

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

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There's a kind of uneasiness and discomfort in the world today. You read the headlines about what's happening in the world, you hear about developments closer to hand, you live through events in your own lives, with your own families and friends, and you wonder at it all.

Recently, Brian McLaren in a sermon preached at the famous First Presbyterian Church in New York City spoke about the challenges facing the church today, and indeed facing the entire world.

He was preaching as part of a series focused on the 100th anniversary of the very important and pivotal sermon by Harry Emerson Fosdick preached in that very pulpit entitled "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?"ⁱ Back in 1922, there was a struggle between Mainline Christianity and Fundamental Christianity. The five fundamentals about which and against which Fosdick preached concerned the Bible and theology and would not have been of any particular interest to those who were not Christian. They were inerrancy of the Bible, imminent physical second coming of Christ, virgin birth, physical resurrection, and penal substitutionary atonement.

Today, however, McLaren writes that there are new fundamental realities which affect everyone. "A hundred years ago," McLaren preached, "the people sitting where you now sit had no idea what would arise between their time and ours: first, nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction; second, climate change and a multifaceted environmental catastrophe; third, a resurgence of ugly and vicious white Christian supremacy; fourth, a form of capitalism so successful that it is not only too big to fail, but also too big to control; and fifth, the power of a small cadre of oligarchs to buy candidates and

governments and media outlets and use them for their own kleptocratic purposes, including invading countries and threatening World War III.”ⁱⁱ

In my mind and heart and spirit, in addition to these realities, I am concerned and worried about how we deal or don't deal with the realities of poverty around us and how we treat people who are dealing with disability, especially in Ontario. “The true measure of any society can be found in how it treats its most vulnerable members,” wrote Mahatma Gandhi.ⁱⁱⁱ He echoes that lesson of Jesus that we will be judged by how we treat the least.^{iv}

How do we deal with these new fundamental realities? Where do we go from here? What next? What do we do now?

Frequently when people come to see me, and I'm sure Rev. Andrew, they are asking for answers to the question, what should I do in this circumstance or that? What next? But there is an added dimension. God is somehow involved here, but they aren't sure how. What does God have to say in my circumstance, to my situation, to my concerns? What does God want me to do? What can I do that is in line with God's desires for my life and future?

For us all here, as individuals, and as a church family, that's the question we ask, what is God's will for me, for us? Where is God leading? What now? What next? What does God have in store for us?

We as Christians understand that we are not self-contained individuals independent from God as if we can make our decisions without consideration for God and God's will and way for us. We also understand that the Church is not a democratic, people-centred institution; it is theocratic and Christocentric. Christ is the head of the Church. We are the body of Christ, and our task is to discern God's will for us. Our decisions are a matter of discernment, discerning God's will.

In the United Church, for example, the General Council, our national governing body which meets every three years, is not made up of delegates elected to represent the various areas and constituencies within the church. It is made up of commissioners

who have been commissioned to discern God's Spirit within the context of Christian community, listening to dialogue and debate, but more importantly being open to and listening to the Spirit of God as the Spirit moves within the assembly. That is why proxies are not allowed within church decision-making bodies. To experience the movement of the Spirit one must be present when the Spirit moves.

Ministers within the United Church are not hired; they are called. The Pastoral Relations process is a process of discernment through which members of the local church and Regional Council listen to the congregation and to the candidates, and then to God as they discern whom God wants to minister among them.

Students for ministry begin their candidacy in a process of discernment during which the student in dialogue with a discernment committee from the local and wider church tries to determine God's will for their lives and for the ministry of Christ's church. A person cannot just decide to be a minister. The church must discern whether that decision is in accord with God's will.

The discerning of God's will for our personal and communal lives is a life-long task. It is a task that began in the earliest days of the Church.

After the resurrection of Jesus, he appeared to some in various settings as proof of his resurrection. These must have been turbulent and confusing times. Jesus had died a violent death, but now he was alive among them. He would not be staying, this they knew, but what would happen? It was like the time between the flash of lightning and the roll of thunder. Something was coming. You could feel it in the air, but what? What was next? They wanted to know just as surely as we do. What next? Where do we go from here? What does the future hold? They tried to discern the will of God.

"Are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel now? Is this the time?" they speculated.

Jesus answered, "It is not for you to know. This is God's business."

Now, I find that a frustrating answer. "It's not your business; it's God's business."

What then is our business? Where do we go from here?

"Wait," Jesus says. Wait for the fulfillment of the promise. Wait for the baptism of the Holy Spirit.^{vi}

"They also serve who only stand and wait," John Milton wrote.^{vii}

I don't like waiting. Do you?

