narrative has offered to our culture, what hope do we have for the ultimate destiny of the world?

While such hope can inspire great social movements, as demonstrated by Tutu and King, we all know that such hope is not only limited to political movements or to our dreams about the stars. It is also a hope that meets us in our own times of crisis and despair -- which leads me to one of the most personal reasons why I believe that we must preserve the text of the Bible as a source of eschatological hope.

My mother is suffering from a brutal and agonizing illness. About a year and a half ago, she was diagnosed with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, or Lou Gehrig's disease. ALS is a degenerative disease which eventually renders a person a captive in their own body. Even though the brain continues to function their bodies becomes useless and eventually shut down.

My mother's illness first manifested itself in her mouth and throat. Slurred speech and bouts of choking were only prelude to the loss of speech, which was particularly tragic for a woman who had spent her life teaching languages – French, English, Latin – as well as finding great enjoyment in reading to her young grandchildren.

Because of her inability to chew and swallow, she is now fed through a feeding tube that has been inserted into her stomach, which again was brutal for a woman who loved to cook, and who insisted on continuing to cook for my father and for all of us when we visited, even after she, herself, was no longer able to eat.

The only way that she can still communicate is through her hands – by email, by writing, or by typing words on a special keyboard which simulates speech.

In preparation for tonight, I asked if she would offer some reflections on what the Bible means to her in the midst of her journey with ALS. The following was what she emailed to me,

The Bible has been the source of my faith, hope, and precepts for years and years. As I go through the ALS journey, here are some of the things it means to me...

It reminds me that my suffering has no explanation, and the 'why' factor is never answered...and Job 37 and 38 assure me that a Great and Awesome Creator does not have to give us answers.

It reminds me that God may not give answers but does not leave me alone.

It reminds me that life is a wisp in the great span of eternity

It reminds me that the wisp is significant in God's sight since He has plan for that life, even in suffering.

It reminds me we all waste so much time running after worthless idols until we stop and hear the voice..."Be still and know that I am God..."

It reminds me that we are surrounded by "a great cloud of witnesses..."and so many people reach out to help.

It reminds me that in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ we have our only hope for redemption.

It reminds me of the foolishness of our meanness and the hurt we cause others in a life that is too short for such crap.

It reminds me that the Divine Son of God also bore awful suffering.

It reminds me that thanksgiving is always in order...no matter how tough the road is.

Love Mom....[I will write] more if I have strength

The reason that I share this with you is because, on many nights as she falls asleep -- in spite of the anger, the questions, the frustrations and the struggles that she has been enduring -- she listens to a set of CDS on which has been recorded the text of the Bible. As a result, as she descends into sleep, and ever further into that horrific captivity

within her own body, there is a voice that continues to speak to her through those recorded words.

I do not know what she hears; but for the love of God, we cannot allow that voice to be silenced in our world.

So, to answer Malcolm's question, what should we struggle to preserve in an age of decline, one answer might be the Bible – for its cultural and literary richness; for the way that it invites us to discern truth in the midst of life's theological and ethical complexities; and for its stunning eschatological hope.

I would like to conclude by reading, to you, some of the words from this ancient book. You are welcome to close your eyes, if you so wish. As you listen, I would invite you to contemplate what a loss it would be if these words disappeared from our world.

“What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God?”

“The Lord is my Shepherd...”

“He leads me through the valley of the shadow of death.”

“For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.”

“Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

“To you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you; you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.”

“Let whoever is without sin cast the first stone.”

“Love one another, as I have loved you.”

“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

“Why do you look for the living among the dead?”

“If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal....Love is patient, love is kind, love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.”

“God will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.”