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Heart Of Worship

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*Jeremiah 7:1-15*

*The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: Stand in the gate of the Lord's house, and proclaim there this word, and say, Hear the word of the Lord, all you people of Judah, you that enter these gates to worship the Lord. Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Amend your ways and your doings and let me dwell with you in this place. Do not trust in these deceptive words: 'This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.' For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another, if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors for ever and ever. Here you are, trusting in deceptive words to no avail. Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, 'We are safe!'—only to go on doing all these abominations? Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your sight? You know, I too am watching, says the Lord.*

*Isaiah 58:5-12*

*Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD? Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am. If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil. If you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.*

We are living in a time of disruption and resetting. I remember Phyllis Tickle, who was a wonderful church historian, speaking about how the church was due for a large-scale disruption. She noticed that about every 500 years there was a big shake-up and rethinking what it means to be church. The last one was the Reformation. I studied history in my undergrad, and I do love to look back and see patterns from the past that still play out today. The

Church has had seasons of shifting and shake-ups from day one.

In recent sermons I've focused on Moses and the story, which took place around 1500 BC, of when the people were freed from slavery to a life in the wilderness. It was a time when everything they understood was turned upside down and they had to learn to follow God in strange and hostile territory. They had to learn to trust that God would provide in the desert, in the wilderness place, and it took them 40 years to learn it.

The scripture readings we just read this morning jump almost 1000 years from the time of Moses to the time of another huge disruption for the people of God — the attack of the Babylonians and the destruction of the Temple in 575 and the Babylonian Captivity when the Jewish people were carted off to Babylon. As these massive events take place, they disrupt life and make people question almost everything, including their faith. No one likes disruption. But it's usually an opportunity to stop and think about what truly matters and to re-orient and refocus.

That's where the prophets come in. The job of the prophet in times of disruption is to point out (usually in not-so-subtle ways) where people were getting it wrong. (Think John the Baptist: "*You brood of vipers! Who taught you to flee from the wrath that is to come?!*") It was the prophets who cried out and insisted that people look and listen to what God was saying in the middle of disruption. This morning we read from the prophets Jeremiah and Isaiah, but we could pull out similar texts in Amos, Hosea, Ezekiel, Micah and in really all the prophetic books. The prophets point out loudly where the people are living and worshiping a false religion and faith and call them to turn back to a true faith, a true religion.

As Jeremiah writes and speaks, the threat of the huge nation of Babylon is upon them. Within a short time, they will be overthrown, Jerusalem will be attacked, and the temple will be destroyed. And the people — particularly the leaders — will be carted off as captives to live in Babylon. *Jeremiah gives the unpopular message that they have been clinging to the temple — but missing the point of the temple.* They are going through the motions of worshiping God and following the prescribed rules and traditions, but they've forgotten the purpose. They have forgotten that the traditions and the temple are meant to change them, so that they might live authentically — and act with justice and mercy. Instead, they are contributing to the oppression of people. Isaiah brings a similar message, calling the people back to the heart of worship. 500 years later, Jesus calls us to love the Lord

our God with all our heart and soul and mind, and to love our neighbour as ourselves.

Someone asked me this week if I thought the Jewish people were God's chosen. It's a theological question, but also today a loaded political question. (And I recognize that I'm an idiot for even treading into this discussion!) My answer is that *God seems to dwell in the particular, not so that the particular would be exclusive but so that the particular would share and be expansive in God's love.*

'Chosen' is a funny word. We tend to go back in our minds to when we were kids and the teacher named 2 captains to form teams. One by one the captains chose individuals to be on the team, and some were always left to the end ... or worse, some were not chosen at all. I think a better understanding of 'chosen' as the scriptures talk about it is the notion of being called. Called to something particular. Jesus was the Christ, the Chosen One. Why did God choose to exist most fully in a man who was born a Jew in the middle of nowhere-that-mattered? I don't know. Why did Jesus choose Peter and Matthew and the other disciples to follow him? I don't know. Why does God choose the Church, or this Wall Street Church? Why did God choose me? Why did God choose you? (And yes, he chose you! You are chosen!) I don't know. But God loves to dwell in particular individuals *not so that they would be exclusive, but so that they would share God's love.* Chosen does not make us "better than, more important than." As we see by looking to Jesus, *chosen* means a life of service. Chosen means humility. And when those who are chosen don't live out their 'chosen-ness' God sends prophets to correct and call the people back. God calls us back.

Jesus both loves and lives out and fulfills his Jewish faith *and* is intensely critical of it. Remember Jesus clearing out the temple? "*My house shall be a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of robbers!*" (Luke 19:46) The love of God dwells in particulars to share with a hurting world, not to 'lord it over' others. Are the Jews the chosen ones? Yes. But a time of great disruption and threat in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC made them forget their call to love the lost and the least.

You are not living out your call to be chosen ones when you take away homes and imprison and bomb the hell out of Palestinian people. If the prophets were here today, they would not mince words. "*Amend your ways and your doings... act justly one with another... do not oppress the alien,*

*the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place.*” The prophets are still here and still speaking. Whenever people —any people — resort to violence and care more for their own interests or gain and do not care about the weak and the left-out, they have forgotten that they were chosen to bear the image of God.

It’s easy to point fingers at others, but we are in a time of shake-up ourselves. The world is shaken, and we feel the heartache and the threats. It can make us want to cling to traditions instead of clinging to the living God. I don’t know about you, but I don’t always feel like I am the best version of myself when I am stressed, overwhelmed and afraid. That is also the case in groups, institutions and nations. I am so grateful that as a church we have recognized the time of disruption. Instead of blindly digging in and clinging to “how we’ve always done it”, we are intentionally seeking God and praying and asking “What is essential? What is the heart of what matters to God for this church?” God has chosen this church. What are we chosen for? Always, we are chosen *for*. Not chosen *because*, but chosen *for*.

