

**Jan Braun – Osler Mennonite Church – December 28, 2014**

*Isaiah 61:10-62:3; Psalm 148; Galatians 4:4-7; Luke 2:22-40, 36-38*

First of all, I want to make sure that if the children want to get worship books, that they take the opportunity to do that now. My niece, Nora, told me that sermons are kind of boring, and I get that, so to the children, I want to say that if you hear anything at all that you want to write about or draw about in your worship activity books, no matter if you think it makes sense or not, if you want to, please come and find me after the worship service and show me.

To be honest, I think that I might be giving you a bit of a Gertrude Stein kind of sermon this morning – she was certainly an inspired feminist, which I value, but a meandering writer by design. I wanted to write a sermon in the fashion that I would write most anything else.

So the story must begin.

I was out for supper a couple of weeks ago when the topic of novels came up. The conversation started gaining speed when I finally brought my full attention to it. And the first thing I really heard was, “I never read novels, you can’t learn anything from a novel.” Then a pile-on started, “Yeah! I loved university, you just had to read a textbook, and that I could get into.” “Give me a manual! I’d rather read a manual than a novel; a much better use of my time,” someone said, shaking their fork.

I was stunned. A few things came to mind: 1) in university basically all I did was read novels; I thought that I was learning something; 2) as a novelist this make me feel slightly insulted, I did research, after all. There are facts (as if that matters);

and 3) I hope that the topic changes quickly. My friend tried to defend the validity of novels, but I found myself saying nothing. The topic did change quickly, and I was relieved.

Later on I thought, Why was I so uninterested in defending the honour of the novel? I'm a novelist. I write poetry, and all kinds of things, shouldn't I be fiercely defending the ability of the novel to teach us something?

Maybe it's no coincidence that with this on my mind I turned to the Scripture readings a week later only to discover that they were filled with poetry.

My writing process has always started from reading, and in fact, I read entirely too much, which caused delay in starting to write this sermon, and in turn caused delay in finishing. Anyway, part of my writing process is that I read poetry, the newspapers, way too much philosophy – which I may or may not understand – biographies, textbooks, blog posts, the Bible, and, of course, novels. A typical day of writing is me waking up, eating breakfast drinking a lot of coffee, pacing around, writing something, pacing some more, writing, going to the gym, coming home to drink more coffee, and on and on. Its all very time consuming, and not always very productive in the sense that I've written pages upon pages. Writing takes time. You have to turn things, write all the bad things that you have to write before you can write yourself all the way to good writing. When people say 'blood, sweat, and tears' I know it's true. It is not mind and heart alone it is also entirely bodily. At least that's true for me. It can be a very enjoyable process, and a very terrible process. And while I could tell you right now what I believe is the most important part of the process, I want you to keep reading.

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I love the book of Luke, but truth be told I used to give myself a bit of a hard time because I would think, “Do I just love his writing because he’s the ‘educated one’, the one who, as tradition would have it, was a doctor? As a Mennonite people who value the upside down kingdom, and who believe that the last shall be first, isn’t it a bit weird to love the educated doctor? It reminds me of how I complicated feelings when I read David Bergen novels. I read an interview he gave in the *Globe and Mail* one time and when asked if his writing was political, he said no, that he wouldn’t do that because it takes away from the quality of writing. I thought, My, my, it must be nice to be in a position of such privilege that you can make a choice about whether your writing is political or not. On the other hand, I love his writing, and he is an excellent writer.

Back to Luke. I realized that, actually, I love Luke so much because he loves and values the place of poetry within his narrative. He’s artistic and imaginative. I like what Sharon H. Ringe has to say about Luke’s writing in her commentary.

“Whether or not Luke is factually accurate in his representation of that story is beside the point. Rather, his artistically powerful and theologically persuasive narrative compels our attention to deeper truth he conveys.” (Ringe 7)

According to Ringe, the book is not meant to be orderly, or cohesive, and the Greek word he uses for “account” in his introduction to the Gospel– Luke 1:1 is used to describe a narrative rather than some factual recounting of empirical data (21).

