

"A LOOK AT SIGNIFICANT RELIGIOUS EVENTS OF 2007"

Titus 3:4-7; Luke 2:1-20

December 30, 2007

The Rev. Ryan Lambert

Our faith doesn't take place in a vacuum, and the year 2007 is continued proof of this truth. For our sermon time this week I will be lifting up and giving brief explanations about key events or people that have had specific relevance to faith communities in 2007. These are in no particular order, but they have relevance to this faith community or faith communities across the nation or globe. On the heels of the Christmas story, as we continue to celebrate the birth of Jesus, and as we look ahead to the year 2008, these events have shaped 2007. And I believe they will continue to shape us and our faith as we move into the future together.

Episcopal Church's continued struggle for Unity

In 2003 the Episcopal Church, a member of the larger Anglican Communion, voted to consecrate Gene Robinson, an openly gay priest as Bishop of the New Hampshire Diocese of the Episcopal Church in the United States. Many more conservative and traditional diocese and congregations began to speak out against the denomination after his consecration as Bishop. The struggles for unity within the Episcopal Church have increased further since the 2006 election of Katharine Jefferts Schori as the presiding Bishop of the entire Episcopal Church. This is the first time a woman has been the presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church and her gender and supportive vote for Bishop Robinson's consecration have been key issues in a number of Episcopal churches. Some dioceses have sought "alternative Episcopal oversight," seeking to align themselves with what they call "more traditional Episcopal beliefs and leadership." However, this has required them to seek inclusion in dioceses in West Africa, South America, and Eastern Europe, which seems inconvenient at best, and deeply damaging to the unity of the church at worst. Finally, some Episcopal churches have decided to leave the denomination due to these issues, which has sparked lawsuits over who ultimately owns the church properties and other assets. Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury and the leader of the world-wide Anglican Communion, has a difficult road ahead as he seeks to shepherd the diverse Anglican Communion into the future.

The Greening of the Church

Stewardship of Creation has been a buzzword within certain circles of Christianity for nearly 40 years now; recycling, energy conservation, and even some sustainable building projects have found their way into the church. However, there has long been tension in the Christian community about how much responsibility we have for stewardship of the Earth because Genesis, the first book of the bible, offers the instruction to "be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it, have dominion over the fish and birds and every living thing." Some mainline churches have been speaking out concerning the environment for some time; but the issues of earth stewardship, global warming, and eco-justice have largely been ignored by evangelical and conservative churches because of the theological belief that we are approaching the second coming of Jesus, and thus the end of time. Therefore, there is no need to protect the planet because it is merely a transition place. However, something is changing in the evangelical church movement, and leaders like Rick Warren and Bill Hybels are beginning to speak out

and preach a green and sustainable gospel. This is a dramatic change, and it may very well lead to a dramatic alteration in how the church addresses the issues of climate change and ecological justice. I am proud to say that our own congregation will be focusing on this topic during a series of Adult Forums throughout January.

The Death of Jerry Falwell

The Rev. Jerry Falwell died on May 15, 2007, leaving behind a huge legacy as a leader in the conservative evangelical church in the United States. The Rev. Jerry Falwell was pastor of the Lynchburg Baptist Church in Lynchburg, VA, a church that grew from a few dozen when he began as pastor to one now claiming 24,000 members. He used his pulpit to become one of the leading conservative voices in religion and politics. Moving from his role as a televangelist on “The Old-Time Gospel Hour,” Falwell was able to found Liberty University—a leading evangelical college—found the Moral Majority, and provide leadership for countless other conservative and evangelical church movements. Rev. Falwell was able to leverage his powerful voice into a political movement that has changed the course of American politics over the last 25 years. As the leader of the Moral Majority he was fond of saying, “Get them saved, baptized and registered to vote.” Although the Moral Majority folded in 1989, the leadership of Rev. Falwell should be credited with creating a space in the religious and political landscape for the creation of organizations such as the American Family Association and James Dobson’s Focus on the Family. Whatever one may think of Rev. Falwell’s theological beliefs—and he often frustrated me with his attacks on anyone who he felt operated from a progressive theological or political belief—his influence on both the religious and political landscape of our time cannot be denied.

UCC’s 50th Anniversary – General Synod in Hartford, Connecticut.

The United Church of Christ turned 50 years old in 2007 and the 26th General Synod in Hartford, CT, was the place where we celebrated. Led by General Minister and President John Thomas nearly 10,000 delegates and visitors descended upon Hartford to celebrate the 50th anniversary of our denomination and acknowledge that while we have been around in this configuration for only 50 years, our reformation tradition stretches nearly 500 years back to Martin Luther, and our Christian tradition stretches 2000 years. We are young and we are ancient; and with addresses by Bill Moyers, Barack Obama, Marian Wright Edelman, Walter Bruggeman, and Peter Gomes, we celebrated the breadth and history and future of the United Church of Christ. The General Synod attendees included nearly 1,000 youth, which I believe spoke to the bright future of the church. One of the most compelling things about the General Synod in my eyes was the fact that although it was a birthday celebration, it was also a business session; and the visitors and delegates were “treated” to business in the UCC tradition—complete with hand recounts, difficult and painful testimony, struggles between progressive statements and traditional ideals. In a session that could have been acrimonious, one of the best moments came when the Synod affirmed the need for breadth within our denomination by calling for further work at including the ECOT (or Evangelical, Conservative, Orthodox, and Traditional) churches in our midst. We are a diverse denomination and we celebrated that in Hartford!

