



Title	⇒ Series: Talking About What We Don't Talk About Part 1: Huh? God in the Cheap Seats
Scripture	2 Timothy 3: 10-17
Minister	The Reverend Matthew Ruttan
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Calendar	Epiphany Sunday
Note	This text is an approximate rendering

Minister: Peace be with you
Congregation: And also with you



Like many of you in this snowy nation of ours I grew up playing hockey—and in so doing was captivated by so much of the mythology and legend that surrounds the game, from playing until way past dark in the homemade flooded rink out back to idolizing Wayne Gretzky. Going to Maple Leaf Gardens with my dad was a dream-like entry into another world, from the hucksters on the street selling tickets at triple price, to that tremolo-sounding organ, to the shimmer of excitement when the players rushed the ice and when everyone stands for the national anthem.

We often had good seats, the ones down front. But one time as we entered the arena we looked down at our ticket stubs and found ourselves heading high into the stands, and higher and higher. So high that looking down on the ice you weren't sure which team was 'us' and which team was 'them.' We were in, as they say, *the cheap seats*.

As we snuggled into our cramped plastic chairs we found our view obstructed not only by the ozone layer, but by a large post right in front of us holding up the roof. But we smiled and tried to keep positive about it. So long as the play never occurred on the 30% of the ice closest to us, we could see fine. But it was hard. Even if we cheered on the winning goal with our whole hearts and lungs, our home team players might not even see us, let alone hear us. Yes, we were in the cheap seats.



This morning marks a new series of messages here at Westminster. It is called "Talking About What We Don't Talk About." It's not something I waded into with a sense of fun or thrill-seeking or even with the sense that I have all the answers in this hazardous world of ours. I don't. We begin this series because I'm afraid there is a problem—and not just in general, but with Christianity. What?

It's connected to some very important changes that have happened and are happening in our world and in our lives which have a serious impact on our Christian faith. They are perceived threats. And notice that I say 'perceived' threats. Let me just tell you about three of them because I think they might help you realize why I've decided for us to embark on this series.



First, *the world is no longer flat*. Of course we all know that. We've seen satellite pictures and Google Earth. We've heard amazing reports from astronauts who have all but danced across the Milky Way. But the issue for the Christian faith is that, to many, the advance of purely scientific understandings of the world pose a threat. Why? Because it offers very compelling details about the origins of the world and its people which do not rely on the wisdom of the Christian faith. Side-lined. "Palaeontologist Stephen Jay Gould summarized all human life by saying, "We are because one odd group of fishes had a peculiar fin anatomy that could transform into legs for terrestrial creatures; because the earth never froze entirely during an ice age; because a small and tenuous species, arising in Africa a quarter of a million years ago, has managed, so far, to survive by hook and by crook. We may yearn for a 'higher' answer—but none exists."¹

And many believe him.

No, the world is no longer flat. All of creation itself is being explained in our world with very little reference to the One, whom we profess, to be its Creator. Although many top scientists are Christians and profess faith in God and speak of the harmony between faith and science—and I agree; there is no big discord between science and faith—all of us know that the rules have *somehow* changed. And we're not always sure about how to express *how* God creates and governs a world that seems to tick-tock along to the tune of fairly predictable natural laws. No, the world is no longer flat.

So in the absence of solid, theological and biblically grounded thinking, what often happens? We relegate God to the cheap seats. We want him in the arena. We know he's important. But we are kind of unsure about what this old bird who doesn't quite fit in has to say.



Second: *'Toto, we're not in Kansas anymore.'* We all know Dorothy's famous line from the 1939 film, *The Wizard of Oz*. She notices that something has changed. After a storm hits her farm in Kansas she and her little dog Toto are transported to another dimension. As she makes her way down the yellow brick road she embarks on a journey to get back home meeting all types of fascinating characters along the way.

Well, those of you who have lived in Canada since before the Second World War might say also that we've entered another dimension. There are many incredible things in this country; one is the freedom—hard won with great cost—that makes many things possible, including change. Women can vote. We have open elections. We have Medicare. You can walk into the hospital, get treatment, and not pay for it (directly). We have a land so beautiful it can literally—ah!—take your breath away. We have great people; great thinkers; and a great spirit. "God keep our land glorious and free."

We also have a diverse population. You can walk down the street to find four neighbours from different parts of the world just a generation ago, or even within this one: one Christian, one an atheist, one a Buddhist and one who isn't sure what he is. Montreal philosophy professor Charles Taylor says that in our time there is now a widely available option for people to use to make sense of their lives and destiny called self-sufficient humanism. It is something, he writes, "accepting no final goals beyond human flourishing, nor any allegiance to anything else beyond this flourishing. Of no previous society was this true." I highly respect this man and let's pause for a second on the gravity of that statement: "Of no previous society was this true." He goes on to ask this question: "why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy, but even inescapable?"²

It is a very difficult question to answer which is why for many people it often seems like an easier option to take a stand beside good old Dorothy and Toto clicking our heels together and saying 'There's no place like home, there's no place like home, there's no place like home,' desperately hoping for things to revert to how they used to be—not only to a time when you could get a Coke and chocolate bar for 15 cents, but when

churches were full, prayers were said in public schools, and many people could recite the 10 Commandments (or at least some of them).

