

RONDEBOSCH UNITED Jan 19

LIVING IN CONSTANT WAKEFULNESS

Scripture text: Colossians 1:1-12

So welcome, welcome to the REAL beginning of the year:

Advent has come and gone again,
the Christmas debris and decorations are cleared away,
the New Year is firmly here and the confusion of writing 2019 instead of 2018 is sorted
resolutions have been made and broken,
the three kings have come and gone,
the kids are back in school,
traffic is backed up again ...

and here we are again at the potential of THIS YEAR becoming more spiritually disciplined ...
or at least that is an option at the back of our minds ...
on Sundays at least.

We have this intention, or at least this vague desire, to live in wakefulness, more intentionally, more spiritually.

Goodness knows it comes at us often these ways:

in health magazines, in on-line advertisements for retreats and yoga and breathing exercises.

So let's look at this season of the year, the real beginning of the year, to see if there is some practical way to respond to this intention toward spirituality.

And it's a very good historical season to do so.

You may recall if you have heard me preach or lead a quiet morning or a retreat, that my constant reminder to us all is the wonder of the religious age in which we are living;

the general consensus that this period, these years in which you and I are living, are the most significant years of religious history since the Reformation; the most significant time of church history for 500 years.

You wouldn't know it, from the headlines and the shocking statistics on just about everything negative on the face of the globe, but if you look more closely, you can see the signs.

The signs? In case you haven't noticed or have forgotten, let me quickly elaborate:

- **The spirituality of the Middle East, where Christianity began, has found a place again in our society.**
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- Meditation, icons, contemplation and incense have become part of spiritual practices. Perhaps we are waking up to the fact that Christianity began in what we call the Middle East -- Syria, Turkey, Greece, Jordan, Egypt. It is hopeful to begin to claim some of that heritage again.

- **Women have come back into places of influence and recognition as theologians, writers, lecturers and hosts of internationally recognized discussion programs.** I suspect Teresa of Avila and Hildegard and Mary Magdalene are very pleased if they look back from wherever they have gone to see what Krista Tippett and Margaret Silf and Barbara Taylor-Brown and Margaret Wheatley, Julie Cameron and Cynthia Bourgeault are doing, writing and saying.... Setting new intellection and theological standards.
- **The church has moved from the north and west to the south and east,** the largest congregations in the world now located in the Africa, South America, the Middle East, and China. You can check out details on PEW research site ... or ask John de Gruchy who went recently to VietNam.
- **The Church has changed names,** no longer the Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, Catholic but HILLSONG, HIS PEOPLE, CONNECT ... to mention only the positive ones. The church has moved from the cathedrals to the warehouses.
- **And spirituality is now the name of the game.** The general public is invited to be very spiritual without any acknowledgment of religion or theology. Any magazine you pick up while waiting in the doctor's office will confirm this.

So where does that leave us? Or more precisely, what does all this invite us to? What is the invitation for your spiritual year of 2019?

My suggestion is that it leaves us open to some very positive options. Because my usual inputs are for quiet mornings or spiritual retreats, I offer these kind of very practical options – I even have a handout!

TAKE ANOTHER LOOK AT LITURGY

- *Not necessarily a return to a fixed way of prayer and spiritual discipline, but an intentional spiritual connection through personal prayer in a focussed way.*

I came to church liturgy very late on my spiritual journey and went through the process of finding it confining, then helpful, then problematic and finally something I can use as a guide, a model, a pattern. An old Anglican lectionary containing the liturgies for Morning and Evening prayers has become a guide and a reflection of my journey. Mostly I have used it as a framework for my own prayers, adding to/crossing out, re-writing.

- *There is an invitation to claim these ancient church liturgies as your own.*

You can do away with the constant masculine references to God, the constant use of "man/men", the change the language to fit you need, to fit where you are. Even the language of scripture is not so sacred that you can't adapt it to your conversation with God. . Because although the language of the scripture may be archaic, the concepts are not.

