

CRTG Worship at the 42nd General Council
Sunday, August 9, 2015

Hymn: “Be Still my Soul” (VU 652 vs 1-2)

Call to Worship: Lauren Hodgson

Prayer of Four Directions: Russ Burns

Scripture: Ezra 3: 10-13 – Wilson Gonese

Reflection: Kenji Marui

Our scripture lesson is set in the time of Persian Empire, following the aftermath of devastation and exile wrought by the Babylonians. Before Ezra even takes the stage in the book of the Bible bearing his name, the rebuilding of the Temple and all the politics involved in such a spiritual enterprise were underway.

It began with great pomp and ceremony. The priests were on trumpet, the Levites on cymbals, as outlined in the rules and regulations of worship. Asaph was the Levite who marched with King David when first establishing a Temple site in Jerusalem; Asaph’s descendants were the ones leading worship with the ritual songs and praises. It was a nice touch, a solid connection to history and tradition.

It was a promising start, a bright moment in the reclamation of the Holy Land and renewed spirit for a downtrodden people. Here was the path back to glory, to get back to the good old days. Except it’s never as good as you remember it.

Like the grouchy old men Muppets in the balcony, Statler and Waldorf, there were some in the crowd in Jerusalem that day that complained. While they did not disagree with what was happening, they could only see the faults in what was being done, in how it was being done. The old Temple took 46 years to build. It was clear to them that this new Temple would not be as good as the old Temple. There are similar fears and worries being expressed throughout all churches today: the church of tomorrow is not going to be as good as the church of yesterday. This was an occasion of regret and lament, they shouted out in mourning and grief.

At the same time, there was eagerness and excitement, people anxious to get to work on this new future. They may not have known the first Temple, and maybe, probably, this new one would not be as good. But it was going to be theirs. They were going to have a hand in its construction, formation, its blessing and its worship and works. This was an occasion of great joy, so they shouted out.

Last November there was an election in the city of London. My then 11-year old daughter and I played a game with all the signs that decorated the lawns and street sides. On the way to church, we would call out “Matt Brown!” each time we

saw one of his light blue signs. You likely don't know that Matt Brown was the early front-runner and eventual winner of the mayoral race. As such, he had many, many signs of support. So we would read out his name, but each time, we had to be louder and longer than the sign before. "MattBrown. Matt ... Brown. MATT ... BROWN." By the time we completed our journey, we'd be screaming ourselves hoarse with cries of: "MAAAAATT BROOOOOWN!"

If someone on the street were to overhear us, they might have some trouble telling if we were supporters or detractors of the candidate, if we were elated or infuriated by his campaign or policies. They would at least conclude that, on either side of the spectrum, we cared very, very passionately.

And that is the loudest message that the Comprehensive Review Task Group has heard: people care so very deeply about the future of the church. They support the ideas that were set out in the early discussion papers, they vehemently oppose those same ideas. Such is the nature of change - we collectively react with relief, enthusiasm, disgust, nostalgia, doubt, fear, anxiety, hope, shock, grief ... and all of that is normal.

New hymn books, projection technology in church, changes are always happening. They have to happen if we want the message of our gospel good news to speak to a world that is increasingly spiritual but not religious, aggressively, stridently atheist, or worse - indifferent and ignorant to the joy and delight of knowing Christ as Saviour, spirit and solace.

In the year of our Lord 1925, when the denomination that was The United Church of Canada was born, the world was different. Virginia Woolf was still writing her books. The Grand Ole Opry debuted as a radio show. High school teacher John Scopes was arrested, convicted, and found guilty of teaching evolution in the classroom. He was fined \$100.

Not so long ago, I used to press shift-3 on my keyboard and get a "number sign". That same symbol, found below 9 on the telephone, was called the "pound key". Twitter makes me identify that same tic-tac-toe board as a "hashtag". At some point what I used to think of as "smiley faces" became "emoticons" became "emojis".

There have always been changes: we no longer sacrifice live animals at the altar in worship, or rely entirely upon the interventions of our priests to connect with God on our behalf. We welcome women to roles of leadership in the church. We welcome those of us who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and queer to roles of leadership in the church. Once upon a time, the new technology that was the pipe organ was considered devil music

We are always growing, new beginnings. Our resurrection faith promises this that our decline and demise is not the end. The Spirit reimagines, repurposes, raises us up each time. The work we do is not to reinvent the wheel but to reconstruct and renovate.

In all honesty, the work of the Comprehensive Review Task Group did not do these things for The United Church of Canada. The new growth, new vision, new vitality of this church rests with the congregations and communities of faith, of its people. It is our collective and combined imagination, creativity, passion for justice, commitment to service, care for one another that will win the day.

Whether the crowd is cheering or booing, whoo-hooing or wailing, the fact is that the church needs that involvement, that interest, those opinions, that buy-in. They all, around this country, and you, in this court, need to know what is at stake. There was no one in the crowd described in the book of Ezra who didn't know what was going on. They each had their impression of what they were yelling about. That continues to be the challenge for our church: understanding where we are so we can envision where we might go next. Find the truth that we can speak and add volume to it.

But for all that is unsettled and up in the air, some things do not change. The worship liturgy that the priests and Levites used was an age old refrain, from before the time of the first Temple, from before King David: "For God is good, for this steadfast love endures forever..." that much will not change. And that is worth shouting about.

