

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario

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The Second Sunday in Lent

The Rev. Dr. David Thompson

“The Wisdom of Uncertainty”

Shimon Gottschalk answered the question What is the most important thing you have learned in your life?? He replied;

“I have been a teacher and a university professor for some 50 years. I believe that the most important thing we can teach students- if it is teachable at all- is to be prepared to deal with uncertainty. It seems that each one of us has to learn this lesson anew, considering the fact that so few things in life are certain.”

On the lighter side there are times when we are often too quickly sure about something. Like the story of the man who ran over to a car that had skidded on the wet pavement and hit a telephone pole. A woman was the first to reach the victim, but a man very sure of himself rushed up and barked; “Step aside lady! I’ve taken a course in first aid!”

The woman watched for a minute and then tapped him on the shoulder. “Pardon me” she said, “But when you get to the part about calling the doctor, I’m right here”.

I would like to talk to you today about the *wisdom* of uncertainty. Let me start by saying what I am not talking about.

There is a wisdom to being certain as well. For instance, if we are going to drive on the road we need to be certain about the rules of the road or we could get into trouble. I am not thinking today about necessary certainty, but about trying to be certain when an attempt at certainty is really a prison that is stopping us from growing and maturing as persons and becoming all that we can be.

What stops us from standing in the place in our minds where everything is possible? Is it fear of the unknown? Is it a low self image? Has someone spoken negative words over you and you have believed them? Are you controlled by a spouse? Do you have an addiction that is controlling you? Do you feel poor and therefore unable to take any risks or spend money that perhaps you should spend as an investment in your future? What is holding you back to day?

It is particularly important to embrace uncertainty when we are talking about the future. For life is a constantly changing experience. Many of us would like to know the future but according to Paul Coelho in his book The Alchemist there are only two things to know about the future: We predict the future based on the indicators in the present. **The secrets of the future are here in the present.** If you pay attention to the present you can improve upon it. And if you improve upon the present, what comes later will also be better. So, forget about the future and live each day... confident that God loves God’s children. Each day in itself brings an eternity.”

Secondly: The future is known only to God. When God does reveal the future, it is often for one principal reason: it is a future that was written so as to be altered.

Remember the story of Jonah? God told Jonah the future of the city of Nineveh, but it was given him so that it would not come to pass. Jonah knew that God was likely to alter the future if Nineveh repented and when God did not bring the future about as Jonah had prophesied, Jonah got upset. In his own eyes he looked like a fool.

In Charles Dickens’s Christmas Carol, Scrooge meets up with the Ghost of Christmas yet to come, and sees some terrible things. Scrooge asks: “Are these the things that must come to pass or can they be changed?”

It appears that the vision was given was so that the future could be different if Scrooge changed his ways. But note for all of that future, **the secrets were in the present, in Scrooge's behavior.** Change the behavior in the present and we change the future!

Every alcoholic who beats the addiction knows that. Change your habits and you are able to seize the future.

What a lesson is there!

In the Old Testament lesson, we came across the Israelites complaining bitterly about Moses and Aaron's leadership. They are deathly worried. At its most basic it comes down to no water for themselves or their animals. Moses, nettled by their rebellion against his leadership, instead of commanding the rock to bring forth water in the name of God, instead strikes the rock twice in anger. Water does come out of the rock. In fact it gushes out but God is not amused by this stunt and Moses and Aaron lose their entrance into the promised land.

At the root of the whole problem is worry about the future and lack of faith and trust in God.

In the New Testament Jesus suggests to His followers that worrying about the future does not help anything and so he suggests that they stop worrying and instead start to exercise faith instead.

All of us worry it seems. We worry about the future, our health, our children, our families, our livelihood, President Tweet, North Korea, gun violence, our job or the lack of one. And if one worry is solved we immediately substitute another. We seem very far away from Jesus words about not taking anxious thought for the morrow. Sure we try to take another approach and trust God. We try to exercise faith but we often, all too often, come up short. We seem to be hard wired to worry rather than be programmed for faith.

But I want to ask today, are we missing something rather wonderful? Is there a factor we have not thought about that might make an enormous difference?

Deepack Chopra is perhaps the best known Guru for teaching us about what he calls **the wisdom of uncertainty**. He teaches us from the Vedic tradition that the search for security and the way things used to be done is an illusion. He says that the search for security, which is what worry is all about, is really an attachment to the known. And what is the known? The known is our past.

In the wilderness the Israelites remembered selectively about their experience in Egypt thinking after awhile that their slavery was not so bad after all. It appeared to be better than their present.

But Chopra says this about the past. "The past is a prison of past conditioning. He says that there is no evolution in that...and where there is no evolution there is stagnation, disorder, entropy and decay." He urges us to relinquish our attachment to the known. For when we do that, we step into the field of all possibilities. He says that in our willingness to step into the unknown we have the wisdom of uncertainty factored in and this means that in every moment of our lives, we will have excitement, adventure and mystery. (Because we don't know what is going to happen next and that is exciting.) We will experience the fun of life and have an exuberance and zest for living. He says that when *we experience uncertainty*, we are on the right path.

I was watching a simulcast documentary called: **The Age of Stupid**. It was on climate change. It depicts a very uncertain future, but in that uncertain future also lies the hope that we can change sufficiently to avert global disaster. **As in the Alchemist, the indicators of the future are in the present behaviors.** Change them and we change the future. Also it is good to note that in uncertainty there is always opportunity.

