

“Facing the Iceberg with Hope”

Hamilton Presbytery Conference - April 21, 2018

The prophet Jeremiah has had a special place in my heart for a long time. A lot of this has to do with the circumstances of my call to ministry. Like Jeremiah, when the call came I immediately resisted it. For two and a half years I ran from that call, sabotaged my relationship with God, and overall was pretty angry with him about a lot of things.

But in that time the brutally honest conversations between Jeremiah and God recorded in this book were a life-life for me as I struggled to hold on to my faith while also running from my call. I ran from my call for the same reason Jeremiah did – I knew it would be difficult and costly. I’m a preacher’s kid twice over and I knew all too well the challenges of leadership in the church in a time of uncertainty, upheaval and exile.

That said, I also knew that Jeremiah’s calling was significantly more difficult than anything likely to be faced by a church leader in 21st Century Canada. Indeed, I think his was one of the most difficult calls ever given to a leader of God’s people – to both announce and live through the destruction of Jerusalem, the Temple and the journey into Exile.

For most of his ministry, Jeremiah had to be the prophet of doom, telling the people of Judah that the time had come to pay the price for their sins. He had to repeatedly announce that the world his people knew and loved was about to burn down around them and nothing would ever be the same again.

Yet when we sift through the ashes of the book of Jeremiah we find one of the most profound messages of hope in the whole Bible: “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” (Jeremiah 29:11)

That said, this is a Bible verse that tends to be taken out of context. But when read in full it’s absolutely clear that we can’t get to the hope without also facing the reality of Exile: “When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place.” (Jeremiah 29:10) The hope of verse 11 is spoken into the reality of seventy years of Exile described here in verses 10.

Now, the Exile of the Canadian Church hasn’t quite hit the 70-year mark, but we’re starting to get close. The membership of the Presbyterian Church in Canada peaked in 1964 at 202, 566. As of the end of 2016 that number had dropped to 88,005 –

all in a period where Canada's population almost doubled. Yet the toughest years are probably ahead of us.

The Haynes Report produced by the General Assembly in 2012 took a long hard look at this long-term trend, the continued changes in Canadian society, and the average age of church members and anticipated that the membership Presbyterian Church would decline by roughly 1/3 in the decade between 2010 and 2020, with a similar decline in the number of congregations.

This stood out for me because I was ordained in 2010. And experience and the numerical trends since 2010 tells me that the Haynes Report won't be far wrong. In the years since my ordination I have heard story after story of congregations struggling to survive; congregations reducing their level of ministry to part-time; clustering or becoming multi-point charges; congregations amalgamating and congregations closing. We've walked through this reality in the past year in our presbytery with one congregation closing and another now in the middle of amalgamation discussions.

Yet for most of the time I've been in ministry I also experienced very little discussion of this reality at Presbytery meetings. After a few years of this in my first ministry I couldn't help but feel like I was on the deck of the Titanic. We would talk about maybe moving a few chairs, what was going on in the kitchen and the laundry and debate a bit about what the band would play, but we would never talk about the iceberg that everyone could see right there!

So, there you have the subtitle for this conference today: "Hope for Churches Facing the Iceberg." We can only get to real hope when we face the reality of the iceberg. We can only get to the hope of restoration when we accept the reality of the Exile – that the city has burned down around us and we're now in Babylon.

And I don't say any of this lightly, or from a dispassionate distance. When I was ordained, I was called to a little church that had seen the iceberg. In fact, to be even more blunt, they had seen the writing on the tombstone. They knew that they had to make some truly significant changes if they had any hope of becoming a vital congregation again and reach people with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

After much soul searching and a period of interim ministry they decided to disjoin from their sister congregation of 170 years with the goal of calling their own minister full-time (they had never been a single point charge in their history). They did this when they were averaging *25 on a Sunday*. In their application to Presbytery they said this:

“For us, this is a real opportunity to respond to God’s call, and we want to pursue it with all of our strength and enthusiasm. We want to do this without fear of closing, to know that we tried our best.” By the time I spotted their profile they had come back up to 35 on a Sunday and were indeed seeking a full-time minister. Their bravery and vision appealed to me, and I discerned a true call there, in spite of the risk and knowing there was roughly a five-year window for something to happen.

As it turns out we did grow together for a couple of good seasons, and there were many signs of new life. Then I burned out. My key leaders also grew tired, or age started limiting what they could do, or life circumstances took them out of leadership. We kept things going a for a few years after that, but our focus then was on developing partnerships with neighbouring churches, looking at options for different kinds of ministry and leveraging the assets of congregation.

They were ready for change (Session said yes to virtually every proposal I made in the first 2 years of my ministry) and profoundly committed to renewal (they supported full-time ministry for five and a half years!) but as it turns out it was already too late. There just wasn’t the critical mass, and the amount of change needed in the short time we had was huge.

Plus, I was a brand-new student. I didn’t have the experience or knowledge of how to turn a church around. And, beyond the minister who had been the interim moderator, I also had minimal support from the Presbytery. This was not a special renewal assignment – mine was just a normal call.

This is part of the reason I’ve been such an enthusiastic supporter of the Replanting vision here in Hamilton Presbytery. If such a thing had existed when my first congregation had made its courageous leap of faith, then maybe things could have turned out differently. Together we did our best, but it wasn’t enough.

Perhaps you’re here today because you have already made a course correction and you want to know if the changes you have made go far enough and where to go next. Perhaps you’ve come wanting to know if there’s time for your church to make enough of a course correction to avoid hitting the iceberg. Perhaps you’ve come here knowing that you have hit the iceberg and are looking for hope that there’s a way to push off, retrofit the ship and live again.

Perhaps you know there's no saving your ship, but you'd like to know that it's worth the effort of loading the life boats with people and whatever's salvageable and going join another ship that has a chance to turn things around. Or perhaps, you want to know that it's worth loading up the life boats, so you can meet up with the life boats from other ships and build something brand new on the other side of the iceberg.

But whatever has brought you here, I first want you to know that there is hope. We are followers of the one who died and was raised to new life. If it's about anything, the Gospel of Jesus Christ is about hope in the face of death. Yet as followers of the risen Jesus we should know that there can be no empty tomb without the cross, and no resurrection without suffering and death.

So, the second thing I want you to know is that we're going to have to talk about both sides of Jeremiah's call: "See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant."
(Jeremiah 1:10)

So often we want to cut right away to the last two words in this verse – we want to go on to building and planting. I know that was where I and my first congregation were when I was called and ordained there. Yet to get to those last two words, "to build and to plant" we have to face the four verbs that come ahead of building and planting – "to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow..."

What that looks like will vary, but both Graham Singh and our own David Moody, will be inviting us to face the truth that there is no way to get to health and growth, and to effectively proclaiming the Gospel to our neighbours without significant change, and the loss and sacrifice that goes along with it.

There is hope for churches facing the iceberg, yet it's the hope of Israel facing the Exile and the hope of disciples facing the cross. And as people who belong to the one who is crucified and risen, could we expect that it would ever be any other way? So my prayer for this day is that it might bring us deeper into the true hope of the Gospel – hope that takes us through the iceberg and on to new life and new waters on the other side.