

Taking The Journey To Faith

A sermon by The Rev. Philip A. Rodgers, presented Sunday, March 12th, 2017,
at Trinity United Church in Malton, related to John 3:1-17

Sometimes young people, if they think somebody is being silly or superficial, will say, "Hey, get a life!" Well, we in the Church say "Amen" to that. It's what I would like to say to Nicodemus when he ask Jesus: "But how can this be? Can I be born again?" Just get a life, Nicodemus. A new one! Try a new path – a new trail.

The Bruce Trail is one of the longest hiking trails on the continent and hikers encounter the array of wildlife in the forest, and breathtaking views of the countryside. But the often most asked question that visitors ask the Trail interpreters is not "Where does this trail go?" or "How long does it take to hike it?" or "Do we need bug spray on the trail", but instead "Excuse me, can you tell me where the trail starts?" It makes sense. No matter how lovely or breathtaking a trail may be, if you don't know where the trail starts, you can't hike it.

Being a Christian is actually like a trail in a deep and mysterious forest called life as God would have it. If we walk this trail we will see and experience amazing things; we will discover something of what God is truly like, in all of God's beauty, wildness and splendor. First what we see when we walk this trail is that God is not like what many think. Some people think of God as like a great big parent, a father or mother in the sky, or maybe a fearsome judge who stares down and makes us behave out of fear and guilt. Some other people think of God like a divine clockmaker who made the creation, wound it up, and lets it tick away on its own. Other people think of God as like some distant star, cold, unblinking, shining out there somewhere, but far away from us and our lives. But when we walk the trail called Christianity, we discover that God is not a fearsome judge or a clockmaker or a distant star, but God is rather a living and dynamic communion of love and self-giving, offering new life and enriching our journey.

The Reverend John Buchanan has just retired after 48 years as a Presbyterian pastor; and in an article recently, in which he was looking back over his half century of ministry, he remembered one Sunday service in which he was baptizing a three-year-old boy. After the child had been baptized with water, John Buchanan, following the directions of the Presbyterian prayer book, put his hand on the little boy's head and said, "You are a child of God, sealed by the Spirit in your baptism, and you belong to Jesus Christ forever." Unexpectedly, the little boy looked up and responded, "Uh-oh." Well, it was an amusing moment, and people in the congregation smiled, of course, but "it was [also] an appropriate response," wrote Buchanan, "... a stunning theological affirmation from the mouth of this child." And indeed it was. That "uh-oh" was a recognition that everything had changed, that this boy would never be the same. He did not belong any more just to his biological family; he had now been born into God's family. He was being called in his baptism to live a different way in the world, God's way, a way that is sometimes met with rejection and scorn. No wonder he said, "uh oh." On this new path life would never be the same.

Every now and then we catch a glimpse, even in a world of pain and violence, of what this loving, self-giving, Christian life of God is like. On a cold January night in 1941, in an unheated barracks at Stalag 8, a German death camp, some of the most beautiful music ever composed was played for the first time on old instruments by prisoners at the camp by Olivier Messiaen. Olivier said he wanted to compose some music that would proclaim, even in the terrors of the death camp, that the love and hope of God were still alive. He was tired of the beat of the Nazi jack boot: hup-two-three-four. And so he composed his music according to a beautiful verse in the French translation of the Book of Revelation, where an angel announces, "There is no more time," as if to say, at the end of time all broken, jagged, and seemingly hopeless human history will be gathered into the eternal and loving

life of God. He called it "The Quartet for the End of Time." There were other musicians in the camp and he asked them to play his music, and right on the score where most composers would have written, "Play slowly, play moderately, play rapidly," Messiaen wrote, "Play tenderly, play with ecstasy, play with love."

And that, finally, is what Christianity is all about. To belong to God is to belong to the life of God, in the community of one God, and to be called to live our whole life journey in the same manner and relate to each other--playing tenderly, playing with ecstasy, and playing with love as we go. God loved the world so much that God gave his only Son, and this Son, Jesus Christ, opens his arms wide to welcome us into the very life of God. "Where does the trail begin? The trail into God's own life starts right *here, right now!*

Let us pray: *O God, we praise you: through your Word and Holy Spirit you created all things. Draw us this day and every day into the fullness of your life and self-giving love. Fill us with the vision of your glory, that we may always serve and praise you, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.*