

Windows of Wonderment

Isaiah 6:1-8

Trinity Sunday

30th May 2010

On Wednesday this past week, Sheryl Smith, the Chair of our Board of Managers and I met with two men, Wayne and Frank, who had travelled down from Meaford, Ontario, to visit St. Paul's here in Peterborough. The gentlemen are on the Board of Meaford United Church and wanted to see our sanctuary because they are, unfortunately, going through the same situation as we have gone through with regard to their roof.

As they told the story of what had happened to their church building, Sheryl and I smiled sympathetically because the sequence of events paralleled our own so closely and so uncannily. Cracks had been discovered in their sanctuary ceiling ... further investigation required ... structural engineer's report ... shear splits found in the rafters ... sanctuary declared unsafe for worship ... need for steel columns to support roof ... the job put out to tender ... contract to be awarded ... and so on. Unfortunately, unlike us, though, they don't have an alternative space for worship as we have with the Christian Education Centre. So, in July and August, they will hold their services just across the road in Meaford Anglican church.

Now, all this has nothing really to do with the sermon. I tell you this just by way of interest and to remind us, that we are not the only historic church going through structural problems. What has to do with the sermon, though, is a very interesting conversation I had with one of the two gentlemen on another matter entirely, after we had discussed the roof. It concerned an even higher and loftier matter than church roofs.

Wayne told me of a visit their church's men's group had made the night before to Lion's Head, Ontario.¹ I am sure you know where that is. Right up on the Bruce Peninsula, to the north of Owen Sound and Wiarton. Seemingly, at Lion's Head there is a private astronomical observatory – something of which I was unaware. The observatory which is called “Quetican” is run by a man called Doug Cunningham who is a retired Science and Outdoor Education teacher and, for the past 34 years, he – and many others – have been observing the night sky from that backyard observatory. And, being so far from major urban centres, it is just an excellent place for astronomy because of the lack of light pollution and the consequent darkness of the night sky.

I am not sure if Quetican is accessible to the public on a drop-in basis. Perhaps it is only open by appointment to interested individuals and parties. But Wayne told me what a wonderful visit their group had this past week. He said the view of the Moon was magnificent. It was almost as if you were flying just above the surface, seeing the craters,

the so-called “seas” and the volcanoes. Almost as if you could reach out and touch them. They were also able to see many other areas of the solar system. Perhaps the most beautiful sight, Wayne said, was the up-close sight of the planet Saturn encircled by its beautiful rings and its moons. It absolutely took your breath away, he remarked. But, even more. Looking through that telescope was a truly religious experience. It was almost as if you were looking in to the very being of God himself. It was just so amazing.

That took me back to the first time I ever looked through the lens of a powerful astronomy telescope back in Scotland some years ago. When you see sensational beauty of the planets, the stars and the nebulae ... When you think of how far away they are ... When you think that, because the distance defies even the speed of light, you are really looking into the past ... then all this is a very moving experience. You are lost for words. It is truly a spiritual experience because in a unique way you sense the very presence of God. And all you can say is, “Wow!”²

Now, we don't need to look through a telescope to have that kind of breath-taking experience. It can also happen when we see a beautiful sunset with the red and yellow hues painted on the evening sky. Or, maybe it's in the still of the morning, when we see a loon settling on a nearby lake. Maybe it's when we travel through the towering Canadian Rockies for the first time. Or, down East, when we witness God's power in the surging Atlantic Ocean. Or when we hear a Mozart symphony or see a painting by Van Gogh. Or, when we stand in an ancient cathedral. Or when we are moved by the beauty of a newborn baby. In times like these, we not only marvel at the Creator's handiwork but are overcome by a sense of God's presence. And we react with awe. With amazement. With wonder. And all we can say is “Wow!”

Isaiah had an experience like this in his early life. He was in the Temple, performing his religious observances. In a familiar place, doing familiar things. When suddenly everything changed. There in that historic building, amidst the aroma of the incense and the ancient Sabbath rituals being played out, he was confronted by a dramatic vision of God himself. High and exalted. His robe filled the whole sanctuary. Surrounded by six-winged creatures calling out, “Holy, holy, holy! Lord God almighty, Heaven and earth are full of your glory.”³

As the young prophet took all this in, he was overcome by a sense of his own personal guilt and sinfulness that drove him to say, “Woe is me! For I am a man of unclean lips.”⁴ Then, as he sensed the awesomeness of God's presence and the immenseness of his call to

service, Isaiah's "Woe" turned to "Wow!"⁵

One of the sadnesses of contemporary Christianity is that we have lost this Wow Factor. We have lost this sense of wonder and awe. We find it in nature. We find it in ancient religious settings. But it seems to be missing in our religious experience today. Perhaps it's because we have brought God so greatly down to our level. We have made him one of us. Our "pal". Our "buddy". And so we have lost that sense of "otherness" or "uniqueness" or "specialness". We refer to God as "holy" in the sense of being a good person rather than realising it means God is awesome, wonderful, terrifyingly mysterious, radically different from us human beings.