Sharing a Vision: Beth Symes(English) and Cathy Hamilton(French)

One: The moment is now! God is calling the United Church into a new creation. In these challenging times the Spirit comes as wind and fire as it did long ago at Pentecost, enlivening our faith and turning us outward in love for the world, as Jesus upended the tables of the money-changers in God's temple.

**All: We are not alone,
we live in God's world.**

Deux : Nous sommes appelés à être des communautés de foi dynamiques, où les gens rencontrent Dieu avec leur cœur, leur intellect, leur corps, leur esprit, Celui qui est Saint :

**... qui a créé et qui continue à créer,
qui est venu en Jésus,
Parole faite chair,
pour réconcilier et renouveler,
qui travaille en nous et parmi nous
par son Esprit.**

One: We are called to be communities of faith of all shapes, sizes, and forms, yet interconnected as a united church:

**...called to be the Church,
to celebrate God's presence,**

One: where people experience the love of God in Jesus Christ; where they are welcomed, included, and affirmed, celebrated in all their diversity, and supported and challenged in their faith journeys.

Deux : Nous sommes appelés à être des communautés dans lesquelles les gens sont transformés par l'Esprit, pardonnés et investis d'une nouvelle force dans une nouvelle vie, incités à faire preuve de courage et invités, à la lumière de la foi, à prendre des risques; dans lesquelles nous découvrons nos dons pour le ministère, et, en tant que disciples de Jésus, nous sommes conviés à aller de l'avant pour partager l'Évangile en paroles et en actes; et dans lesquelles nous cultivons la bienveillance envers notre prochain et notre entourage afin d'œuvrer à un monde meilleur, plus juste et rempli de paix.

**... pour vivre avec respect dans la création,
pour aimer et servir les autres,
pour rechercher la justice et résister au mal,
pour proclamer Jésus, crucifié et ressuscité,
notre juge et notre espérance.**

One : We are called to be communities of hope, love, prayer, and action, modelled in Jesus' ministry and united in God's work.

**In life, in death, in life beyond death,
God is with us.
We are not alone.**

One: We say to the world:

**You are not alone. Thanks be to God.
Vous n'êtes pas seuls. Grâces soient rendues à Dieu.**

Prayer of Thanksgiving

Vic Wiebe

Mysterious Holy One:

Whether we know you as Yahweh, God, Allah, Creator, Higher Power or some other name, we know that you are a loving presence amongst us.

We celebrate our journey with you over these past 90 years. There have been good times; there have been troubling times; there have been times when we faced major decisions and were uncertain about how to proceed. In all these times,

whenever we searched for your guidance, we experienced the reassuring love of your presence and came to know that in the end, things would be alright as the results would be in your hands. For this we are most grateful and give you thanks.

So as we come together in another time of uncertainty and change, help us to be aware of your presence in our deliberations; help us to discern your will for the future of this church that we love; and where we cannot agree on future directions or where more work needs to be done, help us to entrust this remaining work to the leaders we have selected.

We pray this in the name of Jesus the Christ.

Amen.

Sharing our Work

Cathy Hamilton

The Comprehensive Review Task Group first met in November 2012, overwhelmed and unprepared for the scope of what lay before them. As we met, month by month, we prayed, we discussed, we argued, we listened, we shared. We did as much as we could to bring many voices and perspectives into the discussion, facilitating conversations with hundreds of pastoral charges, using on-line opportunities, and inviting input and feedback.

This has not been and will not be the work of church committee insiders in a Toronto conference room, or even of this gathering in a Corner Brook arena, but of the efforts and engagement of a broad, persistent hope in the work of God's people in the church.

We offer the work of our asking and listening, as listed in a document of 40 pages and 10 backgrounders, not as a final product but as a starting place. We knew that we would not have the answers, but tried to give shape and form to the questions.

In our journeying, we have experienced the prayers of our church, in its hope for bold vision, in its deep love and compassion for the world. A tangible and welcomed gift to the group was a prayer shawl that was made by my daughter.

As a symbol of this work, it brought together threads of hope and worry, care and concern, vision and suspicion. The task group has been clothed and wrapped in Spirit and seeking, in the prayers and support expressed and shared.

It is our prayer that we might glimpse the new thing God is doing. Can we perceive it? May we strain to hear the notes of a song as yet unsung. May we share fully in a truth that is as yet unknown.

And so we give and share the work of review and renewal with all of you. We share the mantle of leadership and love with the sessional committee, which has shaped our report and the many engaged conversations and thoughtful, prayerful, responses, for the work of this General Council.

So I share with you, Larry Doyle and Jean Brown, as representatives of the Sessional Committee and all Commissioners, the work of the Comprehensive Review, its hope and responsibilities. May you receive this shawl and the prayers infused within and the threads that hold us together for it is in this way we are united in God's work.

Blessing for the Road Ahead

Kenji Marui

As we continue on this path of being the church, know that God goes before us, and calls us by name, invites us to come.

Que Jésus le Christ est à côté de nous, notre enseignant, notre guérisseur, notre ami
And like light, like colour, like breath, like fire, is the Spirit, filling us with courage,
filling us with hope.

Nous allons avec la Bénédiction de Dieu,
We go with God's great blessing.

Hymn: "Like a Healing Stream" MV 144