

IN THE SPRING OF THIS YEAR WHEN HIS HOLINESS THE DALI LAMA WAS VISITING VANCOUVER HE WAS QUOTED AS SAYING: "WE HAVE TO ACT NOW -- IT IS NO USE TO JUST FEEL REGRET, REGRET, REGRET."

HE WAS ADDRESSING A QUESTION ABOUT VIOLENCE IN OUR WORLD.

IF HIS HOLINESS WAS A CHRISTIAN OR A JEW AND NOT A BUDDHIST – ONE MIGHT HAVE WONDERED IF HE WAS REFERRING TO THE 16TH CHAPTER OF 1ST SAMUEL – IN WHICH GOD IS HEARD SAYING TO SAMUEL – "HOW LONG WILL YOU GRIEVE OVER SAUL? FILL YOUR HORN WITH OIL AND SET OUT."

IT IS NO USE TO JUST FEEL REGRET, REGRET, REGRET, YOU HAVE TO ACT NOW.

IN OUR READING FROM THE HEBREW SCRIPTURES THIS MORNING SAMUEL IS STUCK IN THE PAST – WALLOWING IN REGRET. AFTER ANNOINTING SAUL AS KING OF THE HEBREW PEOPLE HE HAS RECENTLY DISCOVERED THAT THINGS ARE NOT WORKING OUT THE WAY HE HAD HOPED THEY WOULD. SOMEWHERE ALONG THE LINE -- SAUL HAS TURNED AWAY FROM FOLLOWING GOD, FAILING TO LIVE ACCORDING TO GOD'S WAYS.

IN THE PREVIOUS CHAPTER – THE WORD OF THE LORD HAS COME TO SAMUEL : "I REGRET THAT I MADE SAUL KING" SAYS GOD.

BUT NOTE THAT GOD DOES NOT LINGER IN THAT REGRET FOR VERY LONG– BY THE BEGINNING OF THE VERY NEXT CHAPTER OF THE STORY – GOD IS COMPELLING SAMUEL TO GET OVER THE PAST – TO ACT NOW AND MOVE ON WITH HOPE INTO THE FUTURE.

IN FACT – SO ANXIOUS IS GOD TO GET ON WITH THINGS – THAT GOD HAS ALREADY CHOSEN THE NEXT KING – GOD HAS ALREADY DEvised PLAN B -- SAMUEL JUST NEEDS

TO PICK UP HIS HORN OF OIL -- GO OUT -- FIND THE ONE THAT GOD HAS CHOSEN: THE PATH AND THE VEHICLE THROUGH WHICH GOD WILL NOW WORK AT GUIDING THE WORLD -- AND ANNOINT HIM TO BE GOD'S LEADER.

I MUST CONFESS THAT IN THE LAST TWO WEEKS I HAVE FELT A CERTAIN AMOUNT OF KINSHIP WITH SAMUEL. I TOO HAVE FOUND MYSELF GRIEVING WHAT IS PAST -- FEELING A BIT HESITANT ABOUT WHAT GOOD IT IS TO ACT NOW AND HEAD INTO THE FUTURE -- WHEN THE PROSPECTS OF THE FUTURE SEEM SCAREY AND OVERWHELMING -- WONDERING IF GOD REALLY DOES HAVE A PLAN B -- FOR THE CHURCH -- FOR OUR WORLD.

IN THE LAST TWO WEEKS IT SEEMS THAT EVERY NEWSPAPER I OPEN -- AND EVERY MAGAZINE I TOUCH IS FULL OF TALK ABOUT THE CHRISTIAN FAITH -- THE ONLY PROBLEM IS THAT IT IS NOT THE CHRISTIAN FAITH AS I UNDERSTAND IT THAT EVERY MAGAZINE AND NEWSPAPER IS FULL OF.

