

FRESH START

A sermon given at First Congregational United Church of Christ in Loveland, Colorado on August 13, 2017 (Tenth Sunday after Pentecost/Blessing of the Backpacks Day)

Matthew 9:16-17 (Young People)

Revelation 21:1-6

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In case you missed being here last week, I am Bob von Trebra – the new Interim Pastor here at First Congregational Church – a part of the United Church of Christ. This church is currently searching for a new pastor – a process that normally takes about one to two years. I am here to accompany you through this “between-time” – to help you understand what you most need in a new pastor, guide you through the process of searching, and get you ready to enter into a healthy, productive relationship with that person. As I told the previous congregation I served as an interim, searching for a pastor is a lot more like online dating than hiring an employee.

Today we continue our summer theme of playing in the sandbox, although the summer will be soon be coming to an end for some of us. We have today one of the great traditions of this church: the blessing of backbacks, book bags and briefcases in preparation for a new school year. It is a time for a fresh start, and that is our theme for today in our summer sandbox. Fresh start.

At the previous churches I have served, I have done some sermons about what I believe, and why. This isn't to tell you what you must believe. The United Church of Christ, of which we are a part, is a non-creedal church, which means that we have no particular statement of faith or beliefs you must agree with in order to be a member. We are bound together by covenant, not common belief – be that theological or political.

Instead, I hope this will help you to learn more about me, and perhaps provoke some thought and discussion for you as well.

What do you believe, and why? Why do you believe in God, and in Jesus? What would you answer if some person, on learning that you were a Christian and part of a church, asked you why? Would you have an answer? The New Testament book of 1 Peter counsels believers, “Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you...” (1 Peter 3:15)

Many Christians come to believe what they do because they were raised in a church. The Christian faith may be all they have ever known. They accepted what they were taught without a lot of serious thought. Maybe some folks were taught that having doubts or asking questions showed a lack of faith. But these days, we meet and relate to people of other faiths. What makes Christianity different from Judaism, or Islam, or Hinduism, or Buddhism? Or what makes one Christian denomination different from another?

And there are many people who see no need for God or religious faith at all. Can we offer any reason to think otherwise?

I had some church background as a child and youth, but not a lot. When I taught confirmation classes at my previous church, I would tell the young folks that I am a confirmation class dropout – I never did confirm my faith as a youth even though I was baptized as an infant. But I have thought about what I believe -- and have come to be a minister and preacher of the gospel of Jesus Christ because I believe it gives us insights into who we are, and why the world is as it is. And it can help us respond in helpful ways.

Have you ever had the feeling that our world is falling apart? It's hard not to feel that way some days as we get the news of the world. Maybe this is a generational thing. Many young folks see the world as exciting, with great possibilities, and perhaps a naïve belief that they can change things and make the world even better. As we get older, it seems that we mourn the loss of institutions and principles we believed in, and we can be less optimistic about the future. It is easy for us old folks to believe the world is crumbling rather than improving.

Well guess what? Scientifically speaking, the world is running down. The most common theory that astronomers and cosmologists and other scientists currently believe is that the universe began with a "big bang" more than 14 billion years ago. It started as a tiny speck smaller than the human eye could see (if there were any humans, or light to see by), and it is expanding at an ever-increasing rate. But its sources of energy are being used up. If it continues in this way, a time will finally come when all sources of energy in the universe are depleted. It will become cold and dark, and life will cease to exist.

I wouldn't lose any sleep about it. We won't be here to see that happen – none of us. For you young folks getting ready to go to school, this is no reason not to do your homework! The sun that gives light and warmth to the earth is expected to keep shining for more than 2 billion more years. Who knows what human beings will have learned and become by that time. They may have learned to travel to distant planets around newer stars.

But eventually – a long, long time from now – this world, and the entire universe will come to an end. If that happens, it seems to me that ultimately, all that we learn and all that we do here won't matter.

It's a depressing thought.

When I was a youth, I loved to read science fiction, and one of my favorite authors (and perhaps one of the earliest theologians I ever read, although most people would not think of him as such) was Isaac Asimov. There is one short story that he wrote in 1956 that I remember after all these years, called "The Last Question." He wrote it just as computers were being invented and developed – and he foresaw some of their potential. In the story, as computers started to be capable of remembering more data and looking for connections between them, a computer programmer asked an early device a question: How can the process of the universe running down be reversed? After doing all the calculations it could to answer the question, the computer finally had to respond, "Insufficient data for a meaningful answer."

Over the course of many billions of years, that first simple computer grew in ability and complexity (just like the internet) – to the point where one great computer monitored and controlled activity through the entire universe. Some of the people who worked with that computer would occasionally ask again that most difficult question: “How can the process of the universe running down be reversed?” And throughout the course of human history, that great computer was unable to answer the question – there was insufficient information.

Finally, the computer continued to grow in ability and complexity until all information that would ever be known was loaded into its memory, and all human consciousness merged with its consciousness. The last stars in the universe winked out, and all life finally came to an end, but still the computer continued to do calculations, trying to answer that one last question that could never be answered. Finally, after a very long time, all the calculations were done, and the great computer had enough information to answer the question, but no one to give the answer to.

And so the computer said, “Let there be light.” And there was light. A new universe was created.

That story made a big impression on me. Over the years I have come to understand that God is much more than some super-computer. But I have decided to believe in God because only God offers the hope for a fresh start -- that all things can be made new.

Philosophers and theologians have tried for centuries to prove that God exists (or does not exist). It can't be done. Human reason cannot prove that God exists (or does not exist). Perhaps, as some have suggested, God precedes existence. Instead, believing in God is a choice that we make – a choice for hope rather than despair; a choice for possibility rather than fate; a choice for love rather than indifference. A faith choice.

And the good news is that God did not just create a new world “in the beginning.” God is still creating – making all things new. One of the phrases in our United Church of Christ Statement of Faith says that God “calls the worlds into being.” I think that is brilliant. Creation happens more than just here, and it is an ongoing process.

This world is falling apart. Personally, I think that is a good thing. The world that is ruled by money and power and domination and oppression and violence is running out of energy, and its demise cannot come too soon. A new world, ruled by God and steadfast love, is already coming into being. Recent events would suggest that not everyone is happy about that! I choose to believe in that world, and in the God who is creating it, and in Jesus Christ, the first light of that new creation.

And the old me is also falling apart and being recreated. The me that desires to have everything my way -- to be happy and successful and free from pain, even at the expense of others -- is dying. It is a process that started in a baptismal font in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin. But because I believe in God, that is a good thing. Because I believe that God can even make me new – more in the divine image, willing to trust that God knows what is good for me better than I do, and that I can be a co-creator with God in the new world that is coming into being.

And maybe God can even make a fresh start for churches that are trying to work out their future in a world that is rapidly changing, and dying for a vision of love and hope.

In the original Hebrew texts of the Old Testament of the Bible, the verb that is translated into English as “create” – as in the story that begins the book of Genesis – is only applied to God. Humans can take stuff that God has created and make other stuff out of it, but only God can create. Only God can make all things new. And that is one of the reasons I choose to believe in God.

Amen.

Robert J. von Trebra