

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario

Sunday, June 24, 2018

Rev. Dr. David Thompson

“From what if to what now!”

Text: “You will receive the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and your children, and to all who are far away.”

Stuart was thinking about opportunities missed. Here he was hitchhiking on a road against the Blue Canadian prairie sky. As he waited and watched for the certain car that would stop for him he noticed a freight train stopped across a field. As hour after hour went by with no ride, Stuart thought: What if I hitch a ride on a boxcar? What stopped him was the thought that it would be just his luck to get across the field and discover just as he did so that the train was leaving without him.

Finally, he gave up on the road and started across the field towards the train. Sure, enough as if right on cue the train fired up at that moment.

“Darn my luck!” he thought. He stumped back miserably to the road. What if he could have just caught that train? The what if question was answered for Stuart McClean. He got a ride and caught up with the train. It was derailed, two cows in the boxcar he intended to ride were dead, the lumber on the train was on fire in the overturned boxcars. Smoke was drifting off the wreck.

It was 7 in the morning in Sacramento when I got the call on September 11, 2001. The caller from the church said simply. “David turn on your TV.” I did and there unfolding was the attack on the Twin Towers. I sat down absolutely dumfounded. I received contact from my former congregation in Stratford about David Orr. On September 11th his alarm did not go off and so he slept in. He worked in the Twin Towers and his life would have been lost if his alarm had gone off as usual. It was a sober David Orr late on his way to work who saw the dust and smoke of where he used to be employed.

What if he had gone into work that day as usual? Now he knew the answer to that ***What if.***

One day I conducted a celebration of the life of a resident of Ingersoll, a certain Kim Coordes. She got up the day of her death in a terrific mood. She kissed her son and husband goodbye and sailed onto her daily commute on the 401. What if that trucker who had stopped into the inspection station in the rain, had had his truck inspected properly, instead of having the inspection cancelled because it was raining? Would the tire then have been noticed as loose and been bolted back on and then would Kim still be alive? We will never know. There are no answers to *what if* questions.

What ifs!?!? Where do they take us?

Historians generally avoid *what if* questions preferring to stick to established facts and their interpretations. Questions like “If Saddam Hussein had not risen to power in Iraq, how would things have been different? “Would the Americans have entered the Second World War if the Japanese had not bombed Pearl Harbor?” Historians only ask what if questions in an attempt to understand what actually happened. They are only interested in what was and making that clearer. If a *what if* question shows light on what actually happened, then it is admitted into the discussion, otherwise not. But ordinary people like you and me, we ask *what if* questions all the time!

I was listening to a radio program on *what if* questions and the program said that *what if* questions lead us somewhere. They called the destination the Misery Index!

Why do they lead us there?

When something goes wrong it seems to be human nature to want to be able to blame others for it. And we use *what if* questions to do that. For instance, a widow says, "If George had not been drinking, he would not have gone off the road, and I would not be a widow today. *What if* he had let someone else drive?" This sort of questioning rarely helps us and simply adds to the person's misery- hence the Misery Index.

All of us tend to do this. We construct scenarios that would argue for something different if only someone had not done this or that. We use *what if* questions to assign blame. But interestingly when we judge ourselves, research shows that **we are not quite as hard on ourselves as we are on others!** If something goes wrong at work and we are to blame, we are likely to argue that it is the situation that accounts for our behavior. We say, "I was under a lot of pressure that day that made me forget that I had promised to do that."

However, when we are not to blame we will very quickly tend to see one person to blame for the whole situation. We say things like "Ever since John Smithy came to New St. James we have had trouble getting new members. If he had not come to New St. James and turned people off, we would be much stronger today."

"*What if?*" questions tend to make us think that one person is overly important. But according to the experts who try to deal with "What if? questions, life is not like a military history lesson. In fact, it is very, very difficult to know whether the things we assign as the causes are the real causes, because there are so many variables.

A good analogy is the forecasting of weather. It is not that the weather is random but there are so many variables to consider that the weather appears to be random, when it is not. Does our thinking take into consideration the complexity of human events? Experts tell us that assigning either praise or blame to one person rarely results in good analysis. They say it is much better to stick to the known facts rather than to speculate.

There is an upside to asking, "what if?" questions though. Since the advent of the computer we have been able to see what would happen if we change variables. From war games to architectural design we can see what happens if we change a significant variable and thus we are able to design new coping strategies.

In business, in churches, in sports, strategy is frequently based on what if scenarios. Today coaches replay videos of the game's mistakes to see how they might be avoided. "What if?" questions can serve as warnings and bring about teachable moments.

But "what ifs?" can also lead us to despair. One woman I know said "*What if* my father had still been alive and mother had died first? The inheritance would have been as it should be and been equally divided. I mean I was absolutely sure my parents would have given us the farm, but mother gave everything to charity! She said we didn't need it, that we should work for everything just as they did. I mean...I grew up there! Gone! I can tell you my whole life would have been different if Dad hadn't died first!"

I wonder if you have ever played with the idea as to what the world would be like if Jesus had never been born?

He taught a lot of world changing ideas- the love of the enemy which is so sharp and necessary for today as we are taking in thousands of refugees from dire situations caused by the enemy.