Luke offers the readers a lot of poetry in the first two chapters of his book. Luke 1:41-45 introduces us to our first poetic moment when Elizabeth sees Mary for

the first time and her child leaps in her womb when Mary enters and gives rise to Elizabeth's proclamation. There's no indication that Elizabeth has been given any advanced warning that Mary is carrying the Messiah, but her baby knows; her body knows. She says in verse 44 of chapter 1, "For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy." Mary in turn launches into a beautiful and powerful poem of her own, which is familiar to most as the "Magnificat"; it's something that most people here have probably read or heard many times, and rightfully so. I can't help but believe that it is Elizabeth's reaction – the baby leaping in her own womb – and her articulation of that bodily response which spurs on Mary's own outburst of poetry. Luke goes on to say that Mary stayed with Elizabeth for three more months, but doesn't give a reason. Maybe the reason is pretty simple, who wouldn't want to be around someone encouraging you to trust your gut when you are in the midst of something big and unknown like bringing the promised Messiah into the world. Elizabeth's husband, Zachariah, doesn't greet the angel Gabriel with poetry and trust; he greets him with doubt and fear and is rendered silent as a result of it.

On the night of Jesus' birth, as the story goes, there were shepherds doing their job when they were visited by a host of angels. I can just imagine the sky turning to one bright shining vision, maybe like the most spectacular of northern light displays. Surely they were experiencing something for the first time, and instead of being paralyzed by fear, they were compelled into movement by a force greater than themselves.

I realize that I've not yet gotten to our actual Scripture passage for the day yet. There are so many tangents and turns one can make, and one day I will write a 'choose your own adventure sermon', but I will try to avoid that today.

When it is the right time, Jesus is brought to the temple. Normally, as I understand it, he would have been brought to the temple to be 'redeemed' through the payment of money, but Luke doesn't speak about it that way, he uses the word 'presented' and seems to be alluding to a new ceremony taking place – a new way of being (Ringe 46). At the end of the selected passage for today, we meet Simeon and Anna. Both are there in the story to give recognition to the fact that the Lord has come. Simeon is compelled to go to the temple that day – the Bible says, "Guided by the Spirit" in verse 27, which I see as another example of someone trusting their gut feelings. Although we get to hear what Simeon has to say when he sees Jesus for the first time, we're not given the words that Anna says as she, "[B]egan to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem," in verse 38. I can only image that what she had to say would have filled pages and pages after having held the baby Jesus.

While we didn't read the passage from Isaiah this morning, it is part of the lectionary for the morning, so I'm going to read just a few verses - Isaiah 61:10 and 11.

"I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. For as the earth bring forth its shoots, and as a garden

causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.” I love the image of the shoots coming up in the garden.

Some of you may be familiar with theologian, Walter Brueggemann, who says the following about the book of Isaiah:

“The book of Isaiah is like a mighty oratorio whereby Israel sings its story of faith. Like any oratorio, this one includes interaction among many voices, some of which are in dissent . . . [T]he book of Isaiah is a remarkable artistic achievement wherein the artistry is a match for the awesome, inscrutable Character whose tale it tells” (Brueggemann 1).

When Patty asked me to give the sermon this morning, she suggested that I share some poetry that I’ve written. I think that she was probably seeing the same thing that I’ve noticed about these parts of the Bible – they include beautiful poetry. I haven’t even read the Psalm for this morning, but I would encourage you to read it – Psalm 148. I’m fairly certain is the inspiration for the hymn, “Praise the LORD, Sing Hallelujah,” and the Mennonite national anthem, “Praise God, from Whom All Blessings Flow,” so you might find yourself reading it with a tune in your head. The truth is that I would have loved to read you some of my most recent poetry, but there frankly isn’t much to share.

I started writing in grade 7. There was a class assignment that Mrs. Guenther gave us to write a collection of poetry around a theme. I chose ‘Water’ but I’m not entirely sure why. I got an A+ and I was hooked. After that I wrote almost everyday, and when I got to university I found myself listening intently to lectures while

writing poems and later on I started writing a novel. I must admit that my note-taking suffered, but my writing blossomed. After the release of my novel, things have just stopped, and I don't feel like much of a writer these days at all.

