

“Renewed in Love”  
Stouffville United Church  
Sunday, December 16, 2018

Zephaniah 3  
Vosper Decision by Toronto Conference

In Chapter 1, Verse 1 of the Book of the Prophet Zephaniah, we read the prophet’s impressive ‘credentials’: “The word of the Lord that came to Zephaniah son of Cushi son of Gedaliah son of Amariah son of Hezekiah, in the days of King Josiah son of Amon of Judah.”

Zephaniah is one of the 12 Minor Prophets in the Old Testament. This group of 12 minor prophets are distinguished from the three major prophets, Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Ezekiel, simply by the length of their books. Zephaniah is 3 chapters long, Jeremiah is 52. Zephaniah spoke during the middle point of the reign of King Josiah. A commentary notes that the book of Zephaniah is “constructed in a way that sets the stage for the Josianic reform of 621 BCE, a major movement to reintroduce the statutes and ordinances of the Sinai covenant.”<sup>1</sup>

For it was during this reign of King Josiah that the people’s faith would be renewed. The temple in Jerusalem would be restored after falling apart from neglect. And there would be a dramatic discovery of the Book of the Law, for it had been missing for a while.

In 2 Kings 22:5 we read, “The high priest Hilkiah said to Shaphan the secretary, “I have found the book of the law in the house of the Lord.”... When the king heard the words of the book of the law, he tore his clothes. The king went up to the house of the Lord, and with him went all the people of Judah, all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the priests, the prophets, and all the people, both great and small; he read in their hearing all the words of the book of the covenant that had been found in the house of the Lord. The king stood by the pillar and made a covenant before the Lord, to follow the Lord, keeping his commandments, his decrees, and his statutes, with all his heart and all his soul ... and all the people joined in the covenant.(2Kings 23:2-3)

Zephaniah is living and prophesying in the City of Jerusalem, the same time as the prophet Jeremiah who is with the Babylonian exiles. Zephaniah tells the people of Jerusalem that God is angry towards them because they have turned from God. God will destroy the city and the people. And yet, in the closing words of his prophecy, which is our text today, Zephaniah will bring these words of renewal and hope to the people: God “will renew you in his love; and I will bring you home.” Twice Zephaniah tells the people that “The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst.” (vs. 15, 17), affirming that God’s presence is with the people.

The thing about prophets is that they point in directions no one wants to look. That is their job. And Zephaniah has pushed me to look where I don’t want to look.

A week ago I held an information evening here at the church to look at the materials and facts around Toronto Conference’s decision to allow Rev. Gretta Vosper to remain in her church of West Hill United Church in Scarborough. While most of you may know the details of this

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<sup>1</sup> Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 1, 51, Exegetical Perspective.

case, I still want to offer a brief overview. Rev. Gretta Vosper was ordained in 1993 by the Bay of Quinte Conference and called to West Hill United Church in 1997, where she has pastored for 21 years. In 2013, Ms. Vosper declared she could no longer remain true to her ordination vows and that she declared she was an atheist, not believing in God, Jesus, or the Holy Spirit, and would not hold the Bible as foundational, nor conduct the sacraments of communion and baptism.

After receiving an official complaint from a member of a church in Toronto Conference, she was interviewed in 2016 by the Toronto Conference Interview Committee, focusing on whether she continued to affirm the questions in the Basis of Union, Section 11.3, asked of all candidates at the time of ordination. The Conference Interview committee decided that Vosper was unsuitable for ministry because she was no longer in “essential agreement” with the church’s statement of doctrine. Conference subsequently asked General Council’s judicial committee to hold a formal hearing to determine her status as an ordained minister. These sessions were scheduled for November and December of this year.<sup>2</sup>

A few weeks ago, on November 7, 2018, Toronto Conference issued a press release which announced that Toronto Conference, Vosper and her congregation of West Hill had “settled all outstanding issues between them” and that Ms. Vosper would be allowed to continue in her ministry at West Hill United Church. No information was given as to the terms of the settlement.

So we now have an ordained minister in the pulpit who says she does not believe in any of the tenants of faith that are the foundation of the United Church of Canada.

Stouffville United Church has sent a letter, approved through a motion held at a congregational meeting of November 25<sup>th</sup>, stating: “Since our Church (The United Church of Canada) was founded on Christian values and belief in God, and since Atheism is a direct contradiction of this, we, the congregation of Stouffville United Church, wish to register our objection to Gretta Vosper remaining as an Ordained Minister of the United Church of Canada.”

In 1925, the United Church of Canada was created by an amalgamation of three denominations –Presbyterians, Methodists, and Congregationalists. The Presbyterians’ gift to the United Church was “vigilance for Christ’s Kirk and Covenant, and care for the spread of education and devotion to sacred learning”<sup>3</sup>. The Methodists’ contributed “evangelical zeal and human redemption, and the ministry of sacred song.”<sup>4</sup> And the Congregationalists’ gift was “the liberty of prophesying, the love of spiritual freedom and the enforcement of civic justice.”<sup>5</sup>

What is important to note is that in 1925 it was the Congregationalists who insisted that “candidates for the ministry not be required to subscribe to the doctrinal statement of the Basis of Union as a test of the correctness of their theology; it was enough to be “in essential agreement.”

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<sup>2</sup> The Observer, December 2018, p. 42.

