

1st John 1:1—2:2

In the Beginning

April 11, 2021

I suspect many of us have been spending a fair bit of time outdoors these past weeks. Outside of that brutal Alberta clipper which roared through the Province almost two weeks ago we have had sun and relatively warm temps. A year ago (April 11, 2020) the high for the day was -2. Most of our night time lows this past week have been above that temperature and our daytime highs have been stunning. The Meewasin trail has dried off. The ice on the water is vanishing. The geese and gulls are sporting on the remaining ice and emerging sand bars. The pelicans will soon be back if not already. The days have been lengthening which makes a stroll before or after supper possible. We feel our spirits renewed as we soak in the warm rays of the sun and gulp down outdoor air, unmasked as circumstances permit. I feel my soul and spirit reviving as I walk the trail, hear again birds which despite travel restrictions spent the winter in warmer climates. I observe the colour of trees and shrubs change as the sap invigorates them. Professionals have stressed over and over again that spending time outdoors is an antidote to the adverse psychological and emotional effects of a pandemic.

It may seem odd that I am waxing on about the beauty of creation and its restorative properties, but it fits the scripture of the day from 1st John. 1st John is a letter about creation. It draws upon images and language of John's gospel which in turn draws upon images of Genesis 1. Genesis speaks to the physical creation around us. John's gospel largely speaks to the creation of our spiritual lives in relation to Jesus Christ. The creation which 1st John addresses is that of a church community. They are all inter-related, and yet distinct. This morning then, we be intentional about remembering our creations: the natural world around us, our individual stories of coming to trust the way of Jesus, the ever evolving creation story of this congregation.

I do not want to belabour us with the textual links between 1st John 1, John 1 and Genesis 1 and yet it is good for us all to appreciate the manner in which passages of our Bible are in dialogue with other texts in the canon. 1st John and the Gospel of John, for example, both have a fairly lengthy prologue which utilize similar terms. "We declare to you what was from the beginning" is paralleled with John's "In the beginning" and in Genesis we have "In the beginning". 1st John mentions a revealing of "the Word of life"; the Gospel writer says something similar in that through the "Word" life has come into being. And, of course, Genesis 1 is all about the Divine Word calling sky, sea, plants and people into being. Another similarity is that all three of these texts are also about testimony. The author of 1st John writes of testifying to this Word of life; in John's gospel it is John the Baptist who testifies to the identity of Jesus; all of Genesis 1 is a testimony to a God who forms a good creation and good life in comparison to the gods of other creation

stories.¹ There are significant linguistic links between these three sections of scripture, and yet as I mentioned, these three texts really address three different moments of Divine creation.

In my opening I spoke to the awe and wonder and healing properties of creation, so I will not talk more about it. I will, though, leave this section with one of my favorite poems on the natural world authored by Wendell Berry.

The Peace of Wild Things

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with fore-thought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

The creation which interests John's gospel focus more on God's creating energy present in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus was in the beginning with God attests the gospel writer and is a reflection of God. God / Jesus is the bread of life, the light of the world, the door, the Good Shepherd, the resurrection and life, the way, the true vine. Jesus is the beginning of a new relationship with God. Regarding our faith journey, we all have a creation story.

Consider that Sunday School teacher which nurtured you along the way. Consider that parent or professor or pastor or presenter whose encouragement gave you courage to trust the way of Jesus more deeply. Consider that friend whose steadfast presence provided the support needed to hold steady, to recover from a fall, to continue onward. Consider that book whose ideas prompted you to deeper trust or discipleship. In some way these are all manifestations of Jesus Christ who seeks to draw us all into deeper relationship with him and his heavenly parent. We all have a creation story.

