

# The Encountering God

Romans 15:1-6

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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As you've already heard, our theme for this morning's worship service is taken from the Mennonite Church Alberta E3 worship materials.

At the outset, I have two confessions to make, at the very least, windows to provide into my own peculiar process of writing sermons, understanding their role in worship and my role as a pastor more generally.

**Confession #1:** I sometimes struggle with aligning my preaching with visions or ideas that come from somewhere "outside"—outside of our congregation, outside of our local context, indeed from outside my own life and experience.

You may have noticed this. Even when our church uses worship resources produced elsewhere, which we regularly do, and even while I gladly embrace the suggested Scriptures (I much prefer being *given* a text and trying to discern what God might be saying to us through it than starting from scratch), I very rarely follow the sermon prompts or suggestions.

This could be down to arrogance—I don't always agree with what resource writers suggest for interpretations of certain passages and imagine that I know better. 😊

But I think beyond this, I think that my task as someone who preaches regularly is to try to determine what God is saying to *us*—to this very *particular* community of sinners and saints who gather (remotely on or in person) here in Lethbridge, AB.

I've been here ten years now and I think I know our congregation fairly well. I know what some people struggle with. I know what encouragements might be needed or what challenges might be necessary. I know some of your questions and anxieties and predispositions.

At least I think I do. I get it wrong sometimes, certainly. I have no doubt that I sometimes don't "read the room" right. Not every sermon lands the way I hope it will.

I am not even, I regret to inform you, an infallible interpreter of Scripture. I'm sorry if this comes as news to you.

But for me, the task of preaching is unavoidably *local*.

I know we are part of a larger body and I am immensely grateful for this. But I've found that I'm not much good at preaching sermons according to an agenda that comes from somewhere else.

**Confession #2:** I have a bit of discomfort with some of the language we use around visioning in the church. Earlier this week as I was walking through the foyer, my glance turned to the bulletin boards by the mailboxes (remember those?).

There's a sign there announcing Mennonite Church Alberta's "Three Year Action Plan." Year One was focused on encountering Christ in our own personal lives; Year Two the focus is on Christ in community; and Year Three, the emphasis is on the broader world.

It's a logical trajectory, on one level. We can't really encounter, embrace, and embody Christ in our communities or our world unless we have done so in our own lives. So, it makes sense.

But the language of an "action plan" felt strange to me. It's language that I associate more with the corporate board room than with the church.

I know this isn't how anyone in MCA intends for it to be interpreted. I know the people who are behind this visioning process well enough to know this—indeed, I have myself been a part of the process where we discussed these things!

I don't say any of this to be critical of Mennonite Church Alberta or of the visioning process. Not by a long shot. We need plans, strategies, processes, whether it's in our own lives, or in business or the church, even if I still (perhaps naively) think that the church should not operate like a business.

But whatever else you might say about the language of "action plans," they don't preach terribly well, at least in my humble opinion. 😊

Most importantly, I also know God is far wilder and more mysterious and unpredictable than any of our action plans. Woody Allen once said, "If you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans." I think there is some truth to this, whether it's in our own lives or in the life of the church.

Ok, well even after these caveats and confessions, I must also add this. I *like* our vision statement. It sits above the doors of our multi-purpose room. It's on the cover of today's bulletin.

Encountering, Embracing, and Embodying Christ in Community.

This is a vision that I can easily get on board with. It's a vision that I believe that we should *all* be on board with and that should characterize the DNA of our congregation.

As long as I'm allowed to invite us into this vision in my own way. ☺

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Each of the three E's in our conference's vision statement could be a sermon or a series on its own. But this week, I found myself drawn specifically to the word "encounter."

What does it mean to *encounter* Christ? It's a huge question and one that resists easy explanation.

But one thing I am confident of is that when we use the language of *encounter*, we are not in the realm of bullet points or strategic steps or agenda items, but stories.

So, I am going to tell a story. It's a story that I read earlier this week that I found moving and hopeful, and which I hope you will, too.

This will take up a good chunk of the rest of my sermon. I'll try to tie it in with our scripture reading this morning and link it with our conference theme and tie it all up in a nice bow at the end. I'll let you decide if I succeed or not.

(You're probably used to the fact that I sometimes don't preach very traditional sermons by now, too!)

The story I want to share is that of a novelist, poet, and ecologist who encountered a God he wasn't looking for.

Paul Kingsnorth is roughly my age. He grew up in a fairly irreligious England. Institutional Christianity provided some of the cultural furniture to his early years, but it seemed no more relevant to him than any other relics from his nation's history.

His family never set foot in a church. He had no interest in religion whatsoever. He despised lessons from "stuffy old vicars" in school. In fact, as a teenager he used to prank old churches by writing menacing messages in their visitor books and signing them "Satan."

Religion was for the weak, the old, the superstitious. Christianity, in particular, was oppressively authoritarian, corrupt, and complicit in all kinds of historical sins. It wasn't about the mystery of God (if God existed) or the meaning of life; it was about preserving and maintaining a creaking institution.

In holding these opinions, Paul Kingsnorth was like many in the post-Christian west. He'd pass, thank you very much.

But things began to change as he approached young adulthood. His atheism gradually gave way to a cracking open to mystery, to something "out there," something *other*.

It started with a deep commitment to ecology and a love of the natural world. He became a frontline environmental activist. This was the narrative that gave him meaning in the world.

But gradually, he began to see that his passion to save and change the world was the sign of a deeper spiritual hunger. And he realized that all the activism for all the best causes in the world wasn't going to save him or the world.

