

**Troublemaker**  
**Isaiah 6: 1-8; John 3: 3-8**  
**Don Lincoln**

My colleague Peter Hawkins teaches at the Yale Divinity School. He's no stranger to Christianity or the Church. He's an active participant in a faith community, and professor of those training for Christian service. I was reading an article of his recently, and he writes these words:

*At a meeting of church musicians and worship leaders that I attended, the phrase **COMFORT ZONE** was cropping up everywhere. This was the drift of the discussion that day: people should feel at home in worship, especially in times like these when everything is moving so quickly, changing so much – nothing can be taken for granted.*

*We all agreed it is crucial to avoid the bright-eyed minister who decides single-handedly and without warning to rewrite the time-honored liturgy – or the choirmaster who chooses Easter Sunday to debut hot-off-the-press hymns that no one knows how to sing. Those in charge of worship need to respect the conservative, standard, traditional bent of liturgy; to honor people's need to hold on tight to the Rock of their salvation. If there is to be change in the way we worship, then it would have to be done gently and we should be prepared for it. No surprises.*

*Though I'd like to think, I'm hardly a stick in the mud, I resent worship leaders who think they know best and force everyone else to go along with them. When I'm in church I do not want to feel there is anything experimental about it. Along with my world, I am constantly changing. I need something that is "yesterday, today and forever." If there are to be innovations, I don't want to be surprised by them!*

*It was all going well in the conference, we were all feeling pretty good about the sense in the room until someone in the back stood up and asked a question that threw me off guard. "This is all very well and good," she said "but is the aversion to surprise, the maintenance of a comfort zone, actually the way of God? Is God really so user-friendly? Is God always so polite?"<sup>1</sup>*

Listen to our text from Isaiah 6:1-8

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said:

"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said: "OY VEHI!"

Well that's not exactly what it says in the text - but it's really a pretty close translation to the Hebrew, "Woe is me!"

"Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!"

Oy Veh.

The same level of distress is exhibited in John 3. Nicodemus has come politely toward Jesus. He's a Pharisee; he even comes by dark of night to keep things on the low key. He has an inquiry in mind. Nicodemus has come to Jesus showing respect. But religion, writes one scholar, "true religion don't want your respect. It wants your soul." Jesus, knowing Nicodemus – like the rest of the world – is drowning in the churning night sea, doesn't want Nicodemus' respect; he wants his soul – his whole being transformed.

When Nicodemus is confronted by Jesus with the news that this life in the Spirit is like being born again – brought to life by a wind that blows when and where it wills and no one knows which way it is going – that makes Nicodemus very, very nervous.....

Oy Veh!

My friend John Buchanan, former pastor of 4<sup>th</sup> Presbyterian in Chicago once told the story of a Sunday service at which he baptized a two-year-old child. He read the standard pronouncement after baptizing the child from the prayer book: "You are a child of God, sealed by the Spirit in your baptism, and you belong to Jesus Christ forever." And the child responded, "Uh-oh." Buchanan said, "Rarely have I heard a more appropriate response, or a more profound and stunning theological affirmation."<sup>2</sup>

Uh-oh. Oy Veh.

Last week Pastor Ann spoke about the disruptive power of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, the Spirit who might push us out of our comfort zones. But that was last week. That was Pentecost. The ONE Sunday a year we devote to the Holy Spirit. One Sunday. Probably because that's all we are willing to risk! Anything more than that makes us nervous. (notice I went back to the white shirt after wearing the red one last week for Pentecost. The red one is back in the closet for a year).

BUT – if you were here last Sunday as well as today, you may have noted that for two weeks in a row now we've sung a new Gloria Patri. I learned it three weeks ago in my pastor's group. And loved it. And thought we should learn it here.

Do you know the last time we changed the Gloria Patri here? 2001. I would have changed it when I first arrived in 2000 but thought I should wait at least six months before I did something that radical!!

**Westminster used to sing this one (Glenn plays “Meineke”).** It was new once too. In 1844. And for the last 17 years we’ve sung this one **(Glenn plays “Greatorex”).** It was new in 1851. You know why I changed from one to the other? I told people the first one was harder to sing. Truth be told, I grew up with the second one, and I like it better. Uh-oh. I too can be guilty of liking things the way they used to be.

