

October 26th 2019
Sermon for the 65th Anniversary of WUC

Read from Revelation 3

So....WUC turns 65 this fall - happy birthday, church!

I myself turned 65 this year. It's a...funny sort of birthday, 65, at least I found it that way. It seems ...significant somehow. Different from 64...you know? By anyone's standards now, I get the seniors' discount! Before I'd say, well what do you define as a senior? Now it doesn't matter, I'm just old.

So WUC is 65. It makes you think. About the future.
Are we old? A bit arthritic? Is it a decline from here?

Churches are different than people. Organizations, the experts say, live their lives in cycles. There's a big surge of energy at the beginnings, with founders who have vision, then an organization settles into the ordinary running and living out of its goals, then it begins to decline, and at a certain point it can either.. continue into decline

Or.... gather momentum at the bottom of the circle and cycle up again.

What do you think?

Signs of decline include

- excessive preoccupation with who's in and who's out
- focus on keeping the place running instead of focus on the goals
- forgetting the goals, and an inability to articulate themselves
- nostalgia for the good old days.

Much of this is up to us. And all of it is up to God.

Here's some simple reflection on – from my limited point of view, where we've been and where we might be headed.

I chose to read from Revelation – a sadly misunderstood, glorious poem of hope. In the first chapters, before the author goes all wonky, he (or she) writes to each of 7 churches. To the angels of those churches. Saying there's good news andthere's bad news.

And goes on to say to them – this is what you're good at

This....not so much

And here's a promise for you.

Of all the things we could say at the 65th birthday of our congregation.....

I'm going to offer what may be a tool for your own discernment as we move forward

And for our communal discernment as well.

I want you to consider the soul – the angel of this place.

The soul, the angel of Whitehorse.

I have found it a compelling idea. That places have souls, have angels. Churches and cities have angels. Alice Mann, at the course I took earlier this month, said that the task of a church is to befriend

the soul of the place where it is planted. Befriend the angel of the place.

So....just come with me as we explore that....see where the Spirit takes us, ok?

As people of faith, people who are aware that we are made in the image of our Creator, that we are part of a creation that is glorious and precious, and we are a part of that, only a part,

We are part of a huge universe.

AND we are grounded in particular places. In our case, we are rooted and grounded here in Whitehorse.

And part of our call to be faithful, people of integrity and compassion

Part of that is to befriend the soul, embrace the angel of the place where we live.

Does this...ring for you?

The first thing to ask as we contemplate the soul of Whitehorse united church, then, is to contemplate the soul of Whitehorse itself.

And to begin to do that, here's a question: What was going on in the soul of this place, what was the angel of Whitehorse up to when WUC came into being 65 years ago? What was going on in the soul of this city in 1954?

I'd love to have this conversation with you. For now I'm going to say how I see it.

- it was post war. There was a spirit of optimism, a return to "normal" life after the war. A heavy stress on family life, which meant at that time a mom, dad and 2.5 kids where the dad went to work and the mom stayed home in a frilly apron baking cookies. That was a complete fantasy of course....almost no family was really like that. It was the creation of Disney, and shows like Father Knows Best.....and beneath the fantasy lay family violence...people so broken by the war that they'd never be the same, deep racism and....but that was the mentality. People still harken back to that time as the good old days. Completely created by hollywood. "Traditional" values. No one thought to ask - whose tradition.

The social discourse was one of progress and growth, and people just wanted things to be nice. No more war.

Lots of community organizations: service clubs, kids' programmes....and people volunteered for things: service clubs, churches, there was an expectation that you'd take part in your community in at least one of these ways. Scout and Guide leaders, all that.

There was an explosion of babies. They're called the baby boomers. The biggest, healthiest, crop of kids ever born in the history of the world. That cannot be underestimated. They changed everything. And they (we) have been, by virtue of our sheer numbers, changing everything ever since.

When we were little, schools were built in unprecedented numbers. Teachers were needed. When we were teens, the rock and roll, record industry exploded. Catered to us. Hang on to that.

Lots of people had moved to WH as teachers, medical professionals, Government workers. They too had lots of kids. They came from elsewhere, with a spirit of adventure, a spirit of ...service....They'd been members of the UCC where they came from, many of them, and when they got here, there was no UC and so they worshipped for a while...where?