LAST WEEK THE GLOBE AND MAIL STARTED A FOUR-PART SERIES ON THE RELIGIOUS RIGHT IN AMERICA. IN THE SAME WEEK THE VANCOUVER SUN CARRIED A FRONT PAGE ARTICLE WITH ACCOMPANYING PHOTOGRAPH OF MY ANGLICAN COLLEAGUE REV. ED HIRD DECLARING VICTORY OVER HIS BROTHERS AND SISTERS WHO ARE BEING TEMPORARILY KICKED OUT OF THE WORLD WIDE ANGLICAN COMMUNION DUE TO THEIR STANCE ON HOMOSEXUALITY. AS IF THAT WASN'T ENOUGH , LAST SUNDAY SOMEONE DROPPED ON MY DESK A COPY OF THE NORTH SHORE NEWS CONTAINING TREVOR LAUTENS ASSESSMENT OF THE STATE OF THE UNITED CHURCH -- WHICH ACCORDING TO HIM IS SHATTERED AND PAGANISTIC.

THE NEXT DAY THE COVER STORY OF THE TIME MAGAZINE I PICKED UP IN MY DENTIST OFFICE WAS A COMMENTARY ON THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN RE-ELECTING GEORGE BUSH. IN AMONGST ALL THIS MY INBOX WAS FILLING UP WITH EMAILS FROM PEOPLE OF

VARIOUS FAITHS DIALOGUING ABOUT THE ABSENCE OF LEFT-LEANING VOICES IN THE CURRENT NATIONAL DEBATE ON SAME SEX MARRIAGE.

AFTER TWO WEEKS OF THIS -- MUCH LIKE SAMUEL -- I HAVE BEEN READY TO THROW UP MY HANDS IN GRIEF AND DESPAIR, ANGER,, REGRET AND FEAR.

FOR AT LEAST THE LAST 15 YEARS SOCIAL SCIENTISTS LIKE REGINALD BIBBY HAVE BEEN TELLING MAINSTREAM PROTESTANT CHURCHES THAT WE HAD ABOUT 10 YEARS TO GET CLEAR ABOUT WHO WE ARE AND TO MAKE CHANGES TO THE WAY WE DO CHURCH OR WE WOULD FACE EXTINCTION.

THANKS BE TO GOD WE HAVE BEEN AND ARE RESPONDING TO THOSE WARNINGS IN MANY WAYS. THE NEW DRAFT STATEMENT OF FAITH PUT OUT BY THE NATIONAL CHURCH THAT TREVOR LAUTENS WAS CRITICIZING IN THE NORTH SHORE NEWS IS PART OF THAT RESPONSE; THE LIVING THE QUESTIONS SERIES THAT WE ARE ENGAGED IN ON MONDAY NIGHTS -- IS PART OF THAT RESPONSE -- AND THERE ARE MANY, MANY OTHER GOOD THINGS WE ARE DOING TO RESPOND TO THOSE WARNINGS.

BUT WHEN YOU PICK UP THE PAPER OR TURN ON THE TV OR THE RADIO -- AND THE PREDOMINANT VOICE OF CHRISTIANITY THAT WE SEE AND HEAR TODAY-- DOES NOT RESONATE WITH OUR UNITED CHURCH -- MORE LIBERAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE FAITH. ONE HAS TO WONDER IF WE HAVE TRIED TO DO TOO LITTLE TOO LATE. ONE HAS TO WONDER IF THERE REALLY IS HOPE FOR US -- IF GOD REALLY HAS A PLAN B AND IF WE ARE A PART OF IT.

WHEN ONE DISCOVERS THAT THE SIX LARGEST MAINSTREAM PROTESTANT DEMONINATIONS IN THE US HAVE LOST A QUARTER OF THEIR FLOCK IN THE LAST DECADE -- WHILE 3 MILLION AMERICANS NOW ATTEND A CHURCH WITH A

CONGREGATION OF MORE THAN 10,000 PEOPLE – AN INCREASE OF 300 % IN THE PAST 10 YEARS – ONE HAS TO WONDER IF WE MAINSTREAMERS AREN'T GOING DOWN FOR THE COUNT.

IN FACT – IT IS LIKELY NOW A MISNOMER TO EVEN CALL OURSELVES MAINSTREAM PROTESTANT – BECAUSE WE ARE NOT VERY MAINSTREAM AT ALL ANYMORE.

AMERICAN JOURNALIST BILL MOYERS WAS RECENTLY QUOTED AS SAYING "ONE OF THE BIGGEST CHALLENGES IN POLITICS IN MY LIFETIME IS THAT THE DELUSIONAL IS NO LONGER MARGINAL, IT HAS COME IN FROM THE FRINGE, TO SIT IN THE SEAT OF POWER IN THE OVAL OFFICE AND IN CONGRESS."

