

The Dedication of the Maritime Conference Centre

God is ... We are ... Not Alone

The Rev. Matthew Fillier

In *those* days of great change.

In the night of our uncertainty, when we strain to reach out from our deepest desire, hoping, there will be someone, something, to hold onto lest we get swept away...

There are some hallowed words that have come down through the ages to which we, in the United Church, cling:

They almost always sound something like: God...*is*. We...*Are*. *Not-alone*.

Jeremiah's prophecy and ministry embodies *this* prayer. Let us keep those words before us as we gather *this* day upon *this* sacred ground.

As one who God called to proclaim the Word – I believe in his own way, Jeremiah called upon this prayer many times – maybe he said it when he was:

Attacked by his own brothers, beaten and put in the stockades by a priest and false prophet, imprisoned by a king, threatened with death, thrown into a cistern by Judah's officials – because they didn't like what he had to say.

What da ya think Dave? Being a prophet sounds a lot like being on the campaign team and making the pitch at presbytery meetings doesn't it?

I suppose Jeremiah *was* called the weeping prophet for a reason – there are days when we hope Red Letter and the executive can find some solace in that most biblical of truths.

Not to sound too smug, but this reading really does help us to reflect upon our collection of loose gems that we proudly call our conference staff and their ministry.

If our staff was behind the besieged walls of Jerusalem, I firmly believe they would be faithful to the last.

Kendall would be saying in that voice of his, that stills the palpitating hearts of clergy everywhere – or at least slows them down – depending on how he reads the manual – that voice that is set on calming the raging tempest of pastoral relations crises, and opening the way to blessed resolution with those sacred words of his: *Calm down. Don't panic. Here's what you're gonna do.*

Laura would be ensuring the most vulnerable were cared for, that justice wasn't lost in the chaos, and people still made their contribution to M&S – because even when you're under siege the golden rule is still in effect.

Janice would be teaching the masses about how to not only survive but faithfully thrive during these *changing* times and moments of prolonged *transition* of Babylonian proportions – ensuring we are not overwhelmed.

Dave? Dave would be Baruk. Jeremiah's scribe. Taking down every word and weighing each nuance of every blessed syllable of the prophet's prophetic *proposal*.

Ensuring everyone else, including the king, understood the consequences of the prophecy before us, reminding the court there was no need to ask questions about the background material 'cause they should have read it before the invasion happened. It's not like Jeremiah hadn't mailed out a copy to 'ya well in advance! *And yes, Zedekiah is indeed out of order.*

Sarah would ensure the story gets told and Marilyn would develop a lending system for all to share it.

Jennifer, Marlene, and Lorraine would be making sure they did it all, in style, on time, *every single day*.

Too few of us realize that when the stones are shaking beneath our feet, these are the hands that hold our own, and keep us together with that prayer made flesh in the ministry of this office:

God...*is*. We...*Are*. *Not-alone*

I remember two years ago, at an annual meeting, it seemed like everyone felt we were under siege.

As hospital chaplaincy was cut, even though many had worked for years to find ecumenical partnerships and alternative funding, we found ourselves in a roiling sea of conflicted emotions.

Like Zedekiah before us, we began to ask: why is our church under siege? Why do the stones shake beneath our feet?

Why build up a new conference office when the sign of the times is that we're being torn down?

The push and pull of the Holy Spirit's working? No one said she's *always* gentle. Sometimes the new thing God is doing, comes with the greatest of struggles. *Anything* worth *everything* always does.

In the midst of that barren wilderness, I remember a president elect standing up, and doing a rare thing:

Jane read this passage from Jeremiah to the court.

Just as it was for Jeremiah's answer to Zedekiah's question in *those* days, so too, at that annual meeting, for us:

The Word of God can be put aside by the harsh words of human fears, that give voice to our private sacred calfs, and give shape to our near sighted vision *that can barely look beyond the end of our own nose.*

We forget, the thing about God's Word, is that although we may set it aside, wrestle with it , get angry about it, pull our hair out in frustration when confronted by it in all its glory and consternation:

God's Word, will not be overcome. It *will* be heard.
It will tear down, and it will root up – but only to build and to plant.

Only if we dare to forget:
God...*is*. We...*Are*. *Not-alone*.

The executive's decision to sell our old land and buildings, and plant again must have been as firm as Jeremiah's conviction about buying this field from his cousin Hanamel.

May we all share Jeremiah's belief in the Spirit's dreaming for the days and the harvest it can yield.

Lord knows its already been tested.

And rightly so - the wisdom of God *is* foolish to many an ear.

So to what can we compare this Word of God?

God is like the real estate agent that comes rushing into Detroit, when the big 3 had fallen, the economy collapsed, entire parts of the city ran for the hills and abandoned their homes or faced foreclosure –

And God tramps through the streets proclaiming:

“Where ‘ya going? Today *is* the day to buy land, build a house, plant the future – because **I am, you are, not alone.**”

In these changing times of Babylonian proportions, we might do well to remember – *these are* the days God has made.

Jeremiah dares to make God's stand on the soil that will be scorched but is forever sacred – and he confronts our human need to despair at what *has been* without gazing to the skies for *what could be*:

For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel:
Houses and fields and vineyards shall be bought in this land.
And it was so.

Today we lift up the Word, in pouring out the soil that is literally the grit of the churches and presbyteries we call this conference –

Because *God is* – *God is* still living before the run of time began –

God is still preparing the future we cannot see but yearn to glimpse –

The Creator is still sowing with diligent care a harvest for all people from the tip of northern Nova Scotia, to the waters of PEI, through the forests of New Brunswick across the depth of ocean to Bermuda's sandy shore, *God is*.

And we? *We are. We are* 519 congregations living and breathing the Word of God in the world through some 80,000 members that call this conference our mission field. *We are* still God's people of many colours, and we are the church of Jesus Christ, *we are this* United Church of Canada.

In staking out this holy ground – we stand up to proclaim that we too believe the best days have yet to be seen, and we are not content to rest in weariness but long to work for the wonder of the kingdom come.

And Not-alone.

– *not just* because of the beautiful stones that have been erected for this office today – though they are the most beautiful and most environmentally conscious stones this conference has ever assembled.

Not alone – *not just* because of the archival earthenware jars that **house** and **witness** and **hold** before us all whom we have been –

Not alone, because with all who have served before them, and all whom this day, we believe are yet to come after, through all these different regions, and congregations, and cultures –

We are at least *this* ministry through *this* office, by the grace of these hands and these people who give of their lives and talents for our sake – we are at least *this* maritime Conference *together*,

Because at some point we all have to be confronted with the truth revealed in those hallowed words: God...*is*. We...*Are*. *Not-alone*.

As we celebrate the future that we seek to usher into this world for all those to come,

As we hallow the good earth that has yielded this ministry and the people we call and commission to live it every day,

May we never forget, *that* prayer is also the most sacred vow, of our ancestors of faith who have been this way before, and the voice of those yet to come, that call from the step of tomorrow's door,

And all the people, *ALL* the people:

They did rejoice and declare this day: AMEN!