But no, *Toto, we're not in Kansas anymore*. Wherever it may have been for us, our Kansas is gone. And we are often unsure how to articulate our faith in what is pretty much a new world—a new dimension—one that is getting smaller and smaller as we bump into cultures and people who, although similar to us in some ways, are also very different.

So in the absence of solid, theological and biblically grounded thinking, what often happens? We relegate God to the cheap seats. We want him in the arena. We know he's important. But we are kind of unsure about what this old bird who doesn't quite fit in has to say.



Third, *I'll have a McFaith sandwich*. I know it's a strange expression. I made it up. But that's the point. It's my way of saying that a third huge challenge confronting a vibrant and robust faith today is the phenomena called *rampant individualism*. And it is something that makes its way into our Christianity. Just as we can look at a menu at McDonalds and pick what we want and don't want, we look at the wide variety of religious options around us, and construct the perfect-for-me faith; perhaps the meat, we say, is mostly the Jesus stuff; but when we look closer at what we've made for our spiritual digestion and we discover that we have a squirt of astrology here and a pickle of Buddhism there and a New Age slice of lettuce on top to make it look nice. I heard a story about someone named Sheila Larson, a young nurse who describes her faith as "Sheilaism." She says, "I believe in God. I'm not a religious fanatic. I can't remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. It's Sheilaism. Just my own little voice."³ (!)

Our consumer society is incredibly focussed on helping us develop our own little world that perfectly fits our own perfect needs. "Hedonism," I recently discovered while checking out an old friend's profile on Facebook, is the way of life which basically seeks to maximize pleasure in this life. That's its point of life, to maximize pleasure. And often, even in Christianity, we just want the parts that make us feel good. We want a Jesus who encourages us, but who seldom challenges us to get on living his new creation. We want a Jesus who cares enough to forgive us, but who isn't so concerned that he makes us forgive. We want a Jesus who makes us safe and at peace, but who doesn't stir any real call to action about those in the world who have no safety and no peace. In a society when it is no longer the cool thing to be a follower of Christ, it's sometimes simply safer, we think, to just have a private me-and-Jesus. A relationship no one can touch or challenge... not even him. The risk is this: We shape a God to look like us, rather than be shaped by God to live like Christ.

So in the absence of solid, theological and biblically grounded thinking, what often happens? We relegate God to the cheap seats. We want him in the arena. We know he's important. But we are kind of unsure about what this old bird who doesn't quite fit in has to say.



So in light of all this we begin a voyage together talking about what we don't talk about. Why? Because if we are to have a robust faith—one that is thoughtful, gracious, and which has integrity in a rapidly changed world—it helps a tonne to become learned in solid, theological and biblically grounded thinking. Although there are always elements of our faith that are unexplainable, we want to feel within ourselves that we have a grip on some key things, and that we can explain it to others with confidence. God by his very nature is not happy in the cheap sets with an obstructed view to the action in our lives. He wants to be firmly seated in centre stage. Centre ice. And not just for the little things, the little moral dilemmas that we grapple with but which don't have any lasting significance. But the big things. We need to organize our lives so that the whole arena of believers doesn't have to turn around and crank our necks to get a little bit of God on the key, curious and questionable elements of our lives—so that our beings are focussed on him at the very centre stage.

Our voyage will take us roughly two months. Each week we will address a topic that, in my view, many Christians have stopped talking about because we have become *intimidated*. Intimidated by things like a scientific worldview that is changing how we understand the world. Intimidated by a changing culture which has shaken up the order of things with which we were getting comfortable. And we have become, perhaps, victim to an over-personalization of faith—that ‘rampant individualism’—which results in a weakening of faith because it is not shared, strengthened, grown and matured.

Next week we will talk about the not-so-popular topic of politics. In the weeks that follow we will talk about the second coming of Christ. We will talk about money. We will talk about sexuality. And we will also talk about things *you* think we should talk about. You can email me your topics. Or you can write them up on some paper and put them in my mailbox here at the church. I will choose the most popular ones. And if I think the timing is not right to discuss your issue I will give you the reason why. I will be sincere. And friends, let us engage in this voyage together, starting here in weekly worship. Some of you have already shared your ideas with me. And let me tell you, it is sure going to be an interesting ride.



But launching into this we need to keep something in focus: I am a fallible person. In fact, I am incredibly fallible. Part of the reason I am up here is because I am aware of my own unworthiness to be in this pulpit. The great thinker Karl Barth once said that “there is no one who deserves the wrath of God more abundantly than the ministers.”⁴ He was speaking to a bunch of ministers. I doubt his words were very well received! He said it in part because we, as ministers, make the effort, in light of our own fallibility, to be examined under the peering light of God; attempt to come to grips with a holy and eternal gospel message from God; and share it with others—and have the audacity to speak about the mysterious Lord Almighty with confidence! So why then do I speak? Given that I am putting myself in harm’s way every week?

