

Why Church? Why NPMC?

Scripture texts:

Psalm 107:1-3, 23-32

O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
for his steadfast love endures for ever.

Let the redeemed of the Lord say so,
those he redeemed from trouble
and gathered in from the lands,
from the east and from the west,
from the north and from the south.

Some went down to the sea in ships,
doing business on the mighty waters;
they saw the deeds of the Lord,
his wondrous works in the deep.

For he commanded and raised the stormy wind,
which lifted up the waves of the sea.

They mounted up to heaven, they went down to the depths;
their courage melted away in their calamity;
they reeled and staggered like drunkards,
and were at their wits' end.

Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble,
and he brought them out from their distress;
he made the storm be still,
and the waves of the sea were hushed.

Then they were glad because they had quiet,
and he brought them to their desired haven.

Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love,
for his wonderful works to humankind.

Let them extol him in the congregation of the people,
and praise him in the assembly of the elders.

Mark 4:35-41

On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, 'Let us go across to the other side.' And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great gale arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, 'Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?' He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, 'Peace! Be still!' Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, 'Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?' And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, 'Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?'

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In the past when I have accepted the role of speaking on a Sunday morning, the overriding question I have asked myself is what can I say that will have some value or be affirming to people. What I will be sharing this morning is primarily a personal reflection, but I hope it will hold some meaning for those of you listening.

As we have undertaken this experiment of relying on lay speakers to fill in some of the Sundays when Patrick is serving at Tiefengrund or in need of a break, we have given speakers the flexibility to use the lectionary texts or to delve off into particular topics where they feel the spirit leading. This morning the Scripture passages I have chosen are from the lectionary readings for this Sunday, but they tie in to a theme which had already been percolating in the back of my brain. That theme is around the questions of: Why do I attend church, or more specifically why do I attend Nutana Park Mennonite Church?

Let's start by looking at those Scripture passages. Most of us are likely quite familiar with the story from Mark, but I must confess I was not aware that there was a Psalm that contains a similar narrative. In both of these passages the authors paint the picture of a nasty maritime storm – the winds are whipping, the waves are crashing, and we have a few people in a little boat at the mercy of the elements. In the Psalm the people cry out to the Lord, in Mark the disciples take the more direct route and wake Jesus up from his nap. Save us! The Lord immediately hushes the sea, Jesus says “peace, be still”, and just like that it is still.

But while the Psalm ends with the group praising God, Jesus challenges his disciples. He is perhaps a little perturbed as he needed a rest, and these guys just aren't getting it. “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?”

The disciples exhibiting or being chastised for a lack of faith is a fairly regular feature of the Gospels. Personally, I identify with these moments when we see their humanity. I sometimes wonder, if the people who knew Jesus best, listened directly to his words and watched his interactions with people could suffer from a lack of faith, what chance do the rest of us have?

The previous sermon I have given which generated the most positive comments was when I expressed part of my journey with doubt and faith. This reaction was affirming to me, it let me know that I was among others who had similar experiences, and that it was a group that was not afraid to acknowledge the existence of hard questions and doubt. Author Christian Piatt tells a story about his experience in asking difficult questions as a Sunday school student and having a Bible thrown at him by the poor exasperated teacher. I did not see any projectiles that Sunday morning, instead I received support. Many are not so fortunate, and have been deeply scarred when they were rejected by their faith community for outwardly expressing doubt or daring to ask some hard questions.

We have probably all heard statistics about declining church attendance in North America and the percentage of people who identify as “nones” (no religious affiliation). I’m sure there are various reasons for this and I won’t attempt a comprehensive analysis, but I believe that some people are challenging the narrative the church has often put forward that when storms rise up you simply call out to God and you will receive an immediate reprieve. Or, as Ron described a couple weeks ago, if you do not receive the pardon or blessing you have asked for, it is because you are a bad person or have done something terrible. When a person experiences true hardship, which pretty much all of us do, this kind of a message can do real damage. If we praise God for the beauty of the sunset or the quietness of a summer morning, it is probably fair to ask where God is when those same skies turn to destructive storms that threaten or take lives. I notice in the Psalm that God is described not only as the calmer of the storm, but also the force that commanded the stormy wind and waves in the first place. The questions that arise around belief in an all-powerful and loving Creator, and the real life pain and suffering that people experience are not easily reconciled.

In Edna’s sermon on Feb. 25 of this year, she referenced two new definitions she had found of faith that spoke to her. Those definitions caught my ear, and I’m going to refer to them again.

The first definition went like this.