Recently, we were looking at some old VCR tapes of the summers we were fortunate to be able to spend at a cousin's cottage. While there we like to do as much as possible, not to waste any time. We swim and fish and hike and play and boat. One year we made giant bubbles and watched them glisten in the sun as they rose and then burst into a million sparkles of light.

We like to fly kites. The favourite place is to stand on the edge of the dock. So we run along the shoreline the kite rising slowly up and up. Faster and faster, we run along the beach up the gangway to the end of the dock. There we stop and plunk, there goes our kite into the water. So we drag the kite out. Dry it off and start all over again. Up it goes and then every time down it comes into the lake. Why? Because there is no wind. Now it looks like there is wind as we run but there is none. We are languishing in the summer doldrums when the air is still, and kites will not fly no matter how hard you try. What can you do? Wait. Wait for the wind to blow.

And so we too wait. We wait for God's Spirit to come and blow when we will rise like kites on the breeze of God's making.

Rick Warren, founding pastor of the Saddleback Church in Orange County, California, uses a different image, a more Californian one. The purpose of the church, he says, is to surf the spiritual waves of God's making. Too many churches try to make their own waves, and you can do that for a while just as you can pretend there is wind by running, but they don't last, and they are nothing like the waves God can make. It is not our responsibility, nor our possibility, to make waves, but rather to

recognize, to discern, what God is doing and to join God in that endeavour.

And so, the disciples waited. They waited not just in a special place, a holy temple, but in an ordinary room in an ordinary home.^{viii} They waited in hope. They waited in expectation. They waited in anticipation, and they waited in prayer. They didn't sit around doing nothing. They prayed.^{ix}

Surely God's waves, God's winds, are discerned in an attitude of prayer. And so, they prayed. They prayed together of one accord. They prayed with devotion, with fervour and sincerity. They prayed that the promise might be fulfilled, and the Spirit of God might blow among them. In order to discern the direction of the future, to know what to do next, they focussed on God. They turned away from themselves and consciously directed their attention to God.

Did they know what they were praying for? Not fully, I think. That was still God's business. Some probably prayed that God would reveal a little about what they could expect. How would they know when the Spirit had come? How would they know when the power of God had fallen upon them? Would it be obvious? Would it tingle? Would it hurt? How does the Holy Spirit baptize people? And what about this fire Jesus sometimes mentioned? Did he mean real fire or spiritual fire? There must have been a little fear in their prayer. But they prayed, where do we go from here?

By the time the apostle Luke wrote down these stories 50 years had already passed since Jesus' death. Jesus had not yet come. Surely, they felt the same anguish as did those first disciples days after Jesus left them. But for them, as for us, it is somewhat different. Indeed, it is encouragingly different. Luke's church knew, and we know, that the Spirit did come. Fifty days after Jesus' death, the Holy Spirit did come in a powerful way which no one could mistake or deny.^x And from that time the church grew, the disciples spread out as witnesses across the face of the world and each time they spoke the Spirit acted to bring about change. It was as if God had dropped a giant boulder

into the sea of space and time and a tidal wave of unforeseen and unimagined proportions spread out changing the world forever.

And so, for us in our time and our circumstances, in our individual lives, our country and community, in our church family, we ask about the future, "What next? Where do we go from here?" The answer is difficult yet simple: wait for God's Spirit, pray with devotion and hope, and trust that the Spirit will come as the Spirit has come before. This is my faith. So may it be yours. So may it be ours. Thanks be to God. Amen.

ⁱ Fosdick's sermon can be read at chrome-extension://efaidnbnmnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.wrs.edu/assets/docs/Courses/Classic_Fundamentalism/Fosdick--Shall_Fundamentalists_Win.pdf

ⁱⁱ Brian McLaren, "Shall the 21st Century Fundamentalists Win?" quoted in its entirety in the e-newsletter *The Cottage* by Diana Butler Bass, May 22, 2022. The sermon was originally preached on May 1, 2022 as part of a series by various preachers focused on Fosdick's 1922 sermon. McLaren's sermon can be viewed at <https://fpcnyc.org/sermon-shall-the-21st-century-fundamentalists-win>

ⁱⁱⁱ Similar comments to Gandhi's have been made by other people, including Thomas Jefferson, Winston Churchill, Harry Truman, Dostoevsky, Pope John Paul II and many others.

^{iv} Matthew 25: 31-46.

^v Acts 1: 6, 7.

^{vi} Acts 1: 8; Luke 24: 49.

^{vii} John Milton, "On His Blindness", last line. For the poem see, for example, https://www.englishclub.com/ref/esl/Sayings/Quizzes/Patience/They_also_serve_who_only_stand_and_wait_911.php

^{viii} Luke 24: 52; Acts 1.

^{ix} Acts 1: 14.

^x Acts 2.