MOYERS IS NOT TRYING TO BE FUNNY HERE – HE IS SERIOUS – BECAUSE THERE ARE SOME VERY DANGEROUS WAYS OF THINKING THAT ARE GAINING MOMENTUM IN THE US IN PARTICULAR – AND THE ISSUES THAT ARE BEING DEBATED IN POLITICAL CIRCLES IN THE NAME OF CHRISTIANITY – ARE SERIOUS GLOBAL ISSUES.

THEY HAVE TO DO WITH HOW WE VALUE HUMAN LIFE – REGARDLESS OF AGE, RELIGIOUS CREED, COLOUR OF SKIN, COUNTRY OF ORIGIN, SOCIAL-ECONOMIC STATUS OR SEXUAL PREFERENCE. THEY HAVE TO DO WITH HOW WE VALUE OUR ENVIRONMENT. BECAUSE THEY CENTER IN PART AROUND WAR TO THE EXCLUSION OF MANY OTHER IMPORTANT SOCIAL ISSUES -- THEY HAVE TO DO WITH THE SURVIVAL OF THE HUMAN SPECIES LET ALONE THE SURVIVAL OF THE ENTIRE PLANET. THEY ARE ISSUES OF LIFE AND DEATH FOR YOU AND FOR ME AND FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS.

IN THE MIDST OF OUR CHURCH'S DECLINE IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE IN THE FACE OF ALL OF THAT– IT'S NATURAL TO WONDER IF MAYBE GOD ISN'T PASSING JUDGEMENT ON US AFTER ALL.

I REMEMBER ED SEARCY – THE MINISTER AT UNIVERSITY HILL UNITED SUGGESTING THAT TO US AT ONE OF THE REVIVE EVENTS HELD LAST YEAR. -- SUGGESTING THAT PERHAPS WE ARE IN A TIME OF JUDGEMENT – NOT BECAUSE WE HAVE BEEN TOO LIBERAL IN OUR ACCEPTANCE OF HOMOSEXUALS AND WOMEN IN THE PULPIT AND CHOICE ABOUT ABORTION AND THE NAMING OF GOD AS MOTHER AND BY ENGAGING IN INTER-FAITH DIALOGUE – BUT JUDGEMENT BECAUSE WE HAVE NOT TAKEN OUR FAITH PASSIONATELY TO HEART IN THE WAY THAT THE GOSPEL DEMANDS OF US.

WHO IS THE ONE THAT SAMUEL IS TO ANNOINT TO TAKE OVER THE KINGSHIP FROM SAUL? NOT THE ONE THAT LOOKS GOOD ON THE OUTSIDE, GOING TO CHURCH EACH SUNDAY BECAUSE IT IS THE RIGHT THING TO DO, BEING NICE TO EVERYONE, AND DOING GOOD DEEDS AND HAVING A LOVELY BUILDING – BUT THE ONE WHOSE HEART IS ORIENTED TOWARDS GOD – THE ONE WHO LOVES GOD FROM THE INSIDE OUT – WITH EVERY FIBRE OF THEIR BEING.

IF THE RELIGIOUS RIGHT HAS ANY GIFT TO GIVE US – OTHER THAN A THOUGHT-PROVOKING TITLE FOR A SERMON – PERHAPS IT IS THIS: THEY ARE PASSIONATELY AND FOR THE MOST PART SINCERELY COMMITTED TO THEIR LIFE OF FAITH. THEY HAVE A CLEAR VISION FOR THE FUTURE– THEY ARE ABLE TO ENVISION A WORLD THAT DOESN'T EXIST AND WITH EVERY FIBRE OF THEIR BEING THEY ARE WORKING TO BRING THAT WORLD INTO BEING. THEY ARE PRAYERFUL – THEY KNOW THEIR BIBLE -- THEY GIVE AT LEAST 10% OF THEIR INCOME TO THE CHURCH – THEY ARE INCREASINGLY WELL ORGANIZED – THEY ARE NOT AFRAID TO SPEAK OUT FOR WHAT THEY BELIEVE IN -- THEY ARE NOT STUCK IN THE PAST – THEY ARE LEARNING FROM THE MISTAKES OF THEIR PAST AND THEY ARE MOVING ON INTO THE FUTURE WITH GREAT HOPE.

