

“Surely they are my people”  
Isaiah 63:7-9 (10)

First Menno  
30 Jan. 2007

So how does one select a text and sermon for such a day as this? Weeks ago I decided to go with Isaiah 63:7-9, one of the lectionary texts for the first Sunday after Christmas. Though the larger setting for Isaiah 63 is not all that pleasant, the words we heard read are very positive ... and are offered to us as a word from God.

The setting of our text reflects a time and people who had been in exile and now having returned to their homeland and lived there awhile, found in some ways not much had changed, and yet everything had changed. They were still not free of threats from neighboring rulers; their land was still devastated; their holy city was yet in shambles; and most people were still feeling the weight of judgment they understood as coming from God. For most, there seemed to be a sense of distance from God that they didn't like at all. They were beginning to wonder if it would ever get any better.

But it was also true that they had rebelled and grieved God's holy spirit before their exile to Babylon and since ... and that too factored into their past and present difficulties.

One of the readings from Henri Nouwen that had been selected for this year's Advent – Days of Christmas booklet speaks to the inevitable reality of loss that is just part of life. Nouwen's counsel is that every loss is a passage to something. It can be a passage to anger, blame, hatred, depression or resentment. It can also be a passage to something new, something wider, and deeper. The human challenge, especially apt for a person of faith, is that we understand we can't avoid loss, but we can choose to embrace it as a passage to greater life and freedom.

God's people during the time of the exile and after their return seemingly couldn't find a way to see their losses or changes as

passages to something new and different ... though even another prophet had encouraged them along these same lines.

We here at First Menno are in the midst of a season of change and considerable loss. Many of us have the normal range of ambivalence ... wanting to be positive and celebrate what has been, yet feeling a considerable sense of loss, wondering what will be next. A significant change happening in this congregation is that one of your pastors is retiring and bringing an end to 16+ years as pastor here.

Being that retiring pastor, I too am entering uncharted territory for me... not knowing how retirement is going to feel, though my friends say it is a very good stage of life. And so our reality is that you individually and congregationally, as well as Jane and I, are about to move into Nouwen's passage toward something unknown to either of us.

It is normal for us to feel anxiety and loss on multiple levels, but by faith we also know or at least by faith are trying to mumble, "All shall be well, all manner of things shall be well," using the words of Julian of Norwich.

Part of this change for me has been dismantling my library, going through files and other stuff ... knowing that I'll not likely need any of this accumulation in quite the same way again. There is grief in that, though also relief now that it is done.

In thinking about this, I came across something that I wrote in Vol. 1, Issue 2 of the precursor of our church newsletter The Vine, then called 1<sup>st</sup> Menno Notes, entitled, "Reflections on our Need to Move on" and I quote:

**Change is difficult for all of us. We say we want it, need it, and desire it ... but it is still hard and often disturbing when we actually do it. Why is that?**

**We know what we've got, where things are, and who we are in relation to most everything and everybody. It may be good, bad, or so-so, but at least we know our place. Change puts things out of whack. We don't know how or if we'll fit ... so we tend to resist the unknown. We don't like to feel displaced or out of control. Who knows if it will be better? It might be worse. Our fears surge past our desire to be calm and full of faith.**

**In our heads we know that to stay the same is probably not only status quo, it is really losing ground. But in our hearts, we are afraid. It is then that we need to encourage each other, to realize Christ is ahead of us and the Spirit is in us, as was true in the past. It's okay to be afraid (for a bit), but to stay there is to miss our chance for growth (another word for change).**

**Our image of what's ahead can be negative or positive; but it's amazing how often our images of the future become become self-fulfilling prophecies. I choose to think we will experience some very positive spiritual growth as we disconnect from 912, wander through 908, and finally reach 902 come December 1992. Remember: We are still First Mennonite Church and Jesus is still Lord!**

That was written November 1991 ... a couple of months after I became pastor here and we were trying to anticipate a move down the alley to this building, but wondering if we had made the right decision. Here we are again ... anticipating a different kind of move and change; this time the building is the same, but I'm moving. But together we can celebrate that God has been faithful and God's mercy has been extended to each of us and to scores of others who have journeyed with us in the past ... some for a long time and some for shorter periods of time.

And so like the Isaiah 63 text says, let us encourage each other as we recount silently or aloud the gracious deeds of the LORD, praising God for all that the Lord has done for us. As I personally think of all of the persons I've been blessed to know here, who have been part of this congregation, who have allowed me to walk a piece with them on his or her respective journey of faith ... I can only step back and say with thanksgiving in my heart, words adapted from our text this morning: **Surely these folks have been my people. And together we have been God's people.**

Each of us here are recipients of God's mercy, comfort, encouragement, forgiveness and empowerment. For the most part, on most days, we have sincerely wanted to be Christ's followers in our world ... offering healing and hope in Christ's name. But we live in challenging times and sometimes society seems all too successful in squeezing us into its mold. We are not immune from these pressures. Be alert brothers and sisters ... listen to the Spirit within and the biblical texts that you'll continue to need in the years ahead.

This is not a new reality ... it is the reality of life. Changing but a few of the particulars, these were also the realities of those to whom the words of the prophet were written. No matter in what era or what the circumstance, God's people need God's empowerment, and God's divine-human community of real flesh and blood people. Keep on keeping on ... and on those days when all you can do is show up ... show up. Bidden or not, God will be present. Know that what the Lord has started in your lives will be brought to completion ... in you individually and as a congregation.

As of tomorrow, December 31, 2007, I will no longer be your pastor, nor will I function in any of those former roles. You will still be in my prayers and I love you deeply, but for your sake, my sake and the sake of your future pastoral leadership the break and the boundaries must be clear. Future contacts will be simply as friends ... as fellow

travelers on the journey of faith. I will not avoid you but neither will I discuss church matters. That will no longer be appropriate.

May the Lord bless you richly in the days and years ahead, far beyond anything you can now imagine. Thank you for inviting and allowing me to journey with you in the most sacred and intimate of ways as your pastor. On those occasions when I let you down or wasn't there, I ask your forgiveness. On those occasions when I was, let us both thank the One who made it possible ... Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.