Oy Veh.

I’ve been trying to get my head around different ways to talk about the Spirit. Ways that might engage you and me with what the ever-present power of the Spirit – at work in our lives DAILY – might be like for us. One way I heard expressed recently was to think of the Spirit like your imagination. Think about it.

Your imagination retains a passion for freedom. There are no rules for the imagination. It never wants to stay trapped in the expected territories. The old maps never satisfy the imagination. It wants to press ahead beyond the accepted frontiers and bring back reports of regions no mapmaker has yet visited.<sup>3</sup>

What if that was what it was like for the spirit to be at work within us. Passion for freedom. Never trapped in expected territories, old maps not satisfying it. Taking you and me to regions no mapmaker has yet visited.

There’s an oft-quoted Annie Dillard piece from her 1982 book, *Teaching A Stone to Talk*, still one of the most provocative things I’ve ever read:

“Do we Christians have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? Churches are like children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake some day and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.”<sup>4</sup>

Uh-Oh. Oy Veh!

As our call to worship says, “The God of glory thunders, rampaging among the cedars of Lebanon, crashing through the oaks and stripping whole forests clean.” Really? But you and I want a predictable God. A God who stays within the lines, draws the right colors inside the borders, never overflows the banks of our neatly defined life streams, who stays within the boundaries that we have set up for ourselves, and for those we love, and for our church and for our nation.

But if that's what you and I want, then we surely don't want a God who comes in the flesh, who goes to the cross, who is raised from the dead. Not if we want a predictable God; a practical God; a God who is not a troublemaker, who doesn't upset our apple carts.

As Pastor Ann mentioned last week, a week ago Saturday the program staff met with the Vision Team, to review the God-sized dreams they have distilled from the three congregational listening sessions, and their hours of meetings and conversation. We spent six hours on that Saturday discussing and refining the work – and engaging with the possibilities of how God might leverage what this congregation does well for the future. As our coach says, we want to think about what Westminster is truly gifted for in this time and place, and pouring jet fuel on it.

As we were nearing the end of our six hours of conversation and reflection, coach Bill Wilson was writing on the poster tablets, and suggesting some designs for what this might look like going forward, and then you know what he said?

He said, "After you finish refining these dreams, then you ought to start a conversation about structure." He looked at me, and I know he saw the blood drain out of my face. "Structure?" I said. "But I like our committees!"

"Yes – structure," he said. "If this visioning process doesn't impact your structure at all, it's likely it will all have been for naught."

I think I mumbled something about retirement.....

Change is hard. An unknown future can be frightening. We like things the way they are.

An elderly, long married couple was lying in bed one night. The husband was almost asleep when his wife started reflecting on all the love they had shared. The old guy is about to drift off when she nudges him and says, "Honey, do you remember how we used to hug?"

He says, "Yes, dear," and rolls over and gives her a big hug."

He's almost asleep again, when she nudges him and says "Honey do you remember how we used to kiss?"

"Yes, dear," and he rolls over and gives her a big kiss.

He's just about to start snoring when she nudges him again and says, "Honey, do you remember how you used to nibble on my ear?"

The old guy sighs, throws off the covers, swings his legs over the side, and slowly gets up. The wife says, "What are you doing?" With some exasperation he mumbles, "I'm going to go get my teeth."<sup>5</sup>

Things change. They must. 25 years ago this year this congregation left its home in the borough of West Chester, and by the nudge of God's spirit, ventured to this location – and at least a few folks were terrified. Some never even came. It was too outside the bounds.

Oy Veh!

The future may not look like the past. Perhaps one day nations will indeed study war no more. There are new days ahead friends. The promise of God is, He will be with us, by the power of the Spirit. Thanks be to God. Thanks be to God.

**SING new Gloria Patri – “Glory to God, Whose Goodness Shines on Me!”**

1. Peter Hawkins, Christian Century, “God the Troublemaker,” June 2, 2009.
2. John O'Donohue, Beauty: The Invisible Embrace, 2004.
3. Told by Tom Long, Christian Century, Living by the Word, April 26, 2018.
4. Annie Dillard, “Teaching A Stone to Talk,” 1982.
5. Mikey's Funnies, May 22, 2018.