“Faith, then, is not exclusively adherence to a revealed law. What it seems to mean ... is a fundamental openness of the person to transcendence. What people whose faith saved them seemed to have in common was their resistance to the primordial human temptation to make oneself the measure of the possible. These people were willing to accept the possibility that something could exist, could act, that went beyond their own knowledge and powers”.

I described in my sermon about doubt how I believe that there is a solid rational foundation for believing the basics about God and Jesus and that calls me to respond, and at the same time I accept there are many questions that are profound and unprovable. I came to the place where I resolved I would never read away my doubt, that I would always have questions, and that was not only okay but probably a good thing as it allowed for a faith that could evolve. Like the definition suggests, I am open to the idea of transcendence, a power beyond what I can see, touch or hear directly. I believe there is truth in these concepts of Creator, Jesus and Spirit that we talk about. I also accept that we do not understand these concepts perfectly, how could we possibly?

The second definition from Edna’s sermon approaches faith from a different perspective.

“Faith is a deeply ingrained condition formed through steady habits, disciplined practices, and reliable instincts that take shape over long stretches of time”

This definition gets to my question of why church. Church is the main place where I have exercised those habits and practices of prayer, singing, reading Scripture, and listening to sermons that has helped to develop and sustain my faith. Faith is a muscle that requires exercise to be maintained. To paraphrase Hebrews 10, I am not ready to give up this practice of meeting together. I cast no stones and do not hold myself above those who have moved away from the institution of church. I simply have made the choice that it is important to me.

I may not have made that choice if I had not found a nurturing church community. Which leads me to the second of my two questions: why NPMC? The simple answer is it is the closest Mennonite church to where I live. According to Apple Maps, it is .1 km closer to my home than Wildwood Mennonite. I suppose there is some truth that proximity was enough to get me in the door here the first few times, but that would not have been enough to get me to keep coming back.

There are actually other churches closer to me, I pass two of them along the way. For me it is important to come to a Mennonite church. I have an appreciation for Anabaptist history, the principles at the core of that movement, and my own deep family connections to the Mennonite faith. There is a great cloud of witnesses that has gone before me, who have set a foundation for how to live out a Christian faith from an Anabaptist perspective. I feel a connection to that history and the example that has been lived out before me.

If I am going to be part of a church, I want it to be a place that takes the Bible seriously but is willing to go beyond the literal text to search for Wisdom; that advocates for peace in the midst of a fractured world; and that recognizes service as an integral part of faith. This is the faith I grew up with, which has become personal to me as an adult, and that I have found expressed here at NPMC.

At the same time, my faith is evolving. It is surely not the same as that of my grandparents, it is not even the same as when I was baptized. I view that as a good thing. Though I do not have the history in this congregation that many of you do, I venture to say that the expressions of faith at NPMC have evolved too. The recent adult education series around MAID and end of life experiences is a testament to that. There was an openness to learning, to sharing of personal experiences, and to somehow we try to put that into a broader faith perspective. We explore things like this as a community, even if our views don't necessarily end up exactly the same.

Time to bring this full circle. Returning to today's Scripture passages, I do not mean to suggest by my earlier comments that we simply discard what we read here, just that we need to do some work to look beyond the easy narrative of a God who will fix everything.

We recognize in these passages the frailty of the human condition and the natural impulse to call out when we are in trouble or experience turbulent times. They provide us with assurance that there is order amongst the chaos.

Whether God intervenes directly in our lives or not, ultimately all we have comes from God and this warrants public praise and thanksgiving; in the words of the Psalm: “Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love, for his wonderful works to humankind. Let them extol him in the congregation of the people, and praise him in the assembly of the elders.” This is part of our worship. As Duff encouraged us to do last Sunday, we sing to the Lord a new song. Sometimes we do that literally, sometimes it takes the form of expressing our faith in new ways.

In the passage from Mark, aside from the calming of the storm, there is value in simply recognizing the presence of Jesus. Perhaps his admonishment about lack of faith is just a reminder to the disciples – and by extension, us – that he is with us, even if things are bad and our faith is waning. The reference to the disciples being afraid calls to mind other portions of Mark and other Scripture texts where the disciples are told to fear not. We are called not to live in fear, but in hope. The rebuke Jesus gives to the sea “Peace, be still” also applies to us.

When the questions get too big or unanswerable to me, I try to return to the two greatest commandments: love God and love your neighbour. NPMC is a place that helps me to do that, and for that I am thankful. Let us not give up meeting together, but encourage one another as we see the day approaching.

- Amen