This past week I had the honour of presiding at Neil McHugh’s funeral. Neil was very big into sports, and hockey in particular. He was a broadcaster for the Brockville Braves, and he was an incredibly good broadcaster too. He could have gone professional. For his funeral everyone was dressed in a hockey jersey, including me. Anyway, it’s not Neil’s love of hockey that I wanted to share but his love of this church. Back in the 90’s and early 2000’s Neil was a big part of the renewal that began to happen in this church. As I visited with Neil recently, he expressed how grateful he was for the faith that was kindled in him through this church. And I was reminded of, and so grateful for how the Holy Spirit was calling this church in those years to something new.

The ministers in those years were my father Alan Bennett, and Doug Warren. I want to share something that Rev. Doug Warren came across this week and shared with me. Doug was the Pastor at this church for about 10 years and served with my father in the early 2000’s and then with me. Doug wrote this piece in 2006, so when he talks about going back 25 years from today, he means the early 80’s. Let’s listen to Doug’s voice from the past as read by my husband Alex:

*From Doug’s Desk,*

*A DEFINING MOMENT FOR ME ....*

*in my understanding of what church should and could be happened around ten years ago. But first, let's rewind over 25 years. While out West in my search for a church home, I visited Central United in downtown Calgary. Central was in the shadow of the Calgary Tower, which was next door to the Palliser Hotel where I played piano nightly for eleven years.*

*It was a good experience for me. I liked the newly arrived, young associate pastor, Michael Ward. His messages resonated in some of the spiritual chords that had remained dormant in me for some time. But like many historic downtown, mainline churches it was almost all older people that were scattered throughout the large, balconied sanctuary, sparsely occupying a space that had been designed for ten times as many. There might have been 100 or so worshippers, but most times I attended it felt empty. (Especially since the 'select seating' apparently was the back three rows!) Central had been the largest United Church in Canada at one time, and yet I could see the writing on the wall: the life span of this congregation was very short unless something happened and happened soon. Through natural causes (death) and without the infusion of a younger group of people, in less than ten years they would be down to a mere handful. And in less than twenty, the doors would have to close.*

*Fast forward fifteen or so years, to about this time of year – early August. I flew out to Calgary to visit friends and suggested that I would like to attend Central United. One of my friends said: "We'll have to get there early then". That was my first clue that things had changed. We did arrive at least twenty minutes early. And that was after 15 minutes of finding a place to park in downtown Calgary, finally ending up at a parking lot where we had to pay! And yet, arriving early on a hot August summer morning, the sanctuary was already almost full, including the balcony! I glanced around. Hmnn. Not as I remembered it at all. There were people who looked like they had slept on the streets. (I found out later that they had). There were people who looked like they had just stepped out of Saks Fifth Avenue following their final fitting. There were lots of young people. There was a glorious array of skin tones, a virtual palette of the races. There were young families. There were, what appeared to me to be same gender couples sitting together. (That too was confirmed to be true.) There were old, young, well-heeled, no-heeled, and all the variations in between, and the interesting thing was that the front pews were occupied first – at least that was where we got a seat, and it was crowded around us. A native Canadian woman was sitting directly ahead of me, and not being shackled by pre-service solemnity-conditioning, she*

*started talking to me. She said the group she was with were waiting for a delivery (drugs) and when she heard the church bells ringing downtown, she thought maybe she should go to church in the meantime. She'd heard that Central was a welcoming, friendly place to go. We had a great talk.*

*Even before the first word was spoken publicly, I knew I was in God's House. I felt it, and it's a feeling like no other. As I glanced around, I thought, "Jesus would be very comfortable here." And right on the heels of that thought came another: "Jesus **is** very comfortable here." And you know ... that brought tears to my eyes. The visceral experience of the family of God in all its diversity, and the uniqueness of each family member blending in one common moment of worship of our Creator is moving!!*

*That was a major defining moment for me. When we graduate from the belief that church is the private preserve of a privileged few, and we see it as the inclusive, nonjudgmental outpost of God's unconditional love for all people, something miraculous happens. We become the church! And the Spirit of Jesus is happy to be present, and everybody feels that Presence. Remember it was Jesus in a moment of ire who got down to basics, told the religious leaders and those who were using and abusing the Temple what he thought of how they were "doing church." (Matthew 21:12-17, Mark 11:15-19, Luke 19:45-48, John 2:13-22) As he threw out the miscreants, quoting from Isaiah he said: "Oh yes, my house of worship will be known as a house of prayer for all people." (Isaiah 56:7 The Message) Nowadays, I don't think that Jesus gets all that bent out of shape with us when we aren't fulfilling the mission of the church. Perhaps He's tired of centuries of us trying to do things our own way, for our benefit and our position in the community. I think He quietly, by his Spirit, just picks up and leaves. Sometimes it is decades before we know He's gone!*

*I am so thankful for Christ's presence at Wall Street United Church. Let's be really open to what He is asking of us. I know He has great ministry in store for us. Let's be responsive to what He asks.*

Times of disruption can feel so unsettling, and we can feel fragile. But like the seeds of a dandelion when the wind blows, you can be sure the Holy Spirit will be there too — so that what feels like destruction can become a re-planting and re-rooting of something new and true.

In this time of disruption, may we feel the Holy Spirit calling us back to the heart of worship, to our chosen calling to reach out to hurting people with the peace and the love of God.

**Thanks be to God**