Oh, how we need to reclaim this Wow Factor in our spirituality today so that – rather than worship a tiny God, cut down to human size – we may become excited by the true greatness of God, by his true majesty and magnificence.

Oh, how we need to see God in a completely new way so that – rather than being disenchanted by a one-dimensional, overly-simplistic being – we may become exhilarated by God in all his complex, multi-dimensionality.

Whenever we come to Trinity Sunday in the Christian Year, we try once again to understand the complexities of the Doctrine of the Trinity and we wonder why we persevere with a seemingly outworn theological concept that belongs to ages past. But one of the reasons why the Trinity has always been very important is that it expresses so well the multi-dimensionality of God, his many-faceted nature. It tells us again and again of the many different ways in which we experience God. God as Creator inhabiting the vast reaches of the universe. God as Christ the Son, taking our human nature on himself and transforming it. God as Holy Spirit, the invisible, powerful Presence in our world today. It tells us also of the many different ways in which God loves us. In which he cares for us. Not just from afar off but near at hand. It tells of the many different ways in which God is working in our world changing it for the better, moulding it into his image, preparing it for the coming of his kingdom. When we truly understand what the Doctrine of the Trinity is trying to tell us about the majesty and mystery of God, we can only respond in one way. With awe. With wonder. And we can only say, "Wow!"

But it is not only within personal faith that we need to rediscover the Wow Factor, we also need to recapture it in the church, within our congregational life. And particularly in terms of our outreach to those who, in the community around, are seekers after faith. So that, rather than be turned off and disillusioned by a lacklustre and lukewarm religiosity, they will again be turned on, attracted and enthused by the intense spiritual experience Christianity offers! So that they will come to understand what Christianity is all about, how it informs and enriches their

lives in today's world. So that they will find true faith in God and the saving grace of Jesus Christ. And will react spontaneously by saying, "Wow!"

Writing for Chief Executive Officers in a web page called "The CEO Refresher", Shep Hyken says that the Wow Factor boils down to one thing: exceeding the expectations of the customer. The basic idea, he says, is to bring the element of surprise into one's business so that people will say "Wow! Isn't that great!" As an example, he tells of buying a car one day and how the salesman not only stopped by at his home to see if everything was OK but also sent a basket of fruit with a thank-you note. He was so impressed that all he could say was, "Wow!"⁶

Maybe it's something along similar lines we have to do in the church today. We have to exceed people's expectations by the way we serve our community. By the way we welcome newcomers into our midst. By the warmth and acceptance of our fellowship. And, also, we have to exceed people's expectations by the service of worship we provide. A service of true Christian spirituality. A service that will inspire and give new vision. A service that will bring deep peace for everyday living and yet impart a genuine challenge to respond to the demands of Christian discipleship. A service that, more than anything, will make people feel that God is within them and around them, giving them new strength and purpose for their everyday lives.

Yes, let us work in these days to exceed people's expectations as they come into this place. So that, more than anything, they will experience such a new and intense sense of God's presence that spontaneously they will say, "Wow!"

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¹ Doug Cunningham, "The Night Sky .. A Threatened Resource", The Bruce County Gazette, <http://www.bpeg.ca/code/news/nw/article.php?id=6>

² "Wow" 1513, Scottish interjection, a natural expression of amazement. The verb meaning "overwhelm with delight or amazement" is first recorded 1924, Amer. Eng. slang. Used as a noun meaning "unqualified success" since 1920. Online Etymology Dictionary, © 2010 Douglas Harper. I also like to think of "WOW" as being an acronym for "Window of Wonderment", "Wow!" being our spontaneous reaction whenever a window of wonderment is opened to us in life.

³ Isaiah 6:3

⁴ Isaiah 6:5

⁵ Isaiah 6:8b

⁶ Shep Hyken, "The Wow Factor", *The CEO Refresher*, <http://refresher.com/shwow.html>