

“An Unknown God”  
Stouffville United Church  
Sunday, May 17, 2020

Acts 17 and 1 Peter 3

A ministry colleague shared a blogpost by ‘the Sixty Second Preacher’ who was talking about the impact of the pandemic on clergy, listing the top 10 reasons we might need a break about now. Reading through the list, I realized that most of the items fall into *all* of our ‘in-baskets’. The Sixty Second Preacher said that the impact of the pandemic “means a lot of new learning, steep learning curves, and being in that uncomfortable space of the unknown. Even for those who understand these mechanics, this is hard work.”<sup>1</sup> As I heard in a weekly zoom meeting, it’s ‘business as unusual’.

We have found ourselves shoved off the cliff of our normality, to find ourselves in a deep valley of change and chaos. Almost everything we took for granted is not for granted anymore. We can’t visit. We can’t hug. We can’t go to school. We can’t work. We can’t travel. We can’t even sing together. Our patterns are changed. And our priorities have shifted – for example, the time I spend walking up and down the aisles doing grocery shopping is a newly gained hour of free time thanks to online shopping! We are unlearning the learned patterns.

And the way we’re doing worship these days! The church of our forefathers looked nothing like this! Choir members never had to record their parts ‘alone’ and then send them to be mixed in to form an anthem! Some churches are doing worship like we are here at Stouffville United, recording, editing and then uploading. Some churches are going the ‘live’ route, and worshipping at their regular times on Sunday morning, using Facebook live, or zoom.

There has been a tremendous amount of creativity that has gone into these worship services! And the congregation, while not together in the sanctuary, are nonetheless showing that they too are committed to worshipping as one in this online format. It’s a huge effort and change for both halves of worship in the leading and the receiving. And it’s meeting the desire to gather and worship and experience the grace and identity that community gives.

We’re still experiencing a vital, strong, life-giving connection with each other in the many ways we are continuing being ‘church’. Church is still happening, even without the four walls of the building. Pastoral Care is functioning very much as the body of the church – checking in on people. The Open Cupboard ministry is being helped by a wonderful donation of monies by the Lions Club of Stouffville. We are planning a vegetable garden on church property for anyone to pick from, as well as growing two vegetable gardens in the town’s allotment gardens for the Food Bank clients. The UCW sit down in their respective living rooms every second Wednesday of the month at 1:30 pm and have a cup of tea and think of each other. The Children’s Worship is having so much fun during their zoom Sunday morning time together. Our

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<sup>1</sup> [https://sixtysecondpreacher.wordpress.com/2020/05/07/top-ten-reasons-why-your-pastor-may-need-a-break-a-special-message-for-clerks-of-sessions-and-elders/?fbclid=IwAR0iKPcFSUCR33CxsvqK\\_FJ23kC-8OEWsm5sBCQMSWFJ7k9hsDP4Xj\\_2qM](https://sixtysecondpreacher.wordpress.com/2020/05/07/top-ten-reasons-why-your-pastor-may-need-a-break-a-special-message-for-clerks-of-sessions-and-elders/?fbclid=IwAR0iKPcFSUCR33CxsvqK_FJ23kC-8OEWsm5sBCQMSWFJ7k9hsDP4Xj_2qM)

Friday Coffee with the Rev chuckles together. Council and its committees meet through zoom. And after worship today, we'll be gathering for coffee and conversation, just like we would if we were in the building.

Today we are a different church than we were two months ago. We are moving forward on the great love we have for each other, and our care and concern for those in our community. And in some ways, our faith is set free from the building where it may have had strings attached.

As our Prime Minister said this week, "Covid-19 is exposing some uncomfortable truths in our society" and culture – how our society cares for the elderly; the political resistance to procure affordable housing for the homeless. And while the pandemic has certainly stopped us in our tracks, it's not surprising that the negative forces in the world continue unabated. The 22 murders in Nova Scotia. The racist tirades of the past few weeks, with Conservative MP Derek Sloan questioning the allegiance of the Chief Public Health Officer of Canada, Dr. Theresa Tam, when he said, 'Does she work for Canada or for China?'<sup>2</sup> And then this past week, one of our national rock stars, Bryan Adams, writing an Instagram post that lashed out at Wuhan for being the epicenter of the pandemic.<sup>3</sup>

Last Sunday, three United Church buildings in Saskatoon were vandalized by hateful homophobic messages painted on their property. Police have made an arrest.<sup>4</sup> All three churches are 'affirming' churches, declaring them a safe place for people of all sexual orientations and gender identities.

For all the ways in which the pandemic has been an equalizer across the globe, it has not managed to erase racism; it has not vanquished hatred.

In our Acts passage, Paul says to the people in Athens, "I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription 'To an unknown god' ... We ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals." The 'imagination of mortals.' We put our human stamp on everything, even sacred things. For example, for over two thousand years, we have created church buildings that say, 'here is where God can be found'. We've created elaborate worship services and rituals that say this is how we communicate with God.

And these last eight weeks have thrown the things we loved so much about our church, literally out the window. Our worship together. Our sanctuary. Our music and our choir, and the laughter and the sounds and the presence of the people that we love.

But maybe its time for a recalibration. A rejuvenation of what we know is essential but needs a good shaking to get the dust out. Peter and Paul said and wrote these words from our

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<sup>2</sup> <https://globalnews.ca/news/6860468/canadian-mp-demands-theresa-tam-fired/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.msn.com/en-ca/news/canada/bryan-adams-apologizes-for-covid-19-instagram-post-that-was-condemned-as-racist-inflammatory/ar-BB13X25x?ocid=spartandhp>

<sup>4</sup> <https://thestarphoenix.com/news/crime/pair-of-saskatoon-churches-st-andrews-college-at-u-of-s-vandalized-with-homophobic-graffiti/>

scriptures many years before the concept of Christendom even got its feet wet in the time of Constantine in the 4th century, before there was ever a sense of church in the way that we know it. And in the time that has passed since Peter and Paul stood there, the fire in their words around what lights up their lives has become entombed in marble and rubrics and hierarchal structures that have snuffed out the raw power of their witness.

How do we recover that sense of Paul who so passionately declared that this God is the one in whom I live and move and have my being? How do we find the words to answer Peter when he asks us to be ready to give an accounting for the hope that is in us?

Maybe now is the time to rediscover how it is that you live, and move, and have your being in God. Maybe now is the time to find those words to account for the hope that is in you, words that are within you but you haven't spent time with. Maybe now is the time to experience the newness that God is leading you to, and us, as a church.

Today you have the time.

Thanks be to God. Amen.