

## LENTEN SERMON SERIES: THE BIG QUESTIONS:

LENT 3: “Will Christianity survive?” Rev. Elisabeth Bachem-Jennings, March 4, 2018

Texts: Romans 12:9-21 Marks of the Christian life

The Gospel reading: Mark: 12:28-34 *The most important commandment*

1. You asked me “*Do you think Christianity will survive in the face of dwindling numbers, the popularity of other religions, and the irrelevance of religion for young people?*” and it is an interesting one especially this Sunday, where we are baptizing someone- . The reality is, little Georgia may stay the only One baptized in this entire year at St. George and St. Andrew.

Africans would think our question a joke: “What do you mean, will Christianity survive?! Just look at us!”

Today there are more Christians on the planet than there ever were on earth. 2.2 billion of us., 3x as much as the no. of Christians in the world was 100 years ago.

800,000 people are being baptized on the African Continent alone every year.

The question is indeed a Western one- It is *our question*, -the question of the anxious hearts of those who still practice the faith by “going to church” in Canada, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Australia, Germany, France, Austria, Italy, Scandinavia, -perhaps even some in the US are asking that question. All of us have one odd thing in common: Christianity is officially the majority religion in our country. In our countries non Christian religions, such as Islam, are a small minority.

So, why are we worried?

Our church communities have undergone drastic changes in just a life time. The biggest change is the rapid growth of a very different kind of new religion in the West

“No religion at all”. That number comprises the atheists and agnostics, and those who say they are spiritual but not religious. In the US for example, where Christians have a huge majority (7 out of 10 Americans!) the rise of people who say they have no religion at all was up by 8% in just seven years! Over 20% of the population now. (2007 poll and 2014 poll)

While the drop in Christian affiliation is particularly obvious among young adults, it is occurring among Westerners of all ages. We certainly see it in Canada – and in Annapolis Royal, where the population is

much older than the national average, and where we all know older neighbours who have moved into the “No Religion” category over their lifetime.

What does that mean? For one it means that the age of “Cultural and Political Dominance of Christianity” or “Christendom” in the West is over.

(Christianity was considered the “normal” religion in the West. Even if someone didn’t believe in God, it was taken for granted that the God they didn’t believe in was nevertheless the Biblical, Christian God. Even if they were not a practising Christian, their personal values of truth, goodness, and beauty, and their sense of right and wrong – would have been heavily influenced by Christian values. But – since WW2 -In one generation, - and **you are the generation that lives this** the status of the Christian religion has become totally reversed. In your childhood, everyone assumed that a decent, morally upright person was a Christian – or at least lived by Christian values. Now, no-one assumes that all ‘good’ people are Christians. In fact, Christianity has gone from being the dominant religion, to being the one religion which less and less people in the West take seriously any more. Christian faith has gone *Not only from “hero to zero”, but from “hero to villain”*; did I read in an Australian publication.)

We all could give examples of this- I won't.

But does the end of *cultural* Christianity – the end of crosses in court rooms and the Lord's Prayer in schools, the end of Christian chaplains in prisons and the military, the sale of country and city churches, the closing of Christian outreach mission to the poor and the public contempt of the bible and officers of the church mean the end of Christianity in the West? Does it mean that ?

A big question. And you are only going to get my personal take on it. (“*Do you think Christianity will survive ....*”) *My answer is : YES, Christianity in the West will survive for a long time yet.*

1.1. One reason for my answer is this: While “Christendom” is informed by Christianity, it’s not the same as practising Christianity. In some countries like the Netherlands and France, Christendom has already been dealt the mortal blow. And yet, there are thriving Christians there. Ever more secular France is home to the ecumenical Christian Taize community which attracts a quarter million (!) young people from Europe every year. The young people camp in the village of Taize, and spend their weeks in bible study and discussion, listen to sermons from the monks, engage in silent worship and communal singing, cooking and communal clean up. We have several of their hymns in Voices United and more Voices. This community shows no signs of weakening, in fact it has hugely grown since my days there.

Living by Christian cultural norms doesn't make you Christian; it can also make you self righteous, indifferent, smug, or bitter - and deter people from ever wanting to hear about Jesus Christ again. We have seen this.