THEY ARE SETTING THE BAR HIGH AND GOADING US WITH THE QUESTION: ARE WE THIS COMMITTED TO OUR CHRISTIAN FAITH? DOES IT MATTER THIS MUCH TO US?

MAYBE – JUST MAYBE – IF WE CANNOT BE ALL THOSE THINGS ABOUT OUR PARTICULAR INTERPRETATION AND UNDERSTANDING OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH – THEN THEY DESERVE TO BE GOD'S ANNOINTED ONES AS WE MOVE INTO THE FUTURE.

IT WAS NOT LOST ON ME AS I PLANNED THIS MORNING'S SERVICE THAT THE PSALM FOR TODAY WAS THE 23RD PSALM – THE PSALM THAT WE READ FOR COMFORT WHEN DEATH IS NEAR – WHEN DEATH HAS OCCURRED.

THERE IS MUCH ABOUT OUR CHURCH THAT IS DYING. NOT BECAUSE EVERYTHING WE DID IN THE PAST WASN'T FAITHFUL! I WOULDN'T BE STANDING HERE BEFORE YOU TODAY IF NOT FOR MY FAITHFUL FORBEARERS WHO PREPARED A PLACE AT THE TABLE FOR ME . NO, ITS NOT BECAUSE EVERYTHING WE DID IN THE PAST WAS WRONG, BUT BECAUSE SOME OF WHAT WE DID IN THE PAST NO LONGER WORKS FOR THE CONTEXT IN WHICH WE NOW FIND OURSELVES. OUR CONTEXT HAS DRAMATICALLY CHANGED.

AND SO WE HAVE COME TO A CROSSROAD (A CROSS ROAD) – WE HAVE A CHOICE. WE CAN BURY OUR HEADS IN THE SAND AND CONTINUE TO LET OTHERS SPEAK ON BEHALF OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH IN THE WORLD BEYOND THIS PLACE – BECAUSE WE DON'T KNOW OUR BIBLE WELL ENOUGH – OR BECAUSE WE ARE NOT REALLY ALL THAT PASSIONATE ABOUT THE ISSUES BEING DISCUSSED IN THE PUBLIC ARENA– OR BECAUSE WE AREN'T REALLY THAT PASSIONATE ABOUT OUR FAITH.

OR WE CAN GET PASSIONATE ABOUT OUR FAITH – AND KNOWLEDGEABLE ABOUT OUR BIBLES – AND CLEAR ABOUT WHAT GOD IS CALLING US TO DO WITH OUR LIVES– AND

SERIOUS ABOUT OUR LIFE OF PRAYER. (SAMUEL KNOWS HOW TO LISTEN TO GOD'S VOICE BECAUSE HE HAS HAD A LIFE-TIME OF PRACTISE)

WE CAN IN THE WORDS OF OUR EPISTLE THIS MORNING – WAKE UP – RISE FROM THE DEAD AND LET CHRIST SHINE WITHIN US – WE CAN ORIENT OUR HEARTS AND OUR LIVES TOWARDS GOD.

WE CAN DO ALL OF THAT -- AND EVEN THEN – WE MAY STILL DIE AS A DENOMINATION – OR AS A CONGREGATION -- OR AS A FORM OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH – OR EVEN AS A PLANET -- BUT WOULDN'T YOU MUCH RATHER RISK DYING BECAUSE YOU PICKED UP YOUR CROSS, ACTED NOW AND GOT PASSIONATE ABOUT WHAT YOU BELIEVED IN – THAN BECAUSE YOU STOOD BY SILENTLY DISPASSIONATELY WALLOWING IN REGRET, REGRET, REGRET.

THE CROSSROAD UPON WHICH WE WALK CALLS FORTH OUR COMMITMENT AND OUR PASSION – IT WAS SO FOR THE ONE WHOSE STEPS WE FOLLOW ON THAT ROAD – IT IS SO FOR EACH AND EVERY ONE WHO DARES TO STAND UP AND SPEAK OUT FOR WHAT THEY PASSIONATELY BELIEVE IN.

LET US THEN FILL OUR HORNS WITH OIL AND SEEK OUT WITH GREAT HOPE THE PLAN GOD HAS FOR OUR FUTURE.