Arriving Where We Started

Sermon

Fort Massey United Church

Rev. Neale Bennet

December 6, 2015
May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be always acceptable in your sight, O Gracious God.

I am so pleased to be worshipping here with you at Fort Massey, and grateful for the privilege of preaching this morning on this your 144th anniversary. Happy anniversary!

Fort Massey is important to me for a number of reasons. It was here that I was installed as the ninth president of AST – the Atlantic School of Theology – on September 17, a date now destined to be a celebrated anniversary in my life.

My children Jack and Claire rehearse here on Thursday nights with Vox: a choir for social change, and in fact they sang at a concert here last night.

And I have a number of friends and connections in this community, including the Reverend Trent Cleveland-Thompson who is the chair of the board of Pine Hill Divinity Hall – one of AST’s Founding Parties and a tremendous support to the school. David Griffiths who is the Vice Chair of AST’s board. And Daniel MacDonald, a student of the school. We’re grateful to Fort Massey for your willingness to nurture AST students.

Anniversaries are funny things. We mark anniversaries for all kinds of reasons. Weddings, of course. Birthdays are a kind of anniversary and the anniversary you are marking today is kind of a birthday of this church and community. We often remember the day a loved one died. And we mark the anniversaries of other major events in the life of an individual or of a community.

I say anniversaries are funny things because they, in a sense, bring us back to where we started. They are opportunities to re-live a pivotal moment, to be re-grounded in what is enduring and important. As T.S. Eliot puts it: at the end of all our exploring, to arrive where we started, and know the place for the first time.

Finding ourselves once again in that familiar place, anniversaries are an opportunity to recommit, and to start anew.

My wife and I have a ritual on our wedding anniversary. No matter what else we do on that day, or how late in the evening it is before we find a moment, we always without fail read to each other our full wedding service. Well, not the hymns, but everything else. Some years it’s close to midnight but we never let the actual day go by without doing this. It is a way to mark our anniversary but it is also, in a
very real sense, a reflection on the year past, and a moment to pause and take stock of our lives and relationship. And our reading of our wedding service is a way to renew our vows to each other.

Advent is that kind of anniversary. And so, I suggest, is the anniversary of Fort Massey.

Today, we are celebrating 144 years of faith and community here. Along with that milestone there are a number of other things we can mark which happened on this date. On December 6, 1768 the first edition of the Encyclopedia Brittanica was published. In 1865 slavery was abolished in the United States. Everglades National Park in Florida was dedicated in 1947, the first national park created to protect a fragile ecosystem and the largest wilderness of any kind east of the Mississippi River. In 1968 the people of Spain approved by referendum a new constitution which would lead the country into democracy, ending 40 years of dictatorship. And it happens to be Ira Gershwin’s birthday. All good things.

All things I know about thanks to the miracle of Google.

Today is also the anniversary of calamities and tragedies. Almost one hundred years ago, a ship carrying supplies to war refugees collided with a munitions ship which exploded in Halifax Harbour.

On December 6 in 1991 it was Dubrovnik rather than Homs which was the site of deliberate military action against civilians.

And on this date in 1992 Germany, in an act of anti-foreigner sentiment, tightened up its asylum laws.

Today, on December 6, 2015 we might well ask how much further has the world advanced. Refugees of war are again seeking asylum. There is again debate about whether and how to allow them access to safer havens. And Halifax is again part of the effort to see them clothed and fed.

Thirty-six years ago today in Montreal a young man named Marc Lepine walked into the Ecole Polytechnique and opened fire on women, killing 14 of them. The shameful truth on this anniversary is that we have failed to eradicate violence against women. Gun violence continues to take lives and corrode society.

In the wake of the San Bernardino shooting a few days ago I read that the U.S. has had one thousand mass shootings in the past one thousand days. The remembrance of Marc Lepine’s act of hatred cautions Canadians against complacency. As do the more than one thousand Aboriginal women murdered or gone missing since 1980.
It can seem as though God’s vision for the world, if not slipping further away from us, isn’t getting closer very fast. It can seem that as we come full circle year after year, we are spinning our wheels more than we are gaining traction.

If that is so, how do we break the cycle, interrupt the patterns that keep us from more fully realizing the kind of world God wants this to be? A more just, compassionate, peaceful and equitable world?

