

**God has a dream**

and there are people like Martin Luther King Junior and others in our time who have caught glimpses of that dream.

With this morning's sermon, I launch the overall theme that we will follow for the next six Sundays. As we prepared for this fall our preaching team was inspired by the prophetic voice that we read and heard in the lectionary passages. How did Jeremiah and Isaiah and the others challenge and inspire the people to want to participate in God's dream even and especially when they were living in exile?

How does God's dream for God's people and all nations challenge and inspire us today and how does it help us to move confidently into the next phase of our life as a congregation here at Lark and Queen?

First, a verse from Jeremiah caught our attention. Jeremiah 29:7 But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

And the verse before this one, Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there and do not decrease.

As I thought about how these verses and their context apply to TUMC, I found myself asking two questions.

Are we living in exile or are we at home?

What is the prophetic voice in our time that's trying to be heard?

Beginning with the Biblical text and the question about the prophetic voice.

God told the prophet Jeremiah to write a letter to the people who had just been hauled off by King Nebuchadnezzar to his great walled city of Babylon located several hundred miles to the east of Jerusalem.

According to our scripture God told Jeremiah to make these newly displaced and unsettled people aware of God's dream for them.

And this letter was in direct contrast to the voices of other prophets, false prophets who were telling the exiles that they would be back home within two years, back home and back worshiping in the temple carrying with them from Babylon all the sacred vessels from the Lord's house that had also been hauled away. In other words the false prophets were telling the people that in a short time everything would return to normal, everything would return to the way it had always been.

But God's word to Jeremiah said otherwise. Jeremiah's letter told them to settle in, that they were going to be staying for awhile – and then in verse 8 - Do not let the prophets and the diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, says the Lord."

The question remains for us today. How do we hear truth? What in the dialogue of voices that is our scriptures is meant for us and helps to guide us today?

Maybe it partly depends on where we situate ourselves.

Hence my other question.

Are we exiles or are we at home?

I've thought a lot about this lately especially with regard to our congregation.

Who are we really?

I begin with our most recent statement about ourselves on the first page of our website.

*TUMC is a Christian community in the Mennonite-Anabaptist "peace church" tradition. We aspire to be a family of faith that welcomes people with diverse backgrounds and stories, worshipping together and supporting one another, while following Christ's example in working for peace and justice in our urban context.*

This is a good summary of who we are, but doesn't yet answer our question are we exiles or are we at home?

Next let's take a quick look at the history of our church.

The Russian Mennonite Tradition that provides the foundation for this particular congregation includes a combination of first, second and third generation immigrants to Canada who found their way to Toronto for education and to make a living. But their not so distant family stories include great losses from various waves of revolution and war, Stalinist Russia and more war. Like the Israelites who left their homes in Judah

and crossed many miles of desert and unfamiliar territory experiencing hunger and disease and loss along the way, so too the Russian Mennonite story includes similar harrowing stories. Not everyone survived and some of those who did still carry the wounds and scars of those losses.

There are others among us, Eritrean, Sudanese and Colombian whose stories include similar hardships and loss.

In a different vein, some among us may be able to trace our Canadian settler presence beyond three generations. In my family, I am 7<sup>th</sup> generation Canadian and the persecution that motivated my forebears to seek a new beginning in this country is now a dim memory. Then there are some among us whose first nations heritage continues to include a sense of displacement even though they remain in their own home.

And what about the young adults and others among us who come from other parts of Canada to Toronto again for education and work and who don't yet necessarily feel at home in this city. Feeling at home is a relative term and sometimes it can take awhile.

Is Toronto a place of exile or is it home?

There is no imperative one way or another.

But how we answer that question might affect how we hear the words of Jeremiah; build houses and live in them, plant gardens and eat their produce, celebrate marriages, multiply and do not decrease ... and later, "For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your

welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. [listen to this dream of God] Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me, says the LORD, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile. For some reason exile matters, it's part of the larger picture. God sends into exile, why?

There is no real possibility that we will be gathered back to the place that imprinted itself on us as home when we were children for that "place" doesn't really exist anymore, even if we tried to seek it out, for like a river that one can never enter into in the same way twice, time and circumstance change things. So the lessons of the exile apply to us all. Many thoughtful people in our society would point to our entire societal context as one of exile – where people in general feel displaced and disoriented. We have this vague or maybe real sense that the infrastructure of the dominant culture, the city and economy and even religious expressions that try to align themselves with these powers are out of sync with God and out of sync with God's dream.

But what is God's dream?

Part of God's dream includes that even now, even in this crucible, we make a home – build houses and plant gardens and be fruitful.

Our 2008, Values and Identity statement identifies one of the key reasons that we value this place is that it is "home" and we are family here.

