

## RESTORATION OR RESURRECTION

Jeremiah 29: 1-14

Have you ever had something unfortunate or even terrible happen to you - maybe a failure of some kind, a loss, an injury, or a breakdown in a relationship? And then even as you struggled for a long time to find your way, you did eventually do so, and then learned and grown from the experience in ways you could never have imagined? When we lose something or someone precious or when we lose a way of life as we have known it, our hope always is for restoration. But what if we cannot restore what's been lost?

Maybe we've lost our home to a fire or flood and we can never regain all the artifacts and items that made our house a home even if we can rebuild. Maybe we've lost our health or a loved one has lost theirs and our lives have changed forever and can never go back to how they were? Maybe we have had to leave our homeland as refugees because the conditions there became unbearable or unsafe. Maybