

# Through the certainty of uncertainty

## A biblical reflection on living through change

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*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.*  
(Genesis 1:1–2, NIV)

With these words, the book of Genesis begins to tell the story of the creator of the universe. It starts off with beauty and goodness, is quickly tainted by brokenness and separation, but then faithfully follows the arc of redemption until the last page of Revelation. Scripture spans the spectrum from beginning to end, and somewhere in the midst of this grand story, we find ourselves.

### **The story of my church community**

For me and my particular church community, we find ourselves as twenty-first-century Anabaptist Christians living in the urban context of Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. Our story began in the 1940s as Mennonites moved into the city from rural communities for alternative service during World War II. Some decided to stay in Winnipeg after the war and settled in the south end of the city. At first, they organized themselves in home groups and later held services, Sunday School, and Daily Vacation Bible School (DVBS) camps in a local community center. By 1958, Sterling Avenue Mennonite Church was incorporated with eighteen members and fourteen associate members. Sixty-four years, three buildings, a name change, and many members later, Sterling continues to worship and serve in the community of St. Vital.

This is not an overly remarkable story by any means. It has been repeated in many parts of Canada and pales in comparison to some of the stories of church growth around the world. Yet this is our story of how God has worked in our collective church life. We do well to pay attention

to it because it is through our particular stories that we are able to witness to the redemptive power of God in our world.

I have heard many parts of our story over my twelve years at Sterling as I have sat around coffee and dinner tables. I have heard about the joys and excitement of starting a new church, God's leading in selling and buying a new building, and the decisions to accept shifting views (like welcoming women into leadership and ministry). I have also heard about the challenges of almost closing because of declining membership, the deaths of pillar members, and the disappointment of church votes not going the way most people hoped or expected.

### **Living through change**

What stands out to me about the story of Sterling is just how much change our church has endured. I have often sought the wisdom of those mem-



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bers who have been present since the beginning (of which less than a handful remain) and have asked for their input on issues we are currently dealing with. What amazes me is just how unfazed they seem to be. The uncertainty that I carry with me does not seem to trouble them in the slightest. At first I thought the reason for this was their unwavering

faith, but I quickly realized that age does not eliminate doubt. Instead, their experiences have taught them that change is a constant.

The oldest member of our church is ninety-seven. Just in the time since Sterling formed, he has lived in his own house, supported living, and now a personal care home. Each space tells the story of his physical changes, some that were welcomed but many that were not. With age came the change of identity from single to married, to father, to grandfather, and eventually to widower. Over the years, his newspapers and TV have broadcasted endless wars, financial crises, nuclear attacks, famines, natural disasters, regime changes, civil unrest, and even a pandemic. He got to witness the invention of microwave ovens, mobile phones, credit cards, computers, satellites, and the internet. He even had the opportunity to communicate by mail, telegram, phone, fax, text, e-mail, and social media (although I know he never chose the latter).

This man and so many others in his generation have never given me the false hope that things in this life or at church will stay the same. The

only assurance they have given me in regards to change is the certainty of uncertainty. However, they do not hold on to uncertainty for uncertainty's sake. The realization that change is unavoidable and that nothing in life is guaranteed has forced them to hold on to something else. It is here that I find tremendous wisdom as a pastor helping to lead a congregation through the changes we face today.

### **Returning to the beginning**

In order to glimpse this wisdom, we need to return to the beginning, when the author of Genesis tells us that God decided to create. The backdrop we are given is that of an empty Earth, formless and dark. Before God speaks the world into being, God's spirit "was hovering over the waters." The Hebrew word for *hovering* is also rendered in some translations as *moving*. It appears in two other Old Testament passages, most notably in Moses's song recorded in Deuteronomy 32:11 where it is used to describe an eagle *hovering* over its young. Before everything was about to change, the Spirit of God was on the move, hovering as if to incubate the earth. This verb is full of anticipation for what God is about to do. There is an energy that is fluttering with excitement.

As we continue reading, we see how God creates, simply by speaking things into being. Order, goodness, and peace permeate God's perfect creation. Unfortunately, it does not last, and almost as soon as it begins, harmony is lost as relationships with God, others, self, and creation are broken.

God may have rested on the seventh day of creation, but this did not mark the end of God's presence or work in the world. Even while

Adam and Eve were being sent out of the garden, God cared for them by exchanging their leafy garments for more durable ones. Mixed into the curses that sin brought was the anticipation of hope and redemption. From this point on, Scripture tells the story of a God who continually partners with humanity in order to bring about reconciliation and

new life to God's world. Regardless of how many times we turn away from God to follow our own way, God's faithfulness keeps inviting us back.

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## God on the move

Scripture leaves no doubt that God has always been on the move, not only through the people of Israel, but often also through those whom the Israelites least expected. God's love for creation was the force that kept God engaged, eventually fulfilling the long-awaited hope through the incarnation of Jesus. Jesus continued the trajectory of actively seeking out humanity in order that we might be reconciled to God and live as citizens in God's kingdom.

In Luke 15, we find a trilogy of parables told by Jesus that analogize God's ongoing movement in the world. Perhaps the most well known is the last, in which a son takes his inheritance from his father even while his father is still alive. After leaving and wasting all his wealth, the son hits rock bottom and decides to return home, thinking that perhaps his father would take him back as a servant. To his surprise, the father had been waiting with eager longing and anticipation for his son, so much so that when the son comes home, his father hosts an elaborate party to celebrate. The

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father exclaims to his household, "This son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found" (Luke 15:24a).