<sup>3</sup> Phyllis D. Airhart, *Church with the Soul of a Nation*, (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2014), 25.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

They proposed that ordinands instead undergo a rigorous examination of their religious experience and theological beliefs, for which a mere creed could not substitute.”<sup>6</sup>

Back in 1925, the church’s critics saw the ‘essential agreement’ clause as “proof of the United Church’s theology laxity.”<sup>7</sup> And this tag continues to be the Achilles heel of our denomination. “Essential agreement” has now become distorted to the point that the church has now found acceptable whatever explanation Gretta Vosper gave to the question, ‘are you in essential agreement with the statement of doctrine of the United Church of Canada’. Has our doctrine become so watered down that an atheist can pass our questioning?

Today, our national church is characterized by strong regional differences that uniquely define the structure and the relationships in our conferences across Canada. Binding us together are things like our Cedral statements, and the Manual which dictates our polity and enshrines our theological statements. Our theological statements have experienced a metamorphosis from time to time, as new statements are created in response to a growing awareness of God’s creation and what our part in it looks and feels like.

The United Church of Canada’s Doctrinal Statement began in 1925 with the ‘Twenty Articles of Doctrine’<sup>8</sup>, which opened with this statement: “We, the representatives of the Presbyterian, Methodist, and Congregational branches of the Church of Christ in Canada, do hereby set forth the substance of the Christian faith, as commonly held among us. In doing so, we build upon the foundation laid by the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone. We affirm our belief in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the primary source and ultimate standard of Christian faith and life. We acknowledge the teaching of the great creeds of the ancient Church.”

In 1940, our church produced ‘A Statement of Faith’, which included this statement in its preface: “But Christians of each new generation are called to state it afresh in terms of the thought of their own age and with the emphasis their age needs. This we have attempted to do for the people of the United Church of Canada – seeking always to be faithful to Scripture and to the testimony of the Universal Church, and always aware that no statement of ours can express the whole truth of God.”<sup>9</sup>

This was followed in 1968 by A New Creed, and most recently, “A Song of Faith” in 2006.

The United Church of Canada has the spirit and inclination to consistently revisit our theological statements, inviting our questions and discussions about the nature of the divine, and what it means to be a Christian today. However, as my mother has been known to say, a vice is a virtue gone too far. Can doctrines be probed too far? Are there limits to the lengths an inquisitive spirit can push? Where is the line?

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>8</sup> The Manual 2016, (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 2016), Section 2.3.0

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, Section 2.4.0

Well, dear United Church of Canada, it would seem that we've crossed the line, and we're bleeding because of that crossing. Toronto Conference has let us down by its briefest summary of the decision regarding Gretta Vosper, and Nora Sanders, the General Secretary of the United Church of Canada did little better, with our Moderator, Rev. Dr. Richard Bott, a distant third. Yes, you reminded us that we remain devoted to Christian values, and yes, you asked us to pray for all parties involved. But I am frustrated that a regional body of our church doesn't have the guts to move Ms. Vosper to the Discontinued Service List (Disciplinary), effectively ending her ability to continue as an ordained minister in the United Church of Canada. Her presence in the pulpit assaults the foundation of our church. She needs to go.

But what about tomorrow? What does the church say about tomorrow? What will be done about the fall out as clergy catch up with the dismay experienced in the pews? What do we say when people accost us in shopping aisles or in Doctor's offices and ask us – "Why do you have an atheist minister in your church?" How do we explain a decision that has been made by a few, and we're given no information as to the whys of the decision?

I have become numb to the years of letters to the editor in our Observer magazine that go back and forth between the pros and the cons, the whys and the wont's, of people across this land who either grieve the decision to keep Gretta in the pulpit, or who rejoice that she is there. I told the people at the Vosper meeting a week ago, I don't get it. Why are you afraid of this one situation. My sheep sensed a predator. They were fearful. And I, as the shepherd, didn't sense the fear. In these last few days I have discerned a major disconnect between myself and what is being felt in the pews. Is it my hypocrisy that gets in the way of being able to see what is happening? I didn't read it right. But I see it now.

Zephaniah's prophetic voice pointed to the laxity among the people. But soon, under King Josiah's reforms, the people would gather and hear the Word and praise God. Is a similar time now upon our United Church of Canada? Has our church been lulled into a sense of complacency to the point that even God is bracketed out of our identity? In trying to make space for everyone's views, have we lost our way?

We are a church that celebrates diversity and inclusion. It is in our DNA. This identity has held us together since 1925, when three denominations merged into one, allowing room for distinctiveness in the formulae. And anchoring this distinctiveness, this inclusivity, are the doctrines enshrined in the Basis of Union. Our Creed reminds us that we are called to be the Church and to celebrate God's presence. This we do wholeheartedly today as Stouffville United Church.

I am reminded of an older hymn, "City of God" from our old red book, with these words: "In vain the surge's angry shock, in vain the drifting sands: unharmed upon the eternal rock the eternal city stands."<sup>10</sup> The surge's angry shock has ripped across pews in our denomination. And yes, our church has completely failed us in its handling of Gretta Vosper.

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<sup>10</sup> The Hymn Book of the Anglican Church of Canada and the United Church of Canada, (Toronto: Southam Printing Limited, 1971), Hymn 147, City of God, words by Samuel Johnson 1822-1882.

But the prophet Zephaniah offers God's words to us – Do not fear. I am in your midst. I will renew you with my love.

And **nothing**,

no surge, no attack,

no atheist minister

can move, change, alter, belittle or diminish

the presence of God in our midst.

God is with us.

We will never be alone.

Thanks be to God. Amen.