However:- The message of Christianity: be not afraid of death but live with hope and passion for the world - Love as Jesus loved- even your enemies; this is too strong to die out.

Living in joyful, good-news- centred, pluralistic, open minded- and yet committed - Christian communities : that has a future in the Western world. And in such communities I personally could see myself being active in even if the last church building was sold and no one was left to pay a minister's stipend.

Such intentional communities exist already. They can be large like Taize in France or Iona in Scotland, or very small like L' Abri on Vancouver Island.

There is also in the West (including Canada!) an interesting growing "House church" movement where a dozen or so people meet under the guidance of an "elder" or mentor or two for spiritual and christian formation worship, discussion and service – they meet in pubs, coffee shops, art galleries or homes wanting to be simple and practical.

1.2. Another reason for my answer is this: We see growing churches which are socially conservative and intellectually simplistic. The growing churches are the ones that say clearly what is right and what is wrong, you'r in or you'r out, the ones that work with fear and guilt, ecstatic experience and real life practical help. I have no concern that their versions of the Bible will be lost to humanity. I personally would not want to join them, I think. BUT---As our Liberal, educated, intellectual and cultural Christianity is dwindling into minority status, they are the ones coming up strong.

## 2. What does all that mean for little Georgia?

-She will not ever see- a Sunday school of 50 kids in every village or town in Canada. Unless she goes to a private religious school she will not be taught about the Christian Faith in school.

When she attends a church in the Valley with family members she will most likely be the only kid from her class at school to do so.

She will not know what it means to be baptized unless her family teaches her their understanding of it. If she does get taught, she will go through a phase where she is tempted to think that God, bible stories and Santa are the same thing and will want to leave all that stuff behind.

If she has no further mentoring after this point, this will be it for her with Christianity. She is likely to become one of the growing spiritual but not

religious, or agnostic or atheist folk.

But if she has had an ongoing encounter with people who value prayer and action, kindness and Christ, if she is told convincingly that with adulthood its time to move into faith on a different, adult level, and if she chooses to continue to open herself to the story of Jesus and Christian living, she will have several options:

She will notice a variety of groups who claim the name Christian.

She will realize the need to educate herself and choose belonging.

Wherever she will be, she will understand that she is there by choice, and that her religion is one of a minority group. No big deal, millions of people practice their faith in minority status in their country.

Just for fun, let me play with some scenarios here, say for the Year 2040...

Perhaps her family has gone with her to a Christian Summer camp, such as Sherbrooke Lake when she was a kid -and the memories were positive and joyful, and she grows to be a counsellor there when she's a teen, or even a director, and the summer community there will be her church? And in 2040 she brings what she has learnt there into teaching, or social work...

Or perhaps she wanted clear rules and guidelines and joined a fundamentalist group with a great sense of community but also great limits to personal expression. Maybe an Old order Mennonite? Maybe a Pentecostal? Or maybe in 2040 she'll have become a good Valley Baptist? OR, Perhaps if she's studied at Acadia, one day she would start attending Quaker meetings where there is silence....perhaps she would connect with the Christian group behind l'Arche in Wolfville which celebrates the gifts of people with disabilities....

Perhaps she has travelled to Europe and stayed for a week at the thriving ecumenical christian communities of Iona or Taize with thousands of other young people – and was inspired to take a gentle and yet radical form of Christianity seriously in her life?

OR Perhaps she's met an African Christian and fallen in love with a man who attends a church where prophets and prophetesses perform miracles in the name of Christ She is finding the culture shock challenging, but she's adapting.

OR, Perhaps she's realized that she's loving another woman and not a man and, in 2040 is seeking a church in Canada where they both could be fully accepted and get married?

You see where I'm going with this. Young people will have an incredible amount of choices and opportunities.

2.1.

The real question for me is not whether Christianity will survive, but how. How will Christians in the West adapt and evolve? In the face of arch conservative Christian missionary zeal on the one side, growing religious diversity from non Christian immigrant populations in the middle, and in the face of a fast growing “non religious” or even atheist population on the other side....

It is likely, that you and I will not recognize the religious landscape of our country any more. Yet, Christianity will survive. Sure.

