

Deep Love Crier - Nov. 2009

# Positive reaction to sermon

by **Alissa McArthur**

THE first in a potentially controversial "A Different Kind of Church" series of sermons at Mt. Seymour United Church elicited a largely positive reaction, says Rev. Nancy Talbot. The minister delivered the first sermon of the series, "The God I Don't Believe In," on Oct. 18.

"My overall sense is that [the congregation] really liked it," Talbot said. "They're really happy that we're being public about the liberty that people have in the congregation to question what they believe in."

In "The God I Don't Believe In," Talbot challenged the image of God as "a man with a grey beard living on a cloud who intervenes in our lives," and offered alternative ways of viewing God. In her sermon, Talbot explained pantheism — which posits God as existing in every part of nature and beyond. Rather than viewing evil and suffering in the world as God's punishment, she said she sees them as "the cost of being part of a universe that is still evolving...[and] being given the freedom to live as we chose to live."

Talbot says members of her congregation appreciated hearing her voice a view that many already held themselves but were unable to talk about.

"My experience is, people really appreciate someone who has authority in the church using the pulpit to say things they had thought themselves," she said. "One person said to me they felt like weeping because they heard someone say what they'd been thinking."

Talbot believes many in her congregation already held views similar to hers, so she's isn't surprised her sermon was well-received. However, she says it was important to put these thoughts into words, because an alternative image of God isn't regularly discussed in churches. Talbot

also said cultural depictions of a judgmental God has permeated the psyche of many Christians and is at odds with the God they actually believe in.

"I think that our culture has held an idea about who and what God is — that many have rejected — yet we carry within us a lot of internal baggage that has a lot to do with self-judgment," Talbot said. "We live in a culture that says we're not good enough. I think that's why people are attracted to all things spiritual — because somewhere in our beings we're also longing for more than what we're living out of."

Talbot also said she spoke to a number of people from outside her congregation who had come to the sermon upon seeing the church's ads in the Deep Cove Crier and North Shore News. Stephen Allison, who drove from Edgemont Village to attend Talbot's sermon, was among those who appreciated the minister's take on a touchy subject.

"I went because it was the most refreshing thing I'd seen from a church in the last 20 years," Allison said.

A lifelong Christian, Allison said although the Old Testament image of a judgmental God sitting on a cloud has long been dismissed by many religious scholars, the image has been difficult to shake for churchgoers even if they don't consciously believe in it.

"A lot of people had been thinking of a God that has been abandoned by serious theologians," he said. "But nobody had been giving us anything else."

Allison was among those in attendance who gained satisfaction from hearing their own beliefs affirmed.

"I've almost arrived in the same place on my own," he said. "But now I seem to have found a church and preacher and maybe a community — it's tough having your own set of beliefs you're not sharing with anyone."

Not everyone in atten-

dance was as appreciative of Talbot's sermon, however. Jenny Goldie, who was visiting from Australia and attended the sermon with her sister, acknowledged the importance of questioning traditional concepts of God, but said she wasn't entirely satisfied with Talbot's alternative vision.

"I would have liked to have heard more of Jesus in the sermon," Goldie said. "I feel the essence of Christianity is in Jesus' teachings. The way I was raised, God was a loving father as opposed to a judgmental God."

Goldie also questioned Talbot's challenging of God as an exclusively male entity.

"For Christians, I don't think we need to dispense of the maleness [of God]," she said. "I don't have any problems with the maleness of God — I think the minister was pushing the alternative [image] of God...a little too much. I was worried it was too pantheistic. I think that's a reasonable point of view...but then why bother going to church, you might as well go worship God in nature."

Talbot says her message is, at Mt. Seymour United, if that's what you want to do, you have the freedom to do so. However, she says the value of having a church community that supports one's search for God is unique from just thinking about it on one's own.

"I think there's a difference between experiencing God in all things and also holding our experience of God in a particular framework," Talbot said. "Being part of a community that has a common story helps us shape our lives in a way that's more than holding God in nature."

"I just don't want to limit God," Talbot says. "For me that doesn't take anything away from being Christian."

Talbot's four-sermon series continues with "The Bible I Didn't Write" (Nov. 1), and "The Heaven I'm Not Dying to Get Into."