

## Advent 2: The Question of Why

December 10, 2023

In searching out Christmas presents I came across a book by Simon Sinek a communications consultant and professor at Columbia University. In his book entitled ***Start with Why*** Sinek argues that successful leaders and organizations arise when they ask themselves the question “why”. Why are we in this business? Why are we advocating for this cause? {show slide} He outlines a simple diagram of concentric circles with the outer ring representing the question “what” (what is our business; what is our cause) and the middle ring representing the question “how” (what steps do I have to take to make my product or to advance my cause). He argues that the question that distinguishes outstanding leaders from ordinary ones is the question “why” (*why* am I pursuing this business or this cause).

By way of illustration, he reflects on how Martin Luther King became the leader of the civil rights movement. He wasn't the only person to suffer oppression for the colour of his skin and he wasn't the only good orator in the United States of his day. Yet, in 1963 250,000 people showed up in Washington to hear Martin Luther King speak. No invitations had been sent out. It was the era before texts, emails or Facebook. Sinek argues that King became a charismatic leader because he lived out of the “why”. He didn't prescribe strategies or solutions but instead he cast a vision. In his vision God was the source of human worthful-ness and no pre-civil rights laws should take precedence over the will of God. This vision was his why. As Sinek observed, King's speech in August of 1963 did not begin, “I have a plan” but rather “I have a dream.” Others figured out the plan to encode civil rights in American society, but King gave them a why. “I have a dream,” he said, “that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” He knew the “why” of his mission.

Reflecting on Sinek's ideas I asked myself why I was coming to offer a sermon at McClure United Church this morning. Was I coming for the \$235 dollars that will appear in my bank account later this month? That is a positive consequence of me coming, but it is not the reason I came. Did I come here to reconnect with friends I have made within this congregation? Such friendships are truly a blessing to me but that is not the reason I came. As I interrogated myself with the ‘why’ question, I realized I came here because I believe that the message of Jesus is life changing and that the more this message is heard and embraced, the better off your life and mine, and the life of the world, will be.

Why did you come to McClure Church this morning? (Unfortunately, you will not receive a cheque for \$235 at the end of the month). There was a time when coming here might have advanced your standing in the wider community, but those days are long passed. Of course, you have the opportunity to meet friends and that is most certainly a blessing, but does that answer the question of ‘why’? Is it possible that you also embrace the message of Jesus? Is it possible that you have also looked at the world through the lens Jesus offers and concluded that his message is world changing and life saving?

We stand in a long line of believers who've had a dream, or vision that answered the "why" of their lives. In these early weeks of Advent the prescribed Bible readings cause us to revisit some of these dreams. The first lesson appointed for today comes from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah where he envisions a time when his people would be free from bondage. The Israelite people had been oppressed and driven into exile by their neighbours, but Isaiah has a dream that God will change all of that. "Comfort, Comfort, my people... In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord ... every valley shall be lifted up and every mountain laid low." With these words Isaiah envisions new life for his people.

Fast forward about 800 years and we come to the second lesson from the Gospel of Mark who tells us about John the Baptist. Living in the midst of Roman occupation and witnessing the corruption of his own religious leaders, John dreams of a leader, soon to come, who will free, unite and inspire the Jewish people. "One more powerful than I is coming after me," declares John. "I have baptized you with water but he will baptize you with the holy spirit." And with these words John envisions the work and witness of Jesus.

The final lesson comes from the little-known book, The Letter of Peter, from which we read this morning. In these pages Peter holds on to the vision of Jesus returning to earth to usher in an age of peace and justice. Some call this vision "the Second Coming." In his letter, written as long as 60 years after Jesus' death, Peter addresses doubts that have arisen about the second coming and encourages the people to hold on to their faith.

At this point, let me say that I do not adhere to the concept of the second coming, at least not as it is promoted by certain more conservative segments of the Christian community. I do not believe that the world will be consumed by fire, believers will be taken up to heaven and non-believers left to perish. Not only is this interpretation too 'magical' for my modern mind, it ignores the universal grace which is at the heart of God. For me, the second coming not as a singular event but one that is ongoing, in which the Spirit of Jesus is continually breaking into the world, an almost evolutionary process through which God is forever leading creation into a commonwealth marked by actions of love and justice.

