

# I Believe – Fruit Flies and All

Revelation 1:4b-8:

They showed up uninvited and as usual they were quite annoying. More than likely they snuck in with the bananas, which are now safely chilling in our refrigerator. In the meantime fruit flies hover about the house, appearing at inopportune times. The other day we had dinner guests and Michele suddenly starts swatting at the air, looking much like someone who is just coming out from anesthesia and is seeing things no one else can see. They disappear for awhile and you think good, they are gone, but then you sit down for another meal and there they are hovering about, demanding your attention. I have noticed they do seem to appreciate a glass of wine, so I have left a little out for them, with, of course, some dish soap mixed in there as well.

Maybe it is a metaphorical stretch, but I ended up in the seminary and consequently a life time of ministry at Cherokee Park United Church in no small measure because of fruit flies. These fruit flies were not the type of fruit flies that hitch a ride on bananas. These are the fruit flies that hitch a ride on your doubts, your questions, your uncertainties about God. Sometimes those doubts are brought on by unexpected difficulties, challenges, worries and fears like that described by Nona in her poem. Life takes an unwelcome turn and those fruit flies begin buzzing around your head? “How can you believe in a God who would let something like this happen?” “Where is God?” “Why doesn’t God do something?”

The questions go away for awhile, but then they are back, pestering, refusing to leave you alone.

I was in my mid-twenties when the fruit flies started getting especially annoying. There was no particular worry, trouble or difficulty to which they were attached. On the contrary my fruit flies hovered around over ripe questions that I had never really addressed.

The God I learned about as a child no longer made sense to me. Some of what I learned as a child never made sense to me. The fruit flies hovered and I was beginning to feel I need to do something about this before I start swatting at the air and people begin wondering what's wrong with that guy. What do I believe about God? Do I believe in God at all?

I was intending to seek a Master's Degree in Social Work when I discovered two schools that offered joint Master's degrees in Social Work at the University of Pittsburgh and a Master's degree in Fruit Fly exploration, otherwise known as a Master's of Divinity degree, through Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. There is, of course, much more to the story, but suffice it to say, without those annoying fruit flies I never would have ended up at Cherokee Park United Church.

Fruit flies are hovering around the people in the churches to whom the letter of Revelation is written. Biblical scholars tell us those churches existed in Asia Minor, what is now modern day Turkey. This is an area where Paul had been particularly active and had founded a number of churches including the church in Ephesus.

If you are at all familiar with the book of Revelation than you know it is not the type of book parents with young children would read as a bed time story unless their children go gently off to sleep with visions of seven headed creatures, dragons and other frightening beings. Revelation uses what is called apocalyptic writing, providing dramatic images about the end of the world as a way of expressing confidence in God's love even when there appears to be little reason for that confidence.

One Biblical commentary insists no one should read this book unless you read the whole thing together in one single unit in worship without interruption. It is all together too easy to misuse and misinterpret this book as all too many have done, including the brother-in-law of a good friend, who managed to get my email and now regularly sends me updates on his group's latest end time predictions. It's bizarre stuff.

In spite of the warning, I thought it was worth the risk of reading these four verses from this seemingly strange book in the Bible. I was afraid you might get a little antsy if we asked Karen to engage in an hour and half reading of the entire book. Plus I thought you might be curious about the fruit flies hanging around the seven churches. Those churches by the way are real churches in a particular context and in a particular time and place. The number 7, however, is part of the symbolism, intended to represent wholeness and a reminder that the message to these churches is also a message to us.

We do not know why there was a fruit fly infestation at this particular time and place among these seven churches. It is reasonable to assume that people then as now faced the type of personal crisis in their lives that can throw anyone of us for a loop, causing doubts, questions and uncertainties to begin buzzing about our heads. But, we also know that these seven churches are living in a time where the faith they held onto for so long is no longer working as it once did. The hope for an immediate radical and dramatic change in the world with Christ over turning injustice and the exploitive power of Rome can no longer be sustained. They gather for worship, but they do so with little confidence, many questions and doubts. The courage that once existed for offering a bold witness to God's love and God's justice is slipping away; in some congregations it is almost gone.

Fruit flies are everywhere. Do we really believe that God is at work in the world? Do we really believe that the love revealed in Jesus, the one we know as Christ, still reigns? What about the violence of Rome? What about the terror of those who take up arms against Rome? What about the refugees caught in the middle? What about the economic inequities this whole unjust system creates? What about those who languishing unjustly in prison? The questions are very familiar as are the fruit flies that keep buzzing about their heads.