There are no easy answers. The only way forward is through faithful action. To recommit to the labour of bringing about justice and peace. To remember that the essence of being a faithful Christian community is found in social action as well as in fellowship. To make the commitment that next year – December 6, 2016 – if we have anything to do with it the world will be a better place.

This morning’s Gospel points to this. It is a story of call. It is in T.S. Eliot’s words, “the drawing of the Love and the voice of this Calling.” The angel Gabriel appears to a young woman, not long past childhood herself, and gives her extraordinary news. “Greetings, favoured one,” he says. “You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.”

Now, I don’t know about you but I can be suspicious of being buttered up or told how what I am about to hear is going to be good for me. It reminds me of the kind of things my parents would say to me as a boy: “Congratulations. This is your lucky day! You get to clean out the garage!”

But we can imagine Mary listening attentively, if with some incredulity, to Gabriel as he tells her she will bear a son. A son who will deeply and permanently transform the world so as to create a fundamentally new human reality.

But wait, Mary says, I see a slight problem here. I’m a virgin.

A mere detail, says the angel. Nothing to worry about. God has it covered. The Holy Spirit will come upon you. The power of God will sweep over you. The child will be born. He will be holy. He will be called Son of God. Nothing is impossible with God.

Right, says Mary. I’m in. Bring it on. I’m ready to do my part. “Here am I, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word.”

Mary jumps right in with both feet. No real hesitation. No overthinking. No deliberations in committee or the striking of terms of reference for a task force. A true leap of faith.
And note what the angel is promising Mary. You, a young single woman. Without means. You are going to bear a child. Your pregnancy will be a source of puzzlement to others, even shame. It will bring morning sickness. Back pain. And finally the wrenching spasms of labour and the colossal effort of childbirth.

Not to mention a son who, by the sounds of it, won’t be the easiest child in the world to raise.

Pain, effort, agony. That’s what you can count on. Woo hoo. It’s your lucky day, you get to clean out the garage.

Right, says Mary. Got it. Pain, effort, agony. Count me in.

In T.S. Eliot’s words, Mary enters into “a condition of complete simplicity, costing not less than everything.” She makes a vow to give her all. A vow to take up the mantle and play her part in the bringing in of the commonwealth of heaven.

There is something about a vow that keeps us on track. Something that ensures we stay the course, year after year, particularly when things get difficult.

Last summer, before starting in my new position here, I went on silent retreat for a few days at a place in northern Massachusetts run by Anglican monks. My first day there at Eucharist, we – this silent group of strangers – gathered to worship and to celebrate the renewal of marriage vows by a couple who had been going on retreat there for decades. It was quite an unusual and touching experience of community.

The priest in his homily talked about vows, and how it had been for him to live as a member of that religious community. It was difficult, he said, and there were many times that the vow he had taken kept him in community when he otherwise would have gone. And it was good that he hadn’t known, when he took the vow, just how difficult the religious life would be. If he had, he might not have been able to make the commitment.

So, like Mary, we are called to commit. To say, “Here am I Lord. Ready for what lies ahead.” Ready to bear new life, to deliver a new order. Count me in. Bring it on.

There is hard work ahead for all of us as Christians and it will involve some agony. When we talk about bringing in the commonwealth of heaven, we’re not talking about opening a door and waving it in with a smile.
God’s vision for the world calls for rebirth. The delivery of a new world order. Like childbirth it will sometimes call for us to push with all our might. To give over our entire beings to the effort, and the pain, of the transformative change that is radical rebirth.

The good news in all of this lies in the promise of the Christ child, to be born in a manger. The promise that our God is so invested in the future of humanity as to become one of us and one with us. The promise that our God too enters into “a condition of complete simplicity, costing not less than everything.”

Our God knows what it is like to be as vulnerable as a new born child. As vulnerable as a homeless family. As vulnerable as a pursued and persecuted member of an oppressed people.

The good news is that God is with us, and God is all in. Indeed, God has been with and working through this faithful community for 144 years. And God will be with you until the job is done.

And all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well.

God is with us. And so, like Mary, we are called to be with God. And, like Mary, on this anniversary, to renew our vow. To say: “Here am I. Ready to give it everything I’ve got.”

Let it be with me – let it be with us – according to your word.

Amen.