Then they said ...well, let's build one. Merton says that it was Mrs. Simpson, who said let's build it, and apparently you didn't mess with Mrs. Simpson.

I think...correct me if I'm wrong, but I think that the impulse behind that was That we need a church that we're familiar with, for us. And our kids. To ground us and feed us so that we can do the work of God in our jobs and families and communities. They wouldn't have said it that way but I think that was it. It wasn't let's build a church to evangelize the north, (which has a whole set of issues in itself, but that was the vision of some other denominations)it wasn't that. Not let's build a church to bring a liberal social gospel message to the territory, (although that was partly the result)not let's create a space for engagement with first nations.... it was more like

Let's build this because we want familiarity and we want this for our needs.

I'm not criticizing that....I'm just naming it. I would have done the same thing. It's completely understandable....not a bad thing

Many who came were professionals who lived out their faith by what they did in their jobs and other activities: volunteering and so on. The ministry of being part of a community in all the ways you did back then. And church was for feeding the soul so that they could go back out there and do that.

But in contemplating the soul of this place – this church -

Part of it is that its roots are in doing what we need for ourselves. Not closed to whoever wanted to come in, quite the opposite, newcomers would find a welcome, because everyone was from somewhere else, and people welcomed one another. but.....

AND...no history of going out into the highways and byways and saying “come to our church”back then, the assumption was “if you build it they will come” and they did. In the 50s you didn't have to convince people to go to church

Do you agree? There is no lingering spirit of evangelistic zeal here. Our angel is not an evangelist.

Ok.

What about now?

Here are some of the things that have changed since 1954.

You've heard me say this over and over but I don't think any of us realizes how much it changes everything.

THE BOOMERS ARE AGING.

The biggest bump in the demographic – it's artificial, it's not normal. And we're getting old. There are ads on tv for things like adult diapers, viagra, boost, You'd never have seen this in any other generation. It's all pitching one last time to the boomers whose biggest concerns these days are the concerns that go along with aging.

And coming behind them are generations with quite different values and lifestyles.

Bowling Alone. (explain) Just get used to it that's how it is.

Is it that people used to be religious and now they're not?

No: partly, back then, there was nothing else to do.

Partly it was expected. In NR they went to meet guys.

Things have changed. Not only, for example, is it not expected that people go to church, it's seen as weird...and people are hesitant to tell even their friends that they go..

It used to be that churches didn't have to go looking for people; people came to us. They just did. Now? No. No much at all.

Example....Canterbury and Skiff Lake.

It used to be (and when I say it used to be, I mean in the 50s and early 60s. Not all through history...get that out of your head. There is no such thing as it always was a certain way and has only changed in recent history. Things have always changed. So when I say it used to be....I mean when the boomers and their parents were young. It used to be that there were large Sunday schools, (to accommodate the post war kids)

Now? Fewer kids, more for them to do. Parents are very engaged in their children's lives. My mom would never have sat at the kitchen table with me and done homework. She just expected me to do it. She'd never drive me to lessons orshe just wouldn't. Now parents spend time choosing what their kids will participate in, what they think will be good for their kids.

and often, Sunday School programmes are sort of thrown together by volunteers who do it out of guilt. There is no passion for it, no excellence. And so parents, wanting the best for their children, take them places they think will equip them for life, and this – is not one of them.

Parents themselves are living different lives. Often families are blended; kids from one relationship, kids from another relationship, and then our kids together....that means there are two exes (that means kids often have dad weeks and mom weeks) and four sets of grandparents to manage and keep in relationship with....it's not that they don't care. It's that they are often overwhelmed. And when they do bring their kids to us, we expect THEM to teach Sunday school as well.

In society, the church is suspect and often for good reason. About 20 years ago now the UCC did a study...and partly they went downtown in large cities, stopped people on the street and said – do you go to church....the answer was almost always no. What words come to mind when you think of church? The most common words were judgemental and rigid. They were asked what sort of church might you consider attending? They said one that accepts people, that is joyful, that reaches out to genuinely help people with no strings attached. One that isn't stuck in doctrine and dogma.

