

People sometimes ask how preachers get their topics. The most common way for churches of The Reformation, like Lutheran, Congregational, Methodist, Episcopal, is what we know as the “Common Lectionary” The advantage of this starting point is that many churches use this cycle of readings for the Christian Year, so that there are many study groups and commentaries, lots of collaboration. Another starting point for sermons is the news of the day (the old adage for preachers was: “Keep a Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other.” The point was to keep sermons relevant, but we know that too quickly it can move into politics, so most ministers want few Sundays with controversial topics...save them for forums, perhaps after church. Another starting point for topics is simply to preach through an entire book of the Bible, chapter by chapter. This is used by many churches with a literal view of scripture, trying to get meaning from every sentence in the Bible. Another starting point is getting a theme from favorite theological/spiritual writers and devotional writers. And finally, whatever way one gets a topic, I think most preachers would say they must feel passionate about the topic, have some personal experience or feeling about it for a sermon to have any energy and conviction. The preacher’s own passion for something can be the starting point ... as is sometimes the case with me and music; A certain hymn or choir anthem can easily cause me to want to preach on that topic.

I think you know that most preachers in the United Church of Christ lean toward the first method... the lectionary cycle of readings for the Christian year, chosen many years ago as representative of the Christian year and the central topics of Christianity. I also lean toward the lectionary, as I enjoy the

camaraderie and mutual learning of group study with other colleagues... and you know that is how I met and grew to trust our recent guest preacher Chip Robinson, who has been here now twice.

THIS WEEK, to get to the point, no lectionary for me! It was a “no brainer.” Since today is September 11, the topic should deal with the events of 9/11/01, even if now it is 21 years ago! I also happen to have a song about 9/11 that lends passion to the topic, so the song was my starting point this week. I chose the scriptures to match the theme of my song. Let me tell you, or remind you for some of you who have heard it before, how the song came about!

I have a New York friend, a Rockport artist, now deceased, who did an oil painting of the Twin Towers, wrote a poem about that day, and knowing I was a musician, he asked me to compose a song using his poem. Nino Kamalic, before 2001, was painting the Twin Towers on a snowy day, and he included in the foreground some “snow angels” that children had been making. (I’ll show you that painting now.....)

Years later, shortly after the fateful day of Sept 11, 2001, Nino recalled what the children had said to him that day: “Hey mister, don’t step on our snow angels!” He pondered their urgent pleas and wrote a poem full of feeling ...and some learning from their message! I need to say before we go any further that our word “angel” comes from the Greek words in the Bible that mean “messenger!” So the image of angels rightfully conjures up the idea that they may be giving us a “message!” In this case, the snow angels themselves may be the spark of the message, but the children’s voices, their words, become the actual “message”

that Nino heard. Thus the children were also the “angels” or messengers. I’ll read his poem to you now....

Towers in the magic mist... Reaching up in the sky with long brush, An artist stood. A touch of blue... Purple haze... Silver hue. Up and down the snowflakes fell, on the snow angel’s covered hill. Help me angels! How to convey this grief, this feeling of dismay... this void of love, the empty hole... Anger! ... And I promise: I will never step on snow angels!

Nino Kamalic moved his thoughts to prayer (“Help me angels!”) So devastating was the event, (and Nino did have friends who perished) that we all needed divine help and comfort at the time. To the “Where was God” question: We don’t point to God as the architect or cause of such reckless killing; Many of us point to God’s presence in the amazing work of first responders, in those who gave compassionate help after the tragedy.

So I followed Nino’s lead, and made the connection that the angel-covered hill was a kind of “Holy ground,” an example of God’s Creative Spirit, beautiful creations, especially seen in children. While Nino made the vow, the commitment, “*never to step on snow angels,*” I looked for a universal lesson for all of us: We should not step on the creations of any of our fellow human beings; we should not squelch/kill the voice of others, we should not destroy the art of others, and like Isaiah said, “we shall not kill and destroy on all of God’s holy mountain.” As scripture says about children, “Out of the mouth of babes” we learn, and Jesus said “of such is the kingdom of God!”

So we hear the children’s cry and their anger about their little creations, and a painter’s vow never to step on such

creations. It may seem a small thing, but it is a starting place, to care for ALL living creatures and creations of a Creator God. September 11 gives us the opportunity to reflect and meditate upon the forces of destruction in this world, how we can stop or reduce them... but also consider the *forces for life, the energy for compassion and tender care for all of creation*, how to nurture, how to rebuild, how to reconnect, how to make peace.

So I'll sing for you now my song, "Angels in the Snow," inspired by Nino Kamalic:

A painter on a hillside, one frosty winter day, hears the laugh of children as in the snow they play. Towers are his subject, a skyline through the haze; angels in the snow, escape his steady gaze. Years later on that hillside, towers we do not see. The painter now reflects upon fallen majesty. Also in his memory he hears the children's cry: don't step on our angels, as you're walking by! It's in us too, and ignorance, of things we do not see, the hurt and the shattering, if we act thoughtlessly. Who has done this? Don't they know the love and the pride in this creation, now destroyed, anger we can't hide! Towers in the mist, how could they have come down? Angels in the snow, are also holy ground. So I will watch more carefully each step that I take, to safeguard creation, the precious things you make. I won't step on your angels that you carve into the snow. They are your fresh creation, the beauty that you show. If I step on angels that surely are around, to me it may seem nothing, to you it's towers torn down!..... So I will watch more carefully each step that I take, to safeguard creation, the precious things you make. I will safeguard creation, the precious things you make!

AMEN!