I am speculating here, but quite likely some of these congregations to whom the letter of Revelation is written are in the midst of a stewardship campaign. The roof needs to be maintained. Who wants to

worship with water dripping on your head every time it rains? It doesn't get as cold as Minnesota, but the winter months do get chilly, attendance is certainly better when they can warm the church up a bit. They also would like to pay their pastor a decent wage. A number of the congregants in Ephesus have a sneaky suspicious they could do better when it comes to a pastor, but he's been there awhile and they have gotten used to him, sort of like you get used to an old pair of shoes. They have sent out their stewardship letter, but the problem is it is hard for people to feel motivated about giving to the church when fruit flies keep buzzing around. It's distracting and come stewardship Sunday they have forgotten their pledge. Besides, how much support do you really want to offer when you have fundamental questions as to whether it makes one bit of difference.

A couple of congregation's tried to deal with the problem of uncertainty, doubts and questions about God by trying to make God a little smaller. Every time a new crisis emerges, a problem develops, a challenge arises, they find away to keep God out of the equation. Essentially God is demoted. Is there a refugee crisis? Well that has nothing to do with the God reveled by Jesus. We have borders to maintain. Is there evidence of racial injustice in our criminal justice system, inequality in our schools and workforce, discrimination? That has nothing to do with the God revealed in the life of Jesus. It is sort of like putting God in back of the fridge to keep the fruit flies away. God just keeps getting smaller and smaller, more and more irrelevant to the

things that really matter in their lives and in our world. Suffice it to say their stewardship campaign was coming up short and they wondered if they could keep the lights on, much less pay anyone.

This is when the letter arrives from John, which he titles Revelation. It is a roller coaster of a letter, taking one through all manner of symbolic and metaphorical struggles, but John lays out the central theme in the opening verses. *“Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth”*.

Rather than sticking God in the back of the fridge like an over ripe banana, John asserts the witness of the love revealed in Jesus is that no matter how bleak life looks, no matter how bad things might appear, no matter how great the trouble, there is no defeating the love of God, who loves us and sets us free from every sin and trouble that might defeat us. Revelation asserts this love includes freedom from the fear mongering power of Rome, which would have us believe some people have greater value to God than others. Bishop Desmond Tutu, wrote a book entitled “God Is Not A Christian” in which Tutu says, “To claim God exclusively for Christians is to make God too small and in a real sense is blasphemous”. According to Revelation, God’s love, revealed in Christ, the faithful witness, is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end and no one is left out, including Muslim refugees from Syria.

Amidst her questions, this is the God to whom Nona gives witness in her poem “Everything You Are”. “I am the comfort when you’re alone in the dark. I am there in your darkest hour. I am the ever present power.” This is the love spoken of in the Children’s Story “Because Nothing Looks Like God”. “Where is God?”, the authors ask? “God is in the beginning in the first red ripening tomatoes...God is the end. In the last sweet bite of birthday cake....and in the closing moments of someone’s life.” “What does God look like?...Like the cool breezes on a summer night...Like the kindness in someone’s voice.” “How does God make things happen?...With big hands and little hands, with young hands and old hands, with your hands”. Christ is the faithful witness to God’s love and this is the calling of all who would follow the way of Christ.

I went into the seminary with fruit flies buzzing about my head. I was uncertain about God and I had major reservations about the church. Primarily I saw the church as a place that kept a small God stuck in the back of the fridge, with little room for my doubts, my questions, my uncertainties and little concern for the big picture questions of justice that trouble our world. What I discovered was there have been many faithful witnesses who struggle with doubts and uncertainties about God. But, rather than make God smaller, those questions let God be God, beyond our knowing, beyond our understanding, the Alpha and the Omega, the one who was, who is and who is to come. The second thing I discovered in the seminary is something I had already experienced; this

God is known through our faithful witness to love and justice. I came to believe that the church can be a place of courageous love, a place where we learn to care deeply for one another, a place where we find our voice and give witness to the One whose justice and love is for all people and all creation.

I will be honest. Those fruit flies still buzz about. I still have questions about God. But, I do not question the power of love at work in our world, a power that is never less than but also always much greater than our individual acts of caring. I believe there is a tremendous need today for our faithful witness to God's love. I believe that right here on St. Paul's West Side a congregation, this congregation can make a tremendous difference in ways you may never know. This is a Sunday in which we dedicate our pledges to the future witness of Cherokee Park United Church. A year from now I will not be in this pulpit. But Michele and I are making our pledge just the same. I believe, we believe that God is at work in your faithful witness to the love, which was, which is and is to come.

**Revelation 1:4b-8:**

*Our Scripture lesson today comes from the book of Revelation, which takes the form of a letter written to seven churches in Asia Minor. The Churches to whom John, the author, writes are all struggling with questions of faith and many have lost the courage of witnessing to God's love. The power of Rome looks overwhelming, the temptation to play it safe is ever present and the allure of cashing in on economic privileges by aligning with the empire is strong. Revelation draws upon vivid and dramatic apocalyptic images as encouragement for these congregations to remain faithful to the love of God revealed in Christ.*

Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

Look! He is coming with the clouds;  
every eye will see him,  
even those who pierced him;  
and on his account  
all the tribes of the earth will wail.

So it is to be. Amen. "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.