The next question was: have you ever heard of the UCC? And the answer was....no. The ideal church that they were describing was....us. Well, we're not perfect, but we're strong in the ways they said they wanted.

They've never heard of us. Why??

All of this is playing into the current angel of Whitehorse as a city. In spite of ageing boomers, there is a large section of younger people here. They are concerned about the environment. Climate change. That changes everything. EVERYTHING. Or should. They are concerned about jobs, because gone are the days when you could go to university, get a job in your field, buy a house, work at the same job until you retire, get a gold watch...those days are gone. The angel of this place is worried about the future. Is more aware than ever about diversity in our city ethnic diversity, sexual diversity, . She has antennae up and wanting reconciliation with Indigenous neighbours....social justice leaning

We are perfectly suited for the soul of this city. The United Church of Canada, and WUC more specifically, has a soul, and angel that is non judgemental, non doctrinal, social justice leaning. We

have a theology that is intellectually rigorous...we value the questions more than the answers. Our founding fathers and mothers said in 1925 that our statements of faith would have to be rewritten as we learned new things and grew in knowledge and wisdom. And we have. Three times during our short history as a denomination we have rewritten our statements of faith. And we don't ask you to sign on the dotted line ...give intellectual assent to any particular doctrine. We ask – do you believe in God? Do you want to follow Jesus? Then come on in and let's figure out what that means. Together.

I think the angel of Whitehorse would be doing a little angel happy dance to know this. Butshe doesn't know we exist.

And we haven't grasped that we need to at the very least let people know we're here and what we stand for. We're not good at that. When there are few kids coming, we sit back and say where are all the young people. Evangelistic churches respond by hiring two youth pastors, buying a bus and driving around Sunday morning to pick them up. You know?

In Canadian society in general and WH in particular here are some things about the angel of this place:

Baby boomers, now retired or close to it, are dealing with questions like: who am I now that I'm not a doctor/lawyer/whatever work we let define us. How will I spend this last part of my life? What is life about anyway? (Because you can only sit and look at the river so long). They are asking themselves questions about dying. How to die honourably and well. The whole discussion about MAID would never have happened had the boomers not aged. We've had our way all our lives and now we want designer deaths.

Younger people are terrified about climate change and they are cynical about authority and they ask themselves what is real? Who can you trust? There is increasing loneliness, addictions are rampant and not just among the disadvantaged. On the other hand, there is increasing understanding about and acceptance of diversity of ethnicity and sexuality. The calls to action of the TRC are, in some areas, being taken seriously and so the way we understand ourselves as a country and as a territory and city are changing for the better.

So if the author of Revelation were writing to the angel of WUC I think that author would say....you're great at so many things. But I have this to say to you. You need to reach out now. Let people know you're here. There are people coming in from other countries....often they have christian backgrounds. The Philippino community for example. Strong, strong Christian traditions. They come here and they are looking for a church. They don't recognize the name UCC ...and none of us has reached out to them. It's not in our DNA to do that but I think we've got to give our head a shake and maybe bust out of our shyness...or whatever that is.... there.

And....the truth is that no matter what we do or don't do, in 10 to 15 years the church as we know it will be gone. We'll need to make good solid faithful decisions about what to do with this building and property, and I pray we'll make those decisions wisely, not be surprised by the changes that are coming, and not make a decision out of desperation or reaction, but as God's people have always done, trust God for the future whatever it may be. WHATEVER it may be, it won't look like this. It just won't. We can't afford to be blocked by nostalgia or fear or sticking our heads in the sand.

Can I offer you one thing that I think is blocking us?

- my own guilt
- parents' guilt

Until we lament, name those feelings up front, out loud, and cry and do whatever we have to do, we won't be able to move on.

Here's what I think.

This city, its soul, needs the United Church. It is perfectly suited to befriend the soul of this city in ways that I've tried to articulate.

Into the future, whatever it holds, we carry with us

The good news of what God did and is doing in this world as we understand it in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus. We have story and we have song

And we have one another.

The angel of 1954 did a good job. She has now grown into the angel of 2019, and she's beautiful.

It's our joyful calling to love that angel, befriend the soul of this place in the name of our wondrous God.

The future will be, as it always was, open, and waiting for our faithful response.