

January 24, 2010  
Scarboro United Church  
Calgary AB  
J. Paul Mullen

Based on: Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10 • Psalm 19 • 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a • Luke 4:14-21

### Dreams: Broken, Restored, Fulfilled

Here is part of an account that may sound familiar:

. . .one of my brothers, [returned] with another group, and I asked them about [the city] and [the survivors] . . . They told me that those who had survived and were back in the homeland were in great difficulty and that the foreigners who lived nearby looked down on them. They also told me that the walls of [the city] were still broken down and that the gates had not been restored since the time they were burned. When I heard all this, I sat down and wept. For several days I mourned and did not eat. I prayed to God . . . (adapted from Nehemiah 1:1-5)

That description was not written this past week in Haiti. It was written over 2500 years ago by a wine steward to the King of Persia, the man who would become Governor of Judah and be responsible for the rebuilding of the city and its temple. The destruction was not caused by an earthquake but rather by a conquering emperor, Nebuchadnezzar of Babylonia. The leadership of the country had been carried off in captivity to Babylon, in what is now Iraq.

Nehemiah's brothers had gone to visit their ancient homeland and city of their grandparents and had returned to describe a city and temple that still lay in ruins. Nehemiah prays to God. As a result of his prayers he develops a dream of restoring his ancestral city and its temple. Realizing the self-centred, fear-based divisions that led up to the conquest still persist, he asks his king to allow him to return and to rebuild. Permission is given and to this day we can read about the restoration of Jerusalem and the temple in the biblical books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

Interestingly, if you read through those two short books (and I would encourage you to take a half an hour and do so) you will see lists of the people involved, the different gifts, skills and traditions they contributed as they were drawn together in a common cause to fulfill a faithful dream and a dream of faith. Ezra was not alone in any relation.

Before I came to Scarboro I experienced devastation. I thought my ministry was successful and things were beginning to move the way I hoped, when unknown to me some members panicked over a deficit budget and brought about a downsizing of the staff. Both ministry positions were terminated and reduced to one. It was a time when my faith and, I am sure, Jeanne's faith was tested. What I thought would result in the fulfillment of my hopes and dreams for that congregation and our future were yanked out from under us. Although shattered by the clumsy way we had been handled, I managed to look around a little and pray a lot. I ended up here! And, thanks be to God and Scarboro United, what a great experience this has been. We are going through a lot of changes together, changes that will call on your gifts and mine, changes that will change you and will change me. And that is wonderful. Together in work and prayer we will become the dreamer's dream.

Some 500 years after Nehemiah the Apostle Paul receives the Annual Report of the church in Corinth he had founded some years before. He is not very happy to learn of the bickering and squabbling that is going on. It is not in keeping with his vision of the church, a

vision he believes he shares with the risen Christ. He sits down with a scribe and dictates a letter, part of which we heard this morning, in which he chides them for their lack of unity.

I don't believe Paul is telling them that they should all think alike in all things, but rather that they should all keep in mind that they are each following Jesus Christ, that they have a common purpose and a common vision. In that context then, he speaks of the diversity of the spiritual gifts that they have received and that they all, different as they may be, have their place in the congregation of God's people.

With the focus on Haiti this past two weeks I am afraid we have all but forgotten the devastation done to the hopes and dreams of so many in December, when the Copenhagen summit failed to produce an effective agreement on carbon dioxide. Our Moderator, Mardi Tindal, was there, full of hope, passion and concern. She was devastated by what happened and what didn't happen, and she really had to struggle to understand what to do next.

Early in January she sat down and wrote a letter not just to her church in Scarborough, and not just to the United Church. She wrote to all Canadians. Her plan for that letter was that she would release it to the public by reading it at worship service on January 17. All this was put in place before the Haitian earthquake. She did read the letter, and gave it to the press, last Sunday. Unfortunately the press and all of us were totally pre-occupied with Haiti by that time. None the less, her letter is important and hopeful and deserves wider distribution. I am only going to read part of it, so don't worry! There are copies at the back if you want to read it in its entirety.

Here is some of what she says:

### **Where Is the Hope after Copenhagen?**

#### **An open letter to all Canadians from the Moderator of The United Church of Canada**

This letter was born in Copenhagen where, heartbroken, I watched the international climate talks fall apart.

