

January 23, 2022
Third Sunday after Epiphany

Meditation: “Oh Shoot!”

The first place we lived in Toronto was in the basement apartment of a house that was built just after the Second World War ended. The old house beside us went up for sale and we heard the new owners were planning big renovations. Believe me, it needed them. Imagine our surprise the day we came home and found the house gone. And not just the house, but the foundation had been ripped out too. Eventually a brand new, much larger, semi-detached home stood on the lot. It wasn't renovation. It was renewal. Since then, the house we lived in and the one on the other side have been demolished and a row of townhouses stand in their place.

In ancient Israel, after the Babylonian army captured the kingdom of Judah and its capital, Jerusalem, they gloated over the Jews. “Our God is more powerful than your God. The proof is in our victory over you.” And to symbolize that understanding, the temple, Solomon's temple, was torn down, and much of the population was taken to Babylon to learn to become good Babylonian citizens. Jerusalem, and much of the land of Judah, was abandoned; left in ruins to decay and return to nature. Without the temple, God had no earthly home. Removed from God's territory, the Jews felt lost and alone, Godless.

In Jesus' day, the rules of how things were to be done had become so ingrained and so strict that hardly anyone could remember why. The people knew the letter of the law, but the intent had become lost or fuzzy in people's minds.

Do you remember the United Church of Canada of the 1950s and 1960s? It was a going concern. Many congregations were bursting at the seams and there was a construction boom as Christian education wings and gymnasiums were built. We had the ear of the media and the government alike. And ever since the UCC has been sort of like a raft floating down a mighty river for decades, without any clear direction or destination in mind. It has just allowed the current of time to carry it along. We have been on a long, slow decline. Now we close, on average, one church a week. Many others are hanging on by sheer willpower. We have aging buildings in need of expensive upkeep, and both declining memberships and declining budgets at the same time. We have an aging membership, and fewer disciples willing and able to fill the necessary roles to keep the institution of the church running, let alone to minister to the communities surrounding us. And then, in early 2020, came the pandemic, which has accelerated the decline and closures. And it's not just the United Church of Canada that is experiencing this decline, but all of Western Christendom. What about this congregation? Have we just floated aimlessly along until we arrived at a point of community irrelevance and accelerating decline?

As I pondered the similarities between ancient Judah and present day Christendom I wonder, not what is to become of us, but what is to become of God's dream?

All of these examples are about losing our way from God and our need to renew our relationship with God. Rebuilding the temple and restoring temple worship was about renewing their relationship with God. Jesus was there to remind the Jews of his day of what was really important, from God's perspective; that they love God, and their neighbour as themselves. Jesus' words were words of renewal of the relationship between the Jews and God. As a congregation, as a denomination, as the Body of Christ in the world, we also need to remember the original purpose of the journey to start with, our calling by God. We too need to renew our relationship with God.

The prophet Isaiah spoke words that were difficult to hear: "when you pass through the waters", and "when you walk through the fire." He promised us that there would be difficult times. He also spoke words of hope. He promised that [God] will be with us and the waters will not overwhelm us, nor the fires consume. Even though things look hopeless and dead, "a shoot shall come out from the stump of [David's father] Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots."

Some decades after the Jews had been taken into exile in Babylon, the king died, and a new king came to power, Cyrus. Cyrus allowed the Jews to return home, and to start rebuilding the temple, and the city walls. Nehemiah was the governor at the time the city walls were completed, and he called the people to the Water Gate. No, not the hotel in Washington that became infamous during the presidency of Richard Milhouse Nixon, the gate where the water from the pool of Siloam was carried into the temple during the festival of Sukkot, also known as the festival of weeks or the festival of booths. I digress. Nehemiah called the people to the Water Gate where Ezra the priest and scribe, read the Torah, the teachings of Moses that had been found in the rubble. This was the beginning of a time of renewal. The temple was to be rebuilt, the city restored, and temple worship re-established.

In Jesus day, it was common for someone in the assembly to stand to read from the scroll, and then to sit before teaching on the reading. Jesus was in the assembly at Nazareth, as was his custom, and he rose to read from the scroll, and then sat and said, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Never before had someone claimed that scripture was being fulfilled in their hearing. Jesus had come to show the people how to renew their relationship with their God.

Sure, there is decline in the church. But scripture reminds us that decline may be the end of our present reality, it is not the end of God's dream.

At Christmas we received an amaryllis bulb. It looked like a dead, wizened up potato. We planted it in moist earth, in the hopes that something would happen. We waited and waited, and waited some more. We waited through the coldest, darkest days of the year, and finally, a new shoot has appeared. The hope of new life.

Lent is only a few weeks away. It is a season of reflection and preparation for a new relationship with God. This year I am offering a Lenten study called Diving Deeply, in which we seek to delve into our relationship with God.

Whether you join me for the study or not, I challenge you to spend the weeks of Lent thinking about the nature of your relationship with God, and working to strengthen it. If I can glean anything from the reading in Nehemiah, and in Luke's gospel, and from the current reality of our church, it is that we are repeatedly and continually in need of renewal of our relationship with God, and that God is ever present, waiting for us to turn anew to God, waiting for a new shoot to burst forth. May it be so. Amen.