Want to invest in the stock market well? Invest in green technologies. According to news reports it is the fastest growing sector. If you have investments you might be wise to call up your financial advisor and give him or her some advice. *Don't let the prison of the past control your investing policies.* In uncertainty there is always opportunity. To seize that opportunity is to capitalize (literally!) on the wisdom of uncertainty.

Perhaps for you, you are uncertain about your job and future career. If Deepack is right you are on the right path. But you say to me; "It does not feel very good! This so called right path!" What is the problem? Perhaps you want certainty, predictability, a steady income and without those things you don't like the uncertainty! But Deepack would have us believe that what we think is a bad thing, can be a really good thing. We just have to adjust our attitude to it. *For uncertainty has a wisdom in it.*

Here is the truth we need to hear: **There are far more opportunities in uncertainty than in predictability.** Rather than feeling bad about the uncertainty and worrying about it, we can instead embrace it. How do we do this? We think outside the box of past conditioning to see where God is leading us. We look where we would normally not look. We embrace what we normally would reject because our mind is wide open! We stop thinking "I can't do that or I'm too old or I'm not smart enough."

Today if you are being controlled by someone it is important to realize that **you** are permitting that control, probably out of fear. Fear is usually based on past conditioning. **Fear would have you reject uncertainty for the known bad scene. That is what the Israelites did in the Wilderness and so they spun their wheels for decades.**

Perhaps for you someone has spoken negative words over you and you have come to believe that you are a bad person. If you think that you are a bad person you will not be willing to see your own magnificence. But step out of the prison of the past and all possibilities open for you. Become uncertain about what you believe about yourself that makes you a bad person and you may find the wisdom to see your own magnificence. FOR, actually you are a child of God. That is who you actually are and thus you **are** magnificent.

Step out of your prison of fear and see before you a field of many possibilities. In this field of possibilities, where God originally places us all, we then can grasp this strange gift of uncertainty as a deep wisdom. Then grasping the wisdom of uncertainty and factoring that in, watch for possibilities that you never dreamed about begin to flow into your open mind. The magic can begin to flow for you!

Let's remember what we think about we bring about. As Jesus said: as a man thinks so is he. Let's see if we can integrate what Jesus is talking about as the response that God is looking for from us. Rather than worry Jesus asks us to exercise faith. What is the relationship then between faith and the wisdom of uncertainty?

The book **The Shack** has some quotable quotes in it. There is one I particularly like for this sermon: "Faith does not grow in the house of certainty." Remember that one night Jesus' disciples went out fishing and spent the whole night and caught nothing? They saw Jesus on the shore and he said to them "Cast off and throw your net over on the **other** side." Caught in the prison of past conditioning these disciples were certain that there were no fish there and we see them with great reluctance and little faith trying the wisdom of uncertainty. They probably hoped to prove Jesus wrong. After all he was a carpenter what did he know about anything? But they throw the net over and there is a huge draft of fishes so great that their nets are now at the breaking point. They had never dreamed of such a possibility!!

What is it that we have not tried because we are certain it won't work? Can we grasp this truth? **Faith grows in the House of uncertainty.** The field of all possibilities is where the secret to life lies. What you think about you bring about. "Whatever things you ask for in prayer believe that you have them already and they shall be yours." said Jesus. I came across a wise woman the other day who said "You have to think things can happen in order to make them

happen.” But in order to think things can happen we have first to stand in the house of all possibilities and open the windows to the unknown.

A high school boy called Pete loved playing baseball. That was his passion. But when he tried out for the team, the coach did not even give him a chance. He said “I’m sorry son but you are too small.” When his mother picked him up with his friend after school Pete was struggling to keep his composure and trying not to cry when his friend who was much bigger than Pete said; “Did you tell your mum you didn’t make the team because you are too little?” The words pierced Pete’s heart. He hated being small. It cut off all kinds of possibilities. But so many kids applied to be on the baseball team that the school decided on a B team. Pete’s hopes revived and a strong determination made him decide to think outside the box and seize on the possibilities that might come from the wisdom of uncertainty. Who knows he thought something good might come of it! So with an open mind and a passionate heart he tried out for the B team.

At the end of the season the A team played the B team and the B team actually won. Guess who the winning pitcher was? Pete! The coach had been so certain. Pete was uncertain but wise enough to get out of boxed in thinking and instead see what possibilities might be left. The ultimate possibility actually included beating the A team with the big guys in it!!

Here is where the faith comes in. **When we are uncertain it is important to realize that God has matched us with our world through faith.**

As Joel Osteen says; “Even though at times you may not feel that you are able to accomplish your dreams, you have to get beyond those feelings and know that God will never put a dream in your heart without first equipping you with everything you need to accomplish it. Let’s remember that when we experience uncertainty that we are on the right path, **and are fully equipped.** The disciples had a boat, had nets, had certainty, and no fish. When they were willing to let go of their certainty they had a boat, they had nets and more fish than they could handle. Faith lives in the House of uncertainty. Uncertainty has a wisdom in it. What is the wisdom? Uncertainty makes us slow down and take in possibilities that we would otherwise have refused to look at. And you know what? The possibilities are such an improvement over the prison of past conditioning. They are like comparing Egypt to the promised land. There is no comparison when all around you flows with milk and honey!