

The ghost of God

Mark 1:21-28; Isaiah 40:21-31; 1 Corinthians 9:16-23; Mark 1:29-39

Rev Jean Shannon

I wanted to talk about preaching this week because it's in our text from Paul ...and because I want to prepare you for the time when I'm not here. I am praying that more than the usual people will feel, like Paul, compelled to speak. I pray that we can have our own Pentecost where everyone hears the voice of God through their own heart language.

The week started as usual. I did what I always do, I read and re-read the texts. And the more I read the texts, the more uncomfortable I was with Paul's description of how he went about it...and his whole concept of Christian freedom which has been appropriated by the American Christian Right.

Meanwhile – life happens. Our daughter had an accident. The house is a mess of tradesmen, dust and the leftovers from visitors. My husband is away grandparenting while she heals and that means the jobs here that are normally split in two – just aren't...

Burbling away in the news-void we call the 'silly season'... It's all US politics. Overseas news is headlined because all our journalists are on holidays ...and very little happens during our lazy summers.

The official part of Trump's campaign is under way with the Primaries¹. He gives sermons every day but they make no sense. Often, they are just gobbledygook, sometimes including made-up Bible verses and a lot of name-calling and demeaning comments about real people. And the people cheer.

I try and try to understand how Christians can be such fervent followers...so I read stuff. I follow blogs and vlogs, journal articles and book reviews. I have conversations with friends and family. And this week, I finally had an 'ah-ah' moment, thanks to some people with bigger brains than mine.

It's not politics – it's theology. They are following this guy like he is the Messiah. Trump is known as a destroyer. He's going to break government. He's going to break democracy and he's going to 'wipe the slate clean' (which sadly may include some ethnic cleaning). And that is OK with his followers.

¹ Don't start me on primaries. They cost a lot (Haley spent \$100m on one state in advertising) and they mean absolutely nothing. In the end, the candidate that 'wins' isn't automatically the nominated presidential contender. That is decided at the National convention, and they can elect anyone including a total outsider as they did with Trump.

You see, if you believe in a vengeful God. If you believe the earth will drown or the fires of hell will wipe it out before a new era can be born – before Jesus returns, then Trump's your guy.

American Christianity is unique, particularly in the South. It's had hundreds of years of isolation to stew in its own juices. While the South might have lost the war – Southern ideology has conquered America.

There is a fundamental belief that people must be absolutely broken down in order to be saved. Many Southern churches intentionally set about breaking their people so they can 'find Jesus' even though they are sitting in the pews.² It makes sense to me now, remembering those ugly Sunday tirades telling us how bad we were.

Michael Kruse said, "Like it or not — believe it or not — white evangelicalism is a uniquely American folk religion that has shaped our entire history, culture, and political life over the last three centuries. It is just there, in this Christ-haunted nation, like humid air hanging over the Mississippi delta in the summer." ...³

Flannery O'Connor, whose one of my favourite writers in the world said, ..."I think it is safe to say that while the South is hardly Christ-centred, it is most certainly Christ-haunted. The Southerner, who isn't convinced of it, is very much afraid that he may have been formed in the image and likeness of God. Ghosts can be very fierce and instructive. They cast strange shadows."

But it's what my cousin said that was the most chilling for me. She said, "They reject traditional Christian theology because Jesus is seen as "weak and effeminate" because he cared about people and wanted to take care of them."

In other words, the people worship the Bible but don't follow Jesus. The words are more important than God. When it was written "first came the word" – they have taken that quite literally".

So why is any of this important? Because we, the Uniting Church, take the Bible seriously, not literally. We meditate on texts and discern through study and context, history and translations AND soul AND active inquiring minds, what God was trying to tell us. What Jesus taught; What speaks to our hearts; What sits with hope and love, caring and justice. We hope to change lives by seeing God's gifts and celebrating them – not by beating people down. We try to actually DO Jesus'

² You have to go through a metaphoric death and resurrection to be 'born again.