It will not survive in our schools and town halls, not in large rallies and mighty church buildings, but it will survive in Living rooms and hospital rooms, pub gatherings communes, bible studies and discussion groups, prayer and action groups...and in the new temples that will be built by the new Christian denominations which will spring up.

And we, the heirs of the great Western Christian Tradition of folks like Martin Luther and Hildegard of Bingen, John Wesley and John Knox, Rosa Parks, and Harriet Tubman, C.S. Lewis and Dorothy Day, Egerton Ryerson or Lois Wilson and countless others...

We must decide HOW we will practice what we love most about the gospel!

*How and in what shape do you see yourself practising Christianity with others in the future?--even when you will be in a minority?*

That is the true big question, and we all need to contribute to answer it.

Next week: “Why do Christians believe they are the only ones who go to heaven?”

## **ADDENDUM: DATA and STATISTICS**

**From Pew Research Centre's Forum on Religion & Public Life (2010, some 2015)**

**The fastest Growth: No religion and Islam. Also: Sub Saharan Africa, poorest region on earth.**

The worlds fastest growing religion is not Islam or Christianity, but no religion at all – atheism, agnostics, or people who say they are spiritual, but not religious.

In countries where Islam is the majority religion, Christianity is in second place.

In countries where Christianity is the majority..(Such as North America and Europe); secularism is in second place, not Islam!

**In Africa, South America and Asia** there are now **less non religious people** than a decade ago. Both Christianity and Islam are growing there, Islam at a faster rate.

There is a clear relation between affluent countries and atheism, and poor countries and religious belief.

### **Americas:**

Summary:

The Christian share of the U.S. population is declining, while the number of U.S. adults who do not identify with any organized religion is growing, according to an extensive new survey by the Pew Research Centre. Moreover, these changes are taking place across the religious landscape, affecting all regions of the country and many demographic groups. While the drop in Christian affiliation is particularly pronounced among young adults, it is occurring among Americans of

all ages .

To be sure, the United States remains home to more Christians than any other country in the world, and a large majority of Americans – roughly seven-in-ten – continue to identify with some branch of the Christian faith. But the percentage of adults (ages 18 and older) who describe themselves as Christians has dropped by nearly eight percentage points in just seven years, from 78.4% in an equally massive Pew Research survey in 2007 to 70.6% in 2014. Over the same period, the percentage of Americans who are religiously unaffiliated – describing themselves as atheist, agnostic or “nothing in particular” – has jumped more than six points, from 16.1% to 22.8%. And the share of Americans who identify with non-Christian faiths also has inched up, rising 1.2 percentage points, from 4.7% in 2007 to 5.9% in 2014. Growth has been especially great among Muslims and Hindus, albeit from a very low base.

### **Details:**

The **United States** is the world’s third most populous country, but it has by far the largest Christian population of the world. With nearly a quarter of a billion Christians, the U.S. dwarfs even **Brazil**, which has the world’s second-largest Christian community (more than 175 million). About 70% of the U.S. population identifies as Christian, and U.S. Christians represent 10% of the world’s Christian's

In 1776, the vast majority of Americans active in a religious body belonged to only a handful of Protestant denominations:

Congregationalist, Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Baptist and Quaker. By the mid-19th century, however, the picture had changed. The Methodist Church had become by far the largest Protestant denomination by 1850. And before the end of the 19th century, Roman Catholics — who represented a small portion of the population in 1776 and only 5% in 1850 — became America’s largest single Christian group Today, fortified by a steady flow of immigrants from mostly Catholic Latin America, Catholics in the U.S. number more than 74 million, about 24% of the U.S. population. The Southern Baptist Convention is now the largest U.S. Protestant denomination.

Other factors, too, have diversified America’s religious landscape. Other Christian groups such as Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses, many of which were founded in the United States in the 19th century, have grown dramatically

**Membership in long-established Protestant churches, such as Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians and Methodists, has declined, while membership in newer evangelical and pentecostal churches has grown.**

### **Europe:**

Roughly a quarter of the world's Christians (26%) live in Europe. This makes Europe the region with the second-largest share of the world's Christians, following the Americas. Russia has the largest absolute number of Christians in Europe (105 million). Despite the Communist government's attempts to minimize religion in the country for much of the 20th century, more than 70% of Russians are Christian, primarily Orthodox Christian.