He began to hunger for a more spiritual path, one that provided structure, discipline, timeless wisdom. This led to a season of his life devoted to Zen Buddhism which he said taught him many things and was immensely valuable.

But even this left him longing for something more. "It was full of compassion," he said, "but it lacked love." It lacked something else too, and it took him a long time to admit to himself what it was: he wanted to worship.

Something was calling him, but he didn't know what. He still wasn't interested in Christianity. He admired Jesus, but still had no use for the church.

This set him off into a form Wiccan paganism, which scratched his nature-loving itch and his desire for an old tradition. At least for a while. But it didn't scratch his need-to-worship itch.

Then, one night, he had a dream. He dreamed of Jesus. Jesus told him that he was the source and destination of his spiritual longings and the spiritual path.

And then one day over dinner his wife told him that he was going to become a Christian. She just had a feeling. And then he started encountering Christians everywhere.

At this point, I want to let Paul Kingsnorth tell his own story. He's a brilliant writer and he tells it better than I could ever summarize.

This comes from an article called “The Cross and the Machine.” Listen to what how he describes his encounter with the risen Christ:

It kept happening, for months. Christ to the left of me, Christ to the right. It was unnerving. I turned away again and again, but every time I looked back, he was still there. I began to feel I was being . . . hunted? I wanted it to stop; at least, I thought I did. I had no interest in Christianity... But I knew who was after me, and I knew it wasn't over.

After that, there was no escape. Like C. S. Lewis, I could not ignore “the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet.” How much later was it that I was finally pinned down? I don't remember. I was at a concert at my son's music school. We were in a hotel function room, full of children ready to play their instruments and proud parents ready to film them doing it. I was just walking to my chair when I was overcome entirely. Suddenly, I could see how everyone in the room was connected to everyone else, and I could see what was going on inside them and inside myself. I was overcome with a huge and inexplicable love, a great wave of empathy, for everyone and everything. It kept coming and coming until I had to stagger out of the room and sit down in the corridor outside. Everything was unchanged, and everything was new, and I knew what had happened and who had done it, and I knew that it was too late. I had just become a Christian.

None of this is rationally explicable, and there is no point in arguing with me about it. There is no point in my arguing with myself about it: I gave up after a while. This is not to say that my faith is irrational. In fact, the more I learned, the more Christianity's story about the world and human nature chimed better with my experience than did the increasingly shaky claims of secular materialism. In the end, though, I didn't become a Christian because I could argue myself into it. I became a Christian because I knew, suddenly, that it was true...

It turns out that... the stuffy vicars... were onto something: The Cross holds the key to everything. The sacrifice is all the teaching. I am a new and green pupil. I can talk for hours, but ideas will become idols in the blink of an eye. I have to pick up my cross and start walking.<sup>1</sup>

Earlier this year, Paul Kingsnorth was baptized into the Romanian Orthodox Church in England. This is how he describes his homecoming:

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2021/06/the-cross-and-the-machine>

I found a Christianity that had retained its ancient heart—a faith with living saints and a central ritual of deep and inexplicable power. I found a faith that, unlike the one I had seen as a boy, was not a dusty moral template but a mystical path, an ancient and rooted thing, pointing to a world in which the divine is not absent but everywhere present, moving in the mountains and the waters. The story I had heard a thousand times turned out to be a story I had never heard at all.

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Why do I share this story with you? Why, particularly, on a Sunday when our focus is on visioning processes and the larger church body of which we are a part?

I share it for two simple reasons. First, it's simply a moving and powerful story of faith. I think we all need good and hopeful stories of faith, particularly in a season like the one we've been through and are still going through.

It reminded me of the beauty and the persistence of Christ, who is not an idea but a living personal God who is active and on the move, always drawing people to himself, even in skeptical times like ours. God is indeed not absent, but everywhere present, as Kingsnorth says.

Second, it reminded me of a central truth of what it means to be a person of Christian faith.

As Christians, we follow an encountering God. A God who pursues us, a God who longs for and loves us. A God who is patient with us but who also calls us beyond ourselves and the smaller stories we settle for.

We sometimes imagine that the task of faith is to find God, to conjure up an encounter with the divine that we can then somehow compartmentalize and repackage for others, or turn into church growth strategies. But God doesn't work that way.

So often we imagine the life of faith as one of constant effort to reach up to God when in fact it is opening ourselves up to the God who has already reached out and down to us—the God who has always been “after us.”

Our passage from Romans 12 this morning concludes with these words:

May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

This, in the end, is the point of the church—our church, the Mennonite church, the church in all its different expressions around the world. It's not to fix the world. It's not to fix our neighbours. It's not to bring about the kingdom of God, as if we could ever do such a thing.

It is to glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The church is about God. It's easy for us to forget this at times. It's easy to make the church about our agendas our programs our visions, our needs, our whatever. It's easy to think that the goal of the church is to make the church keep going. But it's not any of these things.

The church exists to point people toward the shattering mystery of a God who is always encountering us, the strong, the weak, the faithful, the faithless, the doubters and the confused.

And no vision for the church, whether the local church or the provincial church or global church, will amount to anything if it doesn't proceed from this conviction that God is alive, God is active, and God still encounters us.

We won't all have encounters like Paul Kingsnorth, nor should we seek them. God encounters us each in our own way.

We have only to be open. To remain curious, expectant. To hang on for dear life, sometimes. To not let our imaginations be shrunk down to the size of a culture that tells us that nothing exists beyond what can be seen, measured, observed, commodified.

Actually, sometimes God doesn't even seem to need our openness, as Paul Kingsnorth's story shows us.

Sometimes, he will just break down the door.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