The truth is, I read these passages of Scripture and I feel a bit jealous, wishing poetry was springing forth so eagerly from me. Clint Neufeldt told me the other day, "You can say whatever you want; you're getting on a plane a couple of hours after you preach." While I found it funny, it also made me think about trying to preach within the context of the community; trying to address the relevant themes and speak to things that people might be in the midst of grappling with. Sometimes when you are asked to give a sermon, you are put in the position of speaking uncomfortable truths – to be voice of dissent, as Brueggemann says about the book of Isaiah. The truth is that it's become apparent to me that I'm here to preach to myself.

From the sometimes hard poetic voices of discord in Isaiah, to the beautiful, anthemic joyful proclamation of Psalm 148 to the first two chapters of Luke where we hear the courage that Elizabeth, Mary, Anna, and Simeon have to proclaim that the Messiah has arrived - and that for those who experience oppression, the reign of God's justice will come into being - we are given God's gift of poetry. It's not only beautiful and inspired, but I dare say, it's instructive.

For me, in this time of feeling far away from my poetic, or narrative voice, there is something that I see in these poets and poems, that I don't see in myself, and that's the belief that I have anything worth saying. I never questioned before that I had the right to write anything I wanted. I never hesitated, I never censored myself,

I never thought twice about putting my writing into the world, and I had an unshakable compass inside of me that knew exactly when literary criticism directed at me was on target, and when to discard it. I moved to Toronto almost five years ago, and I moved there with all of that, but now it all seems gone, those feelings and ways of being in the world seem like memories. I'm having a hard time believing that I have anything worth saying, and that is what I believe is the key to writing. You have to believe, even if no one is listening, or reading, or publishing you, or talking about you, that what you have to say matters. In a sense, it doesn't even matter that the rest of the people in the world exist, you just create, because you create.

This brings me back to David Bergen. Well, actually myself. My lesson in moving to Toronto is seeing myself in a new light. I'm someone who has always felt sure that I know about things related to justice and oppression and now I've had the privilege of being in communities that have helped me to continue question assumptions I have about myself. While I know that I am a smart and caring individual who seeks justice and tries to do right, I also know that I am capable through ignorance and stubbornness, among other things, of causing injustice and oppression – so who am I to take up more space in this world with my writing when there are so many voices that are never heard? This has resulted in feeling myself to be in a state of creative status, but I'm also not convinced that my status brings more justice, Shalom or understanding to the world. There's got to be a middle ground.

What I find instructive about these stories in the Bible is not only the content but also the ways in which the characters are so clearly compelled to speak their



truth. They believe entirely in what they are saying, and their lives really do depend on it. Both in the book of Isaiah and in the Gospel of Luke, we have stories of people living under oppressive regimes. For Isaiah, it is first the Babylonians and then the kingdom of Persia; in the Gospel of Luke it is the Romans. Their poetry is certainly political.

I'm sure that many of you are aware that we are now past the Winter Solstice, which is, of course, the longest night of the year. Through the advent season, we light a candle each Sunday to symbolize the coming light which the Christ. For Elizabeth, Mary, Simeon and Anna, they proclaimed that a new chapter was beginning, that the promised Messiah was amongst them. As the New Year approaches, I can't help but wonder if my writerly voice will come back to me. But of course, things like that don't just reappear. Elizabeth is described as "righteous before the Lord" (Luke 1:6), she also listened to her body, and knew what was happening when Mary appeared on her door step. When the Angel Gabriel visited Mary he invites her into the unknown and asks her to trust, Mary put her fears aside and says yes. Simeon listened to his gut and showed up when Jesus and his parents arrived, and was rewarded. Anna put some serious time in at the temple and is described as having "never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day" (verse 37).

I think that I've learned a lot from these stories. Some will call it the Spirit of God, some will call it your 'gut' or your 'instincts', maybe it's that voice in your head - I hope to learn to trust it more everyday, just as Simeon did, and to discern when to listen and act - even when it seems outrageous - and when to know that it's your

ego leading you astray. As Anna shows us, sometimes the things that you are hoping for take time, and patience and work. I think that all of these characters show us what it means to find your voice, be grounded in it, and to speak from it. Maybe my voice is just one of many, maybe I don't really have much of anything important, or instructive to say - maybe you can't learn anything from a novel - but I think that for me, the longer I stay silent, the longer it will take to find my voice.

Amen.