Although the Protestant Reformation began in Europe, today fewer than one-in-five European Christians (18%) are part of the Protestant tradition.

### **Sub-Saharan Africa**

has more than 500 million Christians, which makes it the region with the third-largest number of Christians worldwide. Collectively, the region's 51 countries and territories are home to nearly a quarter of the world's Christians (24%).

The majority of these are broadly defined as protestant.

For ex. **Nigeria:** Has 80 million Christians, about half of the population's total is Christians. Has also a large Muslim population. Evangelical protestants (especially Pentecostals) are fastest growing group, much faster than Islam. Traditional tribal religions are in decline.

Next largest no.'s are in **Congo**. In **Ethiopia**, 60% are Christian

The vast majority of Ethiopia's Christians have adhered to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church for most of the past 1,700 years.

Significant diversity has begun to characterize Ethiopia's Christian population only in the last 25 years. Today, Protestants (incl. Anglicans and African Independent Churches) make up 20% of total Christian population( a huge increase in a short time).

### **Asia/Pacific**

**Philippines:** 93% of pop. identify as Christian, other large % ages of

Christians are in India, China, Indonesia, Australia, South Korea....  
About half and half Protestant traditions and Catholics.

**Mainland China** has roughly 67 million Christians, representing about 5% of the country's total population. **China is home to the world's largest number of Christians living as a minority**. It is difficult to know how many Christians there are, because numbers are only available for the two state approved "Patriotic" Denominations (One Catholic, one Protestant). A substantial number of Christians worship in independent, unregistered churches. These churches do not have legal status because they have not affiliated with one of the two officially approved associations. Unregistered independent Protestant churches, often referred to as "house churches," meet in various venues including homes, rented facilities, businesses and even public places. Additionally, a substantial number of Catholics worship in unregistered Roman Catholic congregations. The general consensus among scholars of religion in China is that **Christianity has grown substantially during the past three decades**. It is too soon to know, however, whether Christianity's growth has peaked or will continue in the years ahead. Whichever turns out to be the case, the religious future of the world's most populous country will have a major impact not only on Christianity but on other religious traditions as well.

### **Middle East and North Africa**

The birth place of Christianity has now less than 1% of the world's Christians left.

Christians are a minority in every country in the region. About half (47%) of all Christians in the region live in either **Egypt or Sudan**. Egypt has by far the highest total no. of Christians in this region, about 4.3 million **Coptic Orthodox** Christians. They also have Roman Catholics and Evangelicals. **Lebanon** has by far the highest percentage of Christians (38%) in the region .

### **Age and Global Religions:**

The median age of two major groups – **Muslims (23 years) and Hindus (26)** – is younger than the **median age of the world's overall population (28)**. All the other groups are older than the global median. **Christians** have a **median age of 30**, followed by members of other religions (32), adherents of folk or traditional religions (33), the religiously unaffiliated (34) and Buddhists (34). Jews have the highest median age (36).

**Affiliation:**

There are 5.8 billion religiously affiliated adults and children around the globe, representing 84% of the 2010 world population of 6.9 billion.

The demographic study – based on analysis of more than 2,500 censuses, surveys and population registers – finds 2.2 billion Christians (32% of the world's population), 1.6 billion Muslims (23%), 1 billion Hindus (15%), nearly 500 million Buddhists (7%) and 14 million Jews (0.2%) around the world as of 2010. In addition, more than 400 million people (6%) practice various folk or traditional religions, including African traditional religions, Chinese folk religions, Native American religions and Australian aboriginal religions. An estimated 58 million people – slightly less than 1% of the global population – belong to other religions, including the Baha'i faith, Jainism, Sikhism, Shintoism, Taoism, Tenrikyo, Wicca and Zoroastrianism, to mention just a few.

**At the same time, the new study by the Pew Forum also finds that roughly one-in-six people around the globe (1.1 billion, or 16%) have no religious affiliation. This makes the unaffiliated the third-largest religious group worldwide, behind Christians and Muslims,**