Religion and politics – Presidential style

Hillary Clinton has been traveling Iowa speaking of her faith. Mitt Romney made a recent address

concerning his Mormon faith. Mike Huckabee has been rising in the polls in Iowa based largely on his evangelical credentials. Barack Obama has had to repeatedly announce and explain his membership in the United Church of Christ, while some have questioned his close relationship with the sometimes radical political statements of his pastor, the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, from Chicago's Trinity United Church of Christ. Rudy Guiliani has been criticized by some Catholics due to his divorces; and nearly every other candidate has been asked to discuss their faith in some forum or another. This is a strange time—when the faith traditions of our presidential candidates are becoming key questions. Faith has sometimes been an issue in politics, but perhaps never in the way that we are seeing the faith traditions of our presidential candidates be fodder for both political gain and distraction. When John F. Kennedy ran for President, he consistently answered questions about whether he would be the President or whether the Pope would be in charge. In a different way, Jimmy Carter's evangelical faith was a key part of his campaign and his identity. However, more than ever our candidates are being asked about their faith and being judged based on their faith traditions. I am not sure what to make of this, but it does throw new light on the importance of faith traditions at the ballot box. It remains to be seen whether this issue will have a lasting role in presidential politics, but I must admit that I am somewhat troubled by the personal beliefs of our candidates being used as weapons and opportunities for scoring points and influencing voters. This is surely one of the emerging faith topics of 2007.

The War in Iraq

The War in Iraq continues to be a key issue in faith communities across this nation and around the world. We are seeing veterans return to faith communities changed by their experiences. We are continuing to see long deployments that require families to make dramatic changes in the way they exist. Children and spouses are spending long periods of time without their loved ones as they serve in Iraq and Afghanistan, and we continue to mourn the mounting numbers of dead. This year there have been more revelations concerning the tactics used in warfare by our government and by Al-Qaeda, and faith communities are beginning to wade into the discussion concerning what tactics should be used in warfare and which should not. What is torture? What if a despicable tactic will save lives? What are the costs to the souls of our soldiers and to the soul of our nation? The war in Iraq continues to place a huge burden on many people and continues to raise important questions for people of faith. Our own congregation currently has Josh Mater and Emilie Goodling serving in combat zones.

Further protections for the GLBT community-maybe

Among the important legislative decisions made in Oregon in 2007 were two that spoke to civil rights for gay, lesbian, transgendered, and bisexual folks. One legislative decision set in motion a new law that made it illegal to discriminate against GLBT folks in housing, work, and public spaces. Basic Rights Oregon and the Community of Welcoming Congregations were groups with large religious bases that helped lobby for this law to be enacted. Another law that was set to go into effect on January 1 was one that would have permitted civil unions in Oregon, which would have allowed gay and lesbian couples to have all the state rights accorded through civil marriage. On Friday, however, a federal judge blocked implementation of this law until a hearing can be held on February 1. Gay and lesbian couples continue to wait to have their relationships honored. Faith communities played a large role on both sides of a signature gathering effort seeking to place these legislative decisions on the ballot—and faith communities will continue to play a role in the ongoing process of determining how—and if—gay and

lesbian relationships will be honored by the state. This issue didn't begin in 2007, and I would guess it will not end in 2008.

Atheism and Christopher Hitchens

One of the interesting people who has had a great deal of impact upon the world of faith is someone who claims to have no faith at all. Christopher Hitchens, with the publication of his book, *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, has been drawing huge and sometimes angry crowds virtually everywhere he goes. I have not yet read his book, although it is in my stack. However, I have watched him speak a number of times and, although he is thought-provoking, no matter what his message he has been able to grab onto our culture's habit of substituting rude and boorish behavior instead of openly debating topics. Quite frankly, I have found the issues raised by Hitchens concerning the damage that has been done in the name of religion to be compelling, but by simply adding another shrill and uncompromising voice to the fray I believe he has not done much other than provide an atheistic addition to the shrieking that often comes via Rush Limbaugh and even *Air America*. However, because Hitchens is often confronted by anger, his defensive tone is somewhat understandable. It is my hope that his writing, as well as that of several other prominent Atheist voices, could bring new avenues for discussion and open up dialog concerning the danger of presuming that there is one true faith or one national faith tradition. And thus an atheist makes the list of important religious voices in 2007.

The Opening of the Cold-Weather Homeless Shelter in Corvallis

I admit I am cheating a little bit because the shelter actually opened on Christmas Eve 2006, but the fact is that in this area the effort to open the cold-weather shelter has been a rallying point for inter-denominational work. The opening of the homeless shelter has been important because it has brought together people of myriad faith traditions around the idea of making our community a better and safer place to live. The dream of the cold-weather shelter was hatched as a combined effort of the downtown business community and several lay leaders in faith communities across Corvallis. In the end, faith communities and civic groups have lead the way in providing the important volunteer hours that have made the shelter a success. Liberal and conservative, mainline and evangelical—people of faith have acted and given of their time and financial gifts. And there are men who are warm, dry, and alive because of it.

The Doubts of Mother Teresa

Finally, the diaries of Mother Teresa were published during this past year, and one of the most profound things that came from their publication was the fact that for much of her ministry she felt that she was left cold and isolated by her faith. And she questioned whether or not she was being faithful enough. On the cusp of the New Year I give thanks for these revelations because I think they are a bellwether admission that speaks to the desperate questioning that so many people of faith experience. If Mother Teresa had doubts about her faith, then my own doubts are not nearly so frightening. If Mother Teresa felt alone and isolated from God, then I am not a heretic when my own struggles overwhelm me. Mother Teresa's faithful struggles are good and profound news for people of faith: even the most faithful among us have doubts and crises of faith...yet we still remain imbedded in our faith. Our faith is not solely a faith for those who have it all figured out. The ministry of Mother Teresa has continued

through her diaries, and I give thanks for the model she authored and the struggles she weathered. As we enter 2008, I only hope we can work as faithfully and prophetically as she did. Thanks be to God for the gifts of this past year and for whatever lies ahead in 2008. Amen.