In light of this understanding, I find that Peter offers two pieces of wisdom for us. First, Peter reminds us that, "with the Lord, a thousand years are like one day." I believe Peter is encouraging us to take the long view. In the midst of present turmoil such as the conflicts besetting the Ukraine, Sudan and Gaza strip it is easy to despair. Closer to home we lament over those who find themselves homeless, addicted or confronted by life-changing medical conditions. Present circumstances can obscure our ability to see God's action in the world. Yet, if we take the 'long view', if we understand that a thousand years are like one day for our God, then it is possible to see the advance of God's commonwealth.

Over the centuries peace has come to lands that were once at war and despite the current regional conflicts we have avoided another great war such as those that plagued the twentieth century. The dismantling of the Soviet Union and bringing down the Berlin Wall freed a number of countries to pursue their own destiny. Visionaries

have arisen who work ardently for peace such as Amnesty International, Doctors without Borders and the various agencies of the United Nations. In recent days we have read of individual Israelis and Palestinians who have been striving for peaceful relations for decades and we see some brave Russian citizens stand in opposition to their government's invasion of the Ukraine. When we take the long view, we see that the world is moving along a path that seeks to reduce conflict and promote life.

Although the plight of the homeless is so apparent these days, we must not forget the strides that have been made since Charles Dickens wrote *A Christmas Carol*. The sweatshops of industrial England were transformed by those who lobbied for labour legislation, trade unions and minimum wages. While we recognize that such advances are yet to be realized around the world the vision has been cast and is being pursued by labour organizers the world over.

Health care is another area in which taking the long view allows us to see the evolution of God's commonwealth among us. Vaccines have eradicated diseases such as small pox and have saved thousands from polio, measles and rabies. In 1965 my father died because an artery to his heart was blocked and the best medical advice was to take blood thinners. Today stents, angioplasty and other developments have revolutionized the treatment of heart disease. Although these advances are more available in developed countries aid organizations such as Doctors without Borders and their pioneer predecessors, such as our own Dr. McClure, have sought to extend these developments the world over. When we take the long view we see an evolution of efforts that are at work to bring peace, healing and a commonwealth for all.

The second piece of wisdom that I gleaned from Peter's ancient letter is the way he encourages his followers "while you are waiting ... strive to be found at peace and ... live lives of holiness." Waiting for the second coming, waiting for a new world, waiting for the establishment of God's commonwealth, is not a static activity for Peter. Seek peace and live holiness into the world he advocates.

Perhaps Professor Sinek's encouragement to ask the "why" question can enhance our ability to pursue peace and enact holiness. It's easy to be overwhelmed with the "what" and "how" of life but if we fail to ask "why" we may lose sight of our vision.

A trite but telling example is the arrival of the green recycling bins to our townhouse units. We have front yard garbage pick up and no convenient place to store the bins resulting in much grumbling. Some homeowners have chosen to simply store their bins, unused, in their garage. One even left their bin on the street for a month, refusing to take it in, as an act of protest. The "what" and the "how" is bogging us down but the annoyance changes for me when I think of the "why". Why do I bother – because our waste is despoiling the earth and increasing the release of carbon producing methane. I'm madly in love with my five grandchildren and I desperately want a planet for them to live in. I don't want them to have to pick up my garbage. That is "why" I recycle – there may be better solutions to the what and the how, but woe to me if I let the details obscure the why.

The why question is exceedingly important if we want to live holy lives. Why do I give to particular charities? Why do I vote the way I do? Why do I think the way I do about racism, or gender identity, or the distribution of wealth, or the way to raise children? If the answer to why begins with, "love your neighbour as yourself" than perhaps you are walking the path of holiness toward that day when God's commonwealth will be a reality for all.

Advent is a season of waiting but it is not just waiting to open presents on Christmas Day. It call us to remember **why** we are waiting, giving, celebrating, hoping and praying. The spirit of Christ is reshaping our world for the better. Might we share our heart, head and hands in the creation of God's commonwealth.

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