

"I Believe...Help My Unbelief"

A communion meditation based on

Isaiah 12:2-6, Philippians 4:4-9, and Luke 3:1-6

December 13, 2009

Redlands United Church of Christ

Sharon R. Graff

* * * * *

Last week—before all those new covenanting members were welcomed into membership; before the parade of smiles, handshakes, and hugs; before the worship service even started—Allen Killpatrick came bounding up to me and, with a smile lighting up his face, said, "So I see you are talking about belief today, and I just want to tell you a story. My childhood pastor, when he was a child, was dragged to some kind of revival. Somehow, before Jay even knew what was happening, he was up front, in the clutches of this revival preacher. The preacher pointed his finger at Jay and yelled, 'Do you believe?' Jay was too scared to answer. So the preacher, still firmly holding on to him, strode over to the baptistery, climbed in and fitfully pushed Jay down into the water. 'Do you believe?' Jay kept hearing as his head bobbed up and down, and finally, was able to sputter out, 'YES, I believe...I believe I'm going to drown!'" Thankfully, we do things a bit differently around here!

Last week's parade of believers, followed by this Sunday's family bringing their daughter for baptism—well, together, they both represent and inspire belief in a God who really does welcome all, belief in one another to walk the journey together, belief in the power of love to overcome any fear and to fill us up with hope. To be sure,

when we participate in such parades of joy, it is easy to say, "I believe...oh yes, I believe..."

The flood of inspiration that began last Sunday morning continued for me in reading your covenants this week. These treasured documents are filled with kindness and honesty, with joy and appreciation for this community of faith, with questions and with hopes and statements of belief—I was and am deeply touched by the dedication, the commitment and the vision of this good congregation. With the scripture writers we have read this morning, I want to sing aloud, to rejoice with all my heart, to joyfully draw water at the well that is God's Spirit, to thank God, to speak about these excellent things, and to know beyond a shadow of a doubt that God is near, God's reign is at hand. Yes, I am inspired by your belief, your faith, and by your willingness to put your faith in action in so many creative ways during this next year.

But then I look outside these walls, and I hear words beyond your covenants. I, like you, listen to the news, and, try as I might to shelter myself in God's love and your inspiring commitments, I find that our world comes knocking at the door with incessant, and sometimes annoying, regularity. In this season of plenty and over-abundance for most of us, you and I see also the haunting pictures of the world's children who are without the basic necessities of food, clean drinking water, and adequate health care. In this season of "Fa-la-la" and "Merrily on high", you and I hear also the voices of soldiers and their families, preparing now for deployment to a land already ravaged by one dominator after another. During this time of joyful caroling, the songs and melodies of the world call our nation to accountability for our presumptuous

consumption that widens the gap between rich and poor. So what are we to do? Is despair our only option? I think not, my friends.

Our scriptures this morning that beckon us to praise and to thanksgiving, that invite us to look for the good in the midst of the bad, to see how the crooked paths are made straight, how the valleys are filled and the rough places made smooth—these scriptures are not based on some naïve or simplistic belief that if we just click our ruby slippers together enough times, then all will be well. These biblical writers had been to hell and back, not once, but many times. Their faith is based on a God who didn't just create the world and then go off on an eternal vacation, leaving them to fend for themselves. Their faith is hard-won; it proclaims that God never leaves our side; that God's love is ever-present; that God nourishes and sustains us, especially through the difficult traumas that life's deck deals us.

Last week we focused on belief and we are still floating in its joy; this week the message of scripture cries out, "God I do believe, but please, please, help my unbelief!" To a people who had wandered from God in body and in spirit, Isaiah sings of deliverance. To the first-century community of Jewish folk who had become complacent in their faith and dependent on religious professionals to do the "faith thing" for them, John cries out about the One who is coming, who will call each person to a faith that makes a difference. To the early Christians who were prone to lose faith and to get caught up in the opposition of their neighbors, Paul exhorts the Philippians to rejoice, to look for the good, and to let their gentleness be known to everyone.

Yet the world we live in, like the world of the prophets and the apostles, is not a gentle place. Bad things often happen to good people who are themselves doing good

things. Moreover, our world is one that is rocked by violence, much of it religious violence. People bomb other people in the name of their particular God...and our religion, sadly, is not immune from such unjustifiable behavior. Our God, according to some, is just as bloodthirsty as any other deity known throughout history. But do we believe that?

During this season of Advent, when we focus on a vulnerable baby surrounded by contented farm animals, we might assess the damage such religious violence can do when it is taken as a literal presentation of who God is and how God relates to the world. How, for example, do we square the last judgment with the parables of the lost son, the lost coin, and the lost sheep? How do we make peace with the images of an angry and vengeful God and the equally compelling images of God who keeps looking until the last little lost sheep has been found?

Yes, on this third Sunday of Advent, we join the scripture writers in proclaiming that we believe in the God of love. But, God, please help us with our unbelief—help us with our tendency to too easily submit our own intelligence to the power of fear; help us with our temptation to ignore the suffering; help us with our dependence on violence and our benign acceptance of the fallout it creates. God, open our eyes this season. Clear the passages of our ears. Use the planks from that manger in Bethlehem as metaphorical 2x4's calling us to attention with the power of your love, which is stronger than any fear, more transforming than any military plan, and made more compelling by that little baby lying in that long-ago manger, who grew to offer each of us food for the journey. God, we believe...help our unbelief.

Amen and Blessed Be