(Example of idols of wood, where a man uses a piece of lumber to build something, and kindling for a fire and out of the remains carves a god and bows down to it, and neon gods+ we've made

Or the term 'war horses for the trauma of battle you can substitute WMD, the acronym from the Vietnam wars for weapons of mass destruction)

- *And may I encourage you to use the Psalms?*

This ancient text is used by the three major religions of the world: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. And when you come to the cursing Psalms, just make a mark through them and thank God you don't need that language. Because a sizable proportion of the world's population DOES need that language to cope with the unspeakable horrors of their lives --- a disturbing number of them on this continent, in this country ... even in this congregation.

C.B. students ... what they wrote coming out of trauma...

Look for an use the helpful Psalms like 104 which an author described as 'the cascades of ecologically tunes poetry'.

WRITE A "THIS I BELIEVE" AND HOLD IT AS A FOCUS

There is a huge gift in regularly re-defining what you believe.

Raised a mainline evangelical fundamentalist, it has taken me a lifetime – is taking me a lifetime – to define the faith I live by. And it isn't, as you will know from your own experience, an easy journey. It puts one in a very fragile place to say "this I believe! ... for now at least". It's much more comfortable to have a "I stand alone on the Word of God" or a "5 step plan of salvation" that is used both a bulwark and a safety line. Winston Graham says in one of his novels that "all historical accounts should end with a comma", and almost certainly doctrinal position statements should too. Perhaps with a "comma, however..."

I am a prime example of a person who has resisted new Bible interpretations, questions about the the **sacredness** of scripture, the plan of salvation, the definition of salvation, what one must 'do to be saved' ...

Deliberately placing myself/yourself in study groups and among people and in settings who see the whole sacred story through a different lens is a very uncomfortable place to be initially, but opens lenses onto new vistas previously unimagined.

PRACTICE AWARENESS

- *Perhaps the most inclusive advice and counsel you will get from coaches, counsellors, spiritual directors and health gurus is to slow down, breathe deeply, look around you, listen to the sounds of nature ... pay attention to the creation in which you are living and moving and having your being.*

(We are living in some of the most beautiful and accessible natural places on the globe. When I see people walking or running in Newlands Forest or Alpen Trails with headphones I wonder what they are listening to ... TED talks? World news? Pop music? Perhaps they are listening to nature sounds...)

To be fully attentive to the creation we are blessed to live in is, apparently, hugely healing, deeply quieting and an opening to spiritual connection with the God of creation. I say “apparently” because although I set out often with that intention I don’t achieve it for very long. All too soon the tidal waves, the wind in the pines, the splashing at the birdbath, the birds at the feeder, the scent of the flowers ... all are lost in my ceaseless mind chatter and I relate again to Beucher’s comment that “we catch glimmers at least of what the saints are blinded by, except that unlike the saints, we go on as though nothing has happened...”

To look, to listen, to sense what the saints are blinded by is to see the angels in the silent places, to turn our estranged faces to see the many-splendoured thing.

A CONCLUSION, OR AT LEAST A GOOD STOPPING POINT

I have mentioned **just three things we can consider at the beginning of what can be a new year spiritually:**

Creating your own liturgy, exploring a new personal doctrinal statement and practicing awareness.

We can look again at the scripture we heard read earlier. Paul, the much maligned writer of the letters to the first churches, offers a composite of what I’ve offered,

- We are now living in an epoch where the gospel is once again spreading and growing as it did at the beginning of the church, and as Paul said of then “making new growth the whole world over”.
- There is a constant growth in understanding of what Jesus’ message really was, what he really meant, what his teaching and example and death and resurrection were really offering: what Paul refers to our receiving of “full insight into God’s will, wisdom and spiritual understanding”.
- We are redefining those who “share the heritage of God’s people in the realm of light”, and acknowledging the wisdom, of all those possessing “the knowledge of God” and “bearing fruit in active goodness”.
- Paul goes on in the next verses to the great poem that begins “Christ is the firstborn of all creation”, the Christ of everything on earth that is created, visible and invisible, an invitation to us to join in the appreciation of our own surrounding creation.

We close with a moment of silence to reflect on any insight or challenge that may enlighten your spiritual path for the new year.