He taught us to forgive 70x7, to go the second mile, to turn the other cheek. He taught us Grace based thinking rather than merit-based thinking. If Jesus had not been born, there would be no Christian churches, no founding of Hospitals by churches and denominations, no planting

of many schools, or the great universities. If you look you will find links to their foundation that go back to Jesus and what he taught.

For instance, we would not be meeting in New St. James today because there would be no New St. James. There would be none of the great things the Christian Church has accomplished in the human fabric of life- also none of the very unfortunate things that the church has done in this country like residential schools for the Natives which were incredibly cruel in concept and practice. They had the name Presbyterian written all over them.

There would be no destruction of cultures in the name of Christianity, no witch hunts no Spanish inquisition, no burning at the stake of heretics no crusades to the Holy Land which are still remembered in the middle East and not forgiven by children's children.

It is an interesting proposition to consider "What if?" no Jesus Christ?

But the fact is that there was a Jesus Christ who came into our history. I think because of this man's teaching, which still liberates us today, that the world is on balance a far better place for his coming and his life. The dark side of Christianity and the church as bearer of that dark message is that the dark side is very clearly **against** the teaching of the Historical Jesus who came. He taught us plainly that we needed to love each other, forgive each other and be in relationship with the Holy Spirit of God who would lead us into the truth that would set us free. The problem is us, when we refuse to follow Jesus and refuse to ask what would Jesus do? Or ask the question "what is the most loving thing to do all things considered?"

I began this sermon with a text: "You will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit For the promise is to you and your children and to all those who are far away." The purpose of the Holy Spirit is to comfort us and to lead us into the truth that sets us free. Blame is a concept that Jesus and the Holy Spirit simply do not care about. **For blame is absolutely useless.**

But going back over the past to learn from the past is absolutely something the Holy Spirit will do with us. For the Holy Spirit is interested in any truth that will free us.

The Holy Spirit will not accompany us into simple black and white answers that see one person as overly important. Truth isn't that way. We live in a multi tiered complex world where causes and answers are not simple, or unified, or black and white. What the Holy Spirit will do with us is to help us sift the evidence, always looking for what is true, what is good, what is kind, what is loving, and what is liberating in the midst of the welter of information that comes our way.

We do not have to be overwhelmed thinking that we have to go it alone in life. We can pray to the Holy Spirit for insight, for wisdom, for guidance, for help and comfort. We can do this at any time. The promise is to us and our children! It is not just an adult promise. Do we consider that when we ignore the gifts of children?

Wanda Grimes was a mother who lost her son at the age of 20 years. She kept going over "what if?" scenarios and got royally stuck in them. "What if he had still been alive? Would he be married by now? Might he not have had a child? Might she not have had a grandchild?"

She made herself absolutely miserable. On this basis she abandoned her relationship with God. She quit going to church. Her life began to fall apart. She got depressed. She stopped cleaning her home. It became a pigsty- dirty dishes piled up unwashed for days until she got desperate and washed a dish or two.

In the midst of her self-inflicted misery there was a still small voice of truth that spoke to her within her heart.

The driver of the car that had killed her son had been under 21 years of age and his blood level alcohol had been over the legal limit when he had gone off the road. This is what the still small

voice inside her heart said to her: “The law forbids the purchase possession and consumption of alcohol by anyone under 21 years of age, but the law **does not prevent the sale.**”

In the midst of Wanda’s internal fog this truth began to pull at her heart.

Wanda Grimes one day sat down and decided to fix this loophole in the law. Twice she went to the State Legislature. Once they failed to pass it. The second time they passed it, but it was declared unconstitutional. Wanda did not give up.

She went to Washington, was written up by the press, she spoke about it all the time and in 1996 the Louisiana Supreme Court ruled the law constitutional!

Let’s remember that this was a woman who was stuck in the **what ifs**. Is this you today? When Wanda got angry enough to take action, she began a process. The day came when she reached her personal limits. At a press conference in Washington she finally said in desperation “Dear God help me!”

In my experience no one who has asked for help like that is ever abandoned by God!

She suddenly realized that she was talking to God again!

A great calmness came over her. Suddenly she had a partner with a capital P! Without knowing it at first, God had moved her from asking “What if? to **what now?**”

When someone asks Wanda Grimes today “Aren’t you mad at God for the loss of your son?” She now says this: “I have been!”

Wanda now says to those who can hear it “Say what is on your mind to God. God will listen and if it’s in your power, use your anger against injustice to make the world a better place. God will help!”

Do we believe that? Are we ready for the **what nows?**

St Peter said “Turn from the way you are going! Repent. Get yourself baptized into the Christian family and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. This promise is to you and your children.”

This is what that promise means: The promise is that you will find God as the Source of your being- a Great Someone for you to take on your life journey, in fact the greatest travelling companion of all to take you into the **What nows?!**

This promise is for you and your children. Don’t whatever you do miss out on it. Why not stop talking about the what ifs and start to choose the joys of the **what nows?**

When she sought God’s help and guidance, when she asked what now God? Linda Grime’s life went back together.

God can do the same for you today!