I speak because—and this, I pray, is something for all of us Christians—we speak because in all humility we have first listened. The first task of a Christian is to listen. And one of the places we listen for a word that is fixed securely to a Rock in a windy time is the Bible. And here’s an idea I want to leave with you: *Scripture is power for life*. It is power for live. Feel free to go out and get a tattoo! Actually, don’t. Just take it to heart!

In Paul’s second letter to Timothy, he is giving wise counsel to Timothy to be steadfast in right teaching. It’s a time when a bunch of strange teachings are abounding—sound familiar? So how does he keep grounded? What is the measuring stick against which one is to judge and advise and counsel? Listen to what Paul says to him:

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

When things go from bad to worse, he says, remember your faith—and remember those beloved people in your past who have nurtured you in that faith; that faith that is more steadfast than the greatest corporation or worldly promise. Not only that, but you have to trust what at the bedrock of that faith: Lord Almighty speaking in Scripture. So Scripture will be our lens, our jumping pad. Donald McCullough says this: “During my years as a pastor, I often witnessed this power at work in people’s lives. A woman once came to me, for example, and requested baptism. I asked her why she wanted to take this step, and she explained that she was a student at the University of California, majoring in Political Science. She had been a Marxist, but for one of her classes had to write a paper on Christianity. So, to be fair, she read the New Testament and it had

changed her forever. She met Jesus Christ, who provided to be far more radical than Karl Marx.” As Charles Spurgeon once said, “The way you defend the Bible is the same way you defend a lion. You just let it loose.”⁵

And so, for each topic we will take Paul’s advice as if he was speaking to us and look to the Bible to see what light it can shed on some of these things we don’t talk enough about—whether it be money; why good people suffer; how we should raise our kids; or how to deal with conflict in our families and lives. To me, if a Bible is not open, it is not the Bible. Hear what it says one more time:

All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

That’s what I want to be! I want to be taught. I want to be trained in righteousness. I want to be proficient, equipped for every good work. In this changing and changed world where so many of us feel intimidated about understanding and articulating our faith, that’s what we so often feel is missing: being “equipped” to grapple with and talk about it. We want the right equipment. Or, as the old King James Version puts it: “thoroughly furnished unto all good works.” And not just in the little things, but the big things. Again I say: Scripture is power for life.

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Let me leave you this morning with this. Some years ago a funeral was held for Grace Thomas in the First Baptist Church of Decatur, Georgia. When she married in the late 1930s, she moved to Atlanta and took a clerking job in one of the state government offices. Through her work, she developed an interest in law and politics, and she enrolled in a local law school that offered night classes. Eventually she completed law school; and her family was shocked when she decided to enter the 1954 race for governor of Georgia. There were 9 candidates and there was really only one issue: *Brown vs. the Board of Education*. That was the one where the Supreme Court had declared racially “separate but equal” schools unconstitutional and thus paved the way for integration of the public schools. Eight candidates spoke out angrily against it. Only Grace said the decision was just. Her campaign slogan was “Say Grace at the Polls.” She lost. Eight years later she ran again. By this time the civil rights movement was gaining momentum. Her message of equality was hitting a chord with people. She got death threats. Again, she finished last.

One day Grace made a campaign appearance in the small town of Louisville, Georgia. In those days, the centerpiece of the town square in Louisville was not a courthouse or a war memorial but an old slave market, a tragic and evil place where human beings had once been bought and sold. Grace chose the slave market as the site for her campaign speech, and as she stood on the very spot where slaves had been auctioned, a hostile crowd of storekeepers and farmers gathered to hear what she had to say. “The old has passed away,” she began, “and the new has come. This place,” she said, gesturing to the market, “represents all about our past over which we must repent. A new day is here, a day when Georgians white and black can join hands to work together.” This was provocative talk in the Georgia of 1962, and the crowd stirred. “Are you a communist?” someone shouted at her.

Grace paused midsentence. “No,” she said softly. “I am not.”

“Well, then,” continued the heckler, “where’s you get those [darned] ideas?” (They used more aggressive language than that.)

Grace thought for a minute, and then she scanned the horizon and pointed to the steeple of a nearby church. “I got them over there,” she said, “in Sunday school.”⁶

Inspired, it says. Power for life. Un-intimidated.

From the cheap seats to centre stage.

Let’s talk about what we don’t talk about.

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¹ Stephen Jay Gould as quoted in “The Meaning of Life,” *Life*, December 1988, p. 84.

² Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2007), 25ff.

³ As quoted in: Robert Bellah, et al., *Habits of the Heart—Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California, 1985), 232-33.

⁴ Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, trans. D. Horton (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1957), 126.

⁵ Donald W. McCullough, *The Trivialization of God: The Dangerous Illusion of a Manageable Deity* (Navpress, 1995), 123.

⁶ Adapted from and recalled in: Tom Long, *Preaching from Memory to Hope* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 19-20.