Here are the list of words we named as important  
home,  
community,  
music and worship  
spiritual formation and transformation  
diversity and hospitality  
Service, peace and justice

The first two, home and community are identifiers as well as values.  
The next two lines, music and worship, spiritual formation and transformation, name the things that we value and the things that shape the type of home and community that we are,  
and the next two lines, diversity and hospitality, service, peace and justice are what we value, but are also the potential fruit that flow out of our experience of the other things that we've named.  
We can embrace diversity and be hospitable; we can engage in acts of service, peace making and justice when these other pieces like a sense of being "at home," are also in place.

Foundationally - How counter-cultural is it to provide a place called home for so many people with diverse backgrounds and stories.

It's not always easy.

I recently had a conversation with my son where I was trying to impress upon him the importance of belonging to a community and in particular

a church community and he said that the word team, meant more to him than my use of the word community. He understands that being part of a team is attractive. For example, he finds himself naturally attracted to people who love hockey and particularly those who love the leafs (they become a part of his team so to speak – I think its called “leaf nation”). He also says he is attracted to people who are basically kind and empathetic to others, because they would be the kind of team he’d like to be part of.

Okay, I said, but so far the way you’ve described team – you are describing teams where people on them are like each other or have an affinity with each other because you share certain characteristics in common. A hockey team is made up of people who both enjoy and have some skill for playing the game for example.

The church team, if you will, is a bit different and can be more difficult to live with sometimes because like it or not, if we are being welcoming and inclusive of all who are attracted to the healing grace of God and want to be part of this team, we’re definitely not all going to be alike. We are all different ages, we have different backgrounds – we are different ethnicities, sexual orientations, faith backgrounds, physical capacities and gifts.

Our commonality arises around our shared commitment to follow Jesus, and it is only Jesus who can create family out of this commitment by reminding us that we are, all of us, children of God and therefore sisters and brothers of each other.

So – now I’m looking at all of you and thinking, what a remarkable family – gathered here. Look around you, these are the people whom you are choosing to be the family of God with, that you are choosing to be “at home” with in this setting.

It is truly counter-cultural to provide a place called home for so many people with so many diverse backgrounds and stories. Home is where we let ourselves settle, where we create homes and plant gardens and become fruitful.

Now the next step, if we let ourselves settle into this reality, what does this reality make possible? If we let ourselves settle into this reality, how and in what way are we being invited to be fruitful?

The time of the exile and immediately post-exile was one of the most fruitful times in the history of the children of Israel. It was the crucible out of which their identity was forged. It was during this time that they wrote down their history and reclaimed their covenant relationship with God. At the same time their prophets helped them to mourn the losses they had experienced along the way, but the prophets also helped them to paint a new picture of the dream of God for them.

What is the dream of God for us at TUMC?

We began the painting of our particular expression of God’s dream back in 2008 with four initiatives.

- 1. Build our experience of community with intentional welcome and integration of all people into the life of TUMC: GLBT, newcomers, marginalized.*
- 2. Consider our programs of spiritual formation and transformation as preparation for being engaged in God's mission in the world.*
- 3. Explore the possibility of a local mission activity (e.g. growing the ministry of Lazarus Rising).*
- 4. Consider creative use of our space (6 Lark St. and 1774 Queen St) to support the ministry objectives of TUMC and our ministry partners in 1774 Queen St.*

*Leadership at TUMC has worked diligently at these tasks over the past four years.*

and we have more work to do.... and that work must be done by all of us. The business of the church, of this particular counter-cultural expression of family, requires attention and commitment by all of us. It is what we pledge to each other each time we receive new members and re-affirm our covenant with God and each other. We get to welcome new members again next week.

Of the four initiatives, we are currently putting a lot of time and energy and money into mapping out creative use of our space. A lot of really good work has gone into this initiative and we have building plans and a building process underway that solves many of the problems with space that we have wanted to resolve for some time – including improved accessibility, larger lobby, enough offices and the current plan

resolves what we will do with the six Lark property according to our congregations expressed wishes at last year's AGM, but for some reason we don't yet know or haven't been able to articulate well how this project fits into God's dream for us in our local context. As we asked this summer, how are we salt and light on this street corner? If we make ourselves at home in this city and in this place how are we being called to be fruitful? As with our scriptures this morning, how do we seek the welfare of the city – for in its welfare we will find our welfare. I think the answer already lies within us and is somehow obvious if God will grant us the eyes to see and the dreams to dream. What gift has God placed within this congregation that is obvious to every person that walks through the doors? What is the first thing that comes to your mind? Make note of it, talk to someone about it. What is that gift and how do we share it? How will our dreaming about creative use of space allow us to be hospitable with the gift or gifts that are already ours to share in a city that needs us to care about its welfare and a God whose dreams for us far exceed anything we might have dreamt for ourselves.