This parable is a reminder to us of God's mercy, compassion, and love. After we have wandered on our own, God's response to us when we turn back is always unconditional forgiveness. However, God is not only described as a father who waits patiently for his child to return. The first parable in Luke 15 compares God to a shepherd who leaves

ninety-nine sheep behind in order to find the one that got lost. The second parable compares God to a woman who lights a lamp and turns over her house in order to find her precious lost coin.

Like the father, God never compels anyone forcefully. At the same time, like the shepherd and woman, God does not stand idly by while God's beloved creation stumbles around in darkness. As Jesus told Zacchaeus in Luke 19:10, "The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost." This salvation will be fully actualized at the end of the age as is revealed to us in Revelation. The promise we hold on to is that Jesus will return to undo the curse of sin, bring justice to the earth, and defeat evil once and for all. As John takes us through his vision, we see his distress when, in

Revelation 5, there is no one to open the seals of the scroll (a symbol for the initiation of the things to come). John quickly learns that the only one who can bring the last days into motion is Jesus. An angel says to John, “Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals” (Rev. 5:5b).

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**As was the case at the beginning of creation, has been the case throughout all of history, and will be the case when Jesus returns, God was, is, and will always be actively on the move.**

will always be actively on the move. Although I have believed this in theory for many years, it becomes all the more real to me as I see the unwavering trust in God through the seniors of our church. Since the changes and uncertainties we face today are nothing new to those who have lived longer than us, we can trust alongside them that God is moving now as well. The founding members of our church have taught me that we are not alone in figuring out the steps ahead.

Through Christ, the church is invited to partner with God to bring about healing and hope. The Holy Spirit is the force working in, through, and sometimes despite us, enabling us to join in God’s action. Our call is to listen and respond to how God is moving in the changing contexts of our world.

### **Humility in uncertain times**

There is one characteristic that is vital in responding to God’s movement in the world, which I again see exemplified in the seniors I encounter—namely, humility. This wisdom is gleaned from Scripture, especially from people like Job. Job’s life was the epitome of change, having lost almost everything except for his own breath. Instead of comforting him, his friends confront him and challenge his understanding of God. There must have been something Job did to bring this suffering on himself. Job pushes back, however, and lays blame on God. He maintains his integrity, even after his wife tells him to “curse God and die” (Job 2:9b). As the characters in this story argue back and forth, they share something in common. Each of them seem to have figured out how God operates; each of them claim to be able to understand and predict God’s movement.

Readers of Job likely sympathize with what he is going through, and if there is one who is right about God, it must be Job. The last few chapters, however, turn everything on its head. God confronts Job, calling him to humility. God basically puts Job on trial and begins the questioning in Job 38:2–7:

*“Who is this that obscures my plans  
with words without knowledge?  
Brace yourself like a man;  
I will question you,  
and you shall answer me.  
“Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation?  
Tell me, if you understand.  
Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know!  
Who stretched a measuring line across it?  
On what were its footings set,  
or who laid its cornerstone—  
while the morning stars sang together  
and all the angels shouted for joy?”*

This type of questioning continues, and by the end, the wisdom of Job is clear: we are not God. God has been revealed to the world, but we should never claim to fully know the mind of God. Although we can be certain that God is at work, we should never assume that we know exactly how God is moving. The simple reminder in Job that we are creatures and not creator shatters any confidence that we can put God into a box. Especially in times of uncertainty and change, we need to remain humble that God may yet surprise us.

### **Adjusting to change**

There are several internal and external changes that we are experiencing as a church. For one, the COVID-19 pandemic has eliminated any sense of “normal” so much so that “pivoting” has become our regular practice. Even as many of us return to in-person worship and activities, we are trying to figure out how our churches have changed and what that means for who we are now. We feel those uncertainties at Sterling like anywhere else. Although we are excited to be back in person, some people are not here. Some have passed away, some have left, and for some, their comfort level keeps them online. At the same time, we are getting to know new people, some who joined us and some who were born during the lockdowns. We

do not quite know who we are at this point, and we also know that our identity will likely continue to change as we fumble to hold on to some kind of stability and rhythm.

As we try to adjust to a changing world around us, we are also facing internal uncertainties as we wrestle with questions of welcome and inclusion. The last few years have seen changes in our thinking and theologies, which for many feel inconsistent with what we have declared in the past. As we discern the way forward, we face the uncertainties of a church divided and the possible changes that come with that. As we observe churches around us who are asking similar questions, we see how some have become more polarized, while others are now more united. The way forward for us feels like taking a step through a fog, not exactly knowing if our foot will hit solid ground.

## **Conclusion**

Through the certainty of uncertainties, I lean heavily on the wisdom I see lived out in our founding members and other seniors in our church. These changes do not scare them because they have consistently seen God at work in their lifetime. They have a keen awareness of God's hovering spirit over us even now, moving in, among, and through us. The excitement of what God can do gives them hope for where we are going. Paired with their strong faith that God is moving in the world is the humility that we do not fully understand this movement. They never claim to know all the answers but rather are open to being surprised by God. They put their trust in a God "who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine" (Eph. 3:20a).

This is the kind of faith that I desperately want to have and live out in my life. This is the kind of hope that I long for our church to grasp. However, I know that those who have lived longer than me have only gotten there precisely because they have lived longer than me. To learn this wisdom, we need to continue walking through the fog, accepting the changes that come, and looking toward a God who seeks to make everything new. It is in the uncertainties, in the emptiness and darkness, that God hovers, moves, and creates.

## **About the author**

Moses Falco lives in Treaty 1 territory with his family. He pastors at Sterling Mennonite Fellowship in Winnipeg, Manitoba, blogs regularly at [mosesfalco.com](http://mosesfalco.com), and co-hosts a podcast at [themennocast.com](http://themennocast.com).