³ ..."We breathe it, whether we recognize its existence or not. Whether we acknowledge it or not. And it took its most unique shape in the American South, where it remains, even in these supposedly secular days, a potent force. Michael Kruse Politico 22 Jan 24 'Our System Needs to Be Broken, and He Is the Man to Do It' - POLITICO

work in the world, not debase people so they can be 'saved'. That's what we preach. That's what I hope you will preach.

I love the Isaiah reading. It reads like a town crier, Do you not know?!! Have you not heard?!! There's a breathlessness, a kind of excitement I'd love to capture in a sermon. It is the kind of reaction I would expect from last week's reading where Jesus drives out the bad spirit. There's a wonderful bit where the text says "the people were amazed!" Astounded and amazed! When that happens, you just can't help but tell somebody ...and basically, that's what we are called to do.

When I'm preparing a sermon and I get to a text that makes me uncomfortable, I sit with it. I read it again and again and then I go in search of commentaries. I don't just take what one person said, I look for other comments, sometimes counter arguments. And ultimately, because God gave us wisdom, I don't have to agree with it. That is Christian freedom.

Sometimes Paul's letters are just plain hard to understand because we're not sitting in that community's time, place or politics. 100 years from now when someone reads THIS sermon, they will say, "trump who?" – or mistranslate the word 'trump' to something that means "outperform" or even "cornet"... then very little of this writing will make sense. We are at the mercy of translators.

But sometimes, Paul is too readily understood, as in this case where he is willing to play any game to get his message across. He is so compelled to preach, to tell the story, he will subvert himself. He will be anything you want him to be if that will make you listen. Don't do that.

Having an authentic voice doesn't mean becoming someone else – it just means you listen carefully to equip yourself with language and images that have meaning to the listeners. Look at the fabulous images Isaiah uses. I'm fairly certain that's what Paul did but that's not how it's written. Paul could debate Roman-style with the best of them. He could use philosophy to explain faith just as well as he could write in plain language to remote communities.

Summing up this rant so far –when it comes to writing a sermon, curiosity and flexibility are essential. Hang onto that.

And also... sometimes, the text we are working with is not as accurate or clear as it might be.

That is not to say there aren't great stories – stories that we really need to tell. Going back to last week. Think about it, Jesus challenged the social order. Who was this nobody? What was his social standing? (remember he was a tradie!)

Once more, he crossed social and religious barriers to save a man from his demons. He didn't just throw a Bible at him, or random inspirational quotes, "he backed up his words with an act of hospitality, restoration and justice"⁴

The people were amazed. Our challenge is to amaze people. Inspire. You don't want a lot of yawning and people saying, "Oh, I've heard this part of the Bible so many times...blah, blah, blah, when's tea?"

When Diana Butler Bass told this story, she wondered what if they weren't amazed? What if they just shrugged and thought Jesus was another drifter with party tricks? What if they were so cynical and washed-out they weren't prepared to be amazed? What is that were us?⁵

And that, dear friends, is the hardest part – imagination. After all the reading and all the research, drawing on your own imagination and wonder, to cast a new light; open a new door; reveal yourself in the wonder of the texts. Read Isaiah again.

Finally, we need to take a page out of Jesus' book – after working hard all day, he withdrew for quiet time. It happens all through the Gospels. There is no way these new wonders and imaginings can happen without withdrawing for silent prayer and quiet contemplation. There is no way you can cast aside the distractions unless you house-keep your soul. You need to leave space for God to speak.

Let me summarise, in case I lost you in the weeds: To write a great sermon, you need:

- Study – not formal just read stuff, watch TV, listen to conversations, notice what's happening in the world
- Flexibility - to speak in many ways
- Curiosity
- Imagination
- Yourself –your relationship/your insight and experiences
- Rest – take time away to let the phrases and imaginings begin to float

God is in those texts. Sometimes like a ghost and hard to find... He was in the hearts and minds of everyone who recorded their experiences ...and the Divine will be with you as you craft your message. The question that must always be on your lips is who are you portraying – the God you've been told to believe or the one you are discovering in scripture.

⁴ Diana Butler Bass The Cottage 28 Jan 2024

⁵ Does that describe general society today?