Heartbroken because it was clear to me, as it was to many of you, that the talks in Copenhagen needed to succeed, that it is no longer safe for us to go on as we have before.

I believe this is a unique time in humanity's fretful reign on Earth, a rare moment that will have historic significance.

And yet the Copenhagen talks failed. We have no plan to reduce deadly emissions of carbon dioxide. . .

We also have no legally binding agreement. Instead we have feeble words cloaked in mistrust, the phantom of a deal.

Our moment of opportunity came and then went, and here we are now, the fate of civilization and of millions of the planet's life forms hanging by the frayed thread of inaction.

So where is our hope?

I believe the answer to this question is that hope is in you. It is in me and in all of us who choose to reject despair and embrace hope. Together, we will replace the Copenhagen failure with success. It is up to us.

Why do I say that?

Because I believe something important shifted in Copenhagen. Watching the tens of thousands of citizens who gathered at the talks to exhort our world's political leaders to act reminded me of the words of Martin Luther King, Jr., who said it would be "fatal...to overlook the urgency of the moment." He also spoke of the "fierce urgency of now."

. . .

While I was in Copenhagen, I reread the letter King wrote nearly 50 years ago in Birmingham, Alabama, where he had been jailed for taking part in a non-violent protest against segregation. White church leaders were harshly and openly critical. His actions weren't right, they said. His letter, which remains a powerful work of literature, is an answer to their charge that he should stick to his knitting.

He said: "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny."

...

Biologically, we live within an inescapable network of mutuality. Science tells us that. Without the web of life, there is no life. We need each other. We are emphatically, biologically not alone. As the carbon dioxide concentrations in the atmosphere rise, the planet will fail to provide for us. Life as we know it will die. . .

We are tied in a single garment of destiny.

This is why the issue of too much carbon dioxide in the atmosphere has moved far beyond a political process. It has also moved far beyond being just a scientific issue. It is an ethical issue.

...

I say this despite the fact that there are those who would say faith leaders have no place in addressing the issue of climate change. Stick to praising your God, they say.

That's what we're doing.

I do this within the tradition of my own faith community, The United Church of Canada. Because of our faith we have struggled with moral issues for generations, and we have often been criticized for it. We pressed for all sorts of social advances that today are givens: universal education, legal birth control, the social safety net. We did this from a deep faith that hope and change are possible.

...

And so, while it may be true that humanity's sacred stories don't speak about the intricacies of climate change, they do tell us about right and wrong. They are an archive of human dreams, a narrative of inspiration, humanity's call to rise to the occasion. . . .

That is why I believe we must look at issues through the lens of morality and faith. Science describes what is. Faith describes how things can and should be. On this issue science is not enough. We need more. And that is why ecological issues are also fundamentally moral, ethical, and theological concerns. And, therefore, why faith leaders must grapple with them. Why we all must grapple with them.

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So what am I asking you to do?

Whatever it takes to follow in the footsteps of inspirational leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr.

Whatever you can imagine. I wouldn't dream of limiting you to my list. The possibilities are abundant. In our homes and offices, in our places of worship, in our families and community organizations, as individuals and acting together, let us choose hope and action over despair and paralysis. . .

When we do this, we will replace the fearful self-interest of Copenhagen with joyful inclusion and healing of the world.

This is a transformative moment in the planet's history. The world will be shaped by how we and our communities respond in the months to come. It will take all of us. All of you. I can see your imagination springing forth even now, making this safe, healthy new world come

to life. A new world where broken hearts are transformed as we take heart together.

With sincerity and hope,  
Mardi Tindal  
Moderator  
The United Church of Canada

Broken Jerusalem – Nehemiah had a dream. Through prayers, vision and hard, persistent work – restored and present to this very day. Broken Corinthian church – Paul has a dream. Through prayers, letters and hard work – restored and given to us this day that we might give it to our children and children's children. Broken Haiti – We are dreaming dreams of a healthy, vibrant community. We hope and pray, give and pray, work and pray for restoration in the fullest sense. Broken environment – we have a dream of a healthy world for all people, all God's creatures. We hope and pray, give and pray, work and pray for restoration in the fullest sense. Fulfillment is possible when restoration is given a chance, given a dream.