A little over a year back (BCE: Before COVID Emerged) I was able to attend a pastoral resource event at Canadian Mennonite University. Irma Fast Dueck led a session on telling our faith stories. In one class she taught the students spent time describing the faith journey not through a chronology of events, but rather through objects. Each student was to consider their story and compile five

¹ See Walter Wink's, *Engaging the Powers* (Minneapolis, Augsburg Fortress: 1992), pp.14-16.

tangible symbols of that and explain to others how that particular object reflected God's walk with them. Four students of the class joined her on stage and shared about one of their objects. I don't remember them all, but I do recall a quilt serving as the symbol for one young woman and a replica Tardis (from the television show Dr. Who for those don't know what a Tardis is) of a young man. While life is chronological, most of our spiritual journeys are not. Maybe some year we will try this at Nutana Mennonite: in a small group, in Adult Education, maybe during worship. We could do worse on a Sunday morning than giving testimony to our spiritual journey.

The biblical trajectory of a personal relationship with Jesus and God naturally leads to community life, and this is the interest of 1st John.

The author brings up "the beginning" to call the members of the community back to the foundation of their corporate faith. Recent developments in the life of the community had caused dissension, leading to schism. Now, 1 John calls those in the community back to their origins in the life of the congregation and reminds them that their existence together is based on the testimony given them concerning the eternal life that was manifested to by earlier eyewitnesses. The call to remember the beginnings is an appeal to renew confidence in the earlier testimony upon which the community was founded...it is a reminder that in any generation the Christian community inherits its foundation from those who have gone before in the faith.

Upon the foundation of shared faith, we are called to a distinctive manner of life. 1 John declares that God is Light, and that as believers we walk in the light. The vision of Christian faith is the vision of God, given to the community of faith in and through what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. We are shown God's will in Christ, and we are called to live our lives in faithful compliance to [the way of Christ]...God revealed God's self in Jesus Christ in order to call us into a personal relationship with God, and in that relationship there is an enabling fellowship...

The author knows that sadly, despite the joy of Divine fellowship [and congregational fellowship], humans...still sin. Christian faith does not deny sin, and it does not condone sin; rather it takes seriously that God has called us out of our sinfulness and has made provisions for our forgiveness.²

This brings me now to possible avenues in which we might practice a discipleship of our 1st John text.

² Marion Soards, Thomas Dozeman, Kendall McCabe, *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*-- (Year B; Lent / Easter, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), pp.117-118.

Like the psychologists, the social workers and the counsellors are suggesting-- get outside. And when we are amidst God's good creation let us remember that we too are created good, that God has shaped eco-systems which can survive, that we are cared for as much as the grasses and the geese. Like Wendell Berry notes, this can give us a bit of emotional respite.

Secondly, most of us have a story. Think about your story. When I think about the person I have become I remember 3rd grade Sunday School teacher Frank Janzen who prayed for each of us by name. I remember High School teacher Don Perry whose care and concern went well beyond the teacher's portfolio. I remember the book *Siddhartha* authored by Herman Hess which open my world God's activity in other cultures and beyond Christianity. I remember.... Do you remember as well??? At the beginning of our life together as a congregation there are moments in which God has nudged us and been with us and blessed us.

Finally, we call to mind again the foundations of our congregation. The setting of 1st John is one in which members have separated themselves from the congregation. At NPMC these days we don't have a schism going on, but we do have pandemic fall out. We, as church people, have been separated from each other. I haven't been trolling the halls of Bethany Manor in over a year. Outside of dire circumstances I haven't been to RUH or other places of medical care. Goodness, delivering paskas just before Easter was a reminder to me of the craving people have to see each other and visit. The sun was warm that day and my expected 10 minute stop invariably lasted 30 minutes. What do we need to remember about Nutana Park Mennonite Church and this people? We are a congregation that strives to keep the doors open wide enough for all people while keeping racism and sexism and other forms of prejudice away from our theology and community life. As our web site notes, "We are young and old, we are children and parents, grandparents, nieces and nephews, brothers and sisters. We are students and retirees, professionals, professors, teachers and volunteers. We are tradespeople and craftsmen, hobbyists, cooks, gardeners and bakers. We are artists and musicians, poets and preachers. We are together in Christ ~ supporting, trusting, honouring and loving one another".³ It is good, now and then, to remember who are and who we are striving to be.

May the natural creation strengthen us in these days. May we remember again God's creative work in our spiritual lives. May we remember again this congregation and God's ministry through it through the years and today. May we remember and give thanks. Amen.

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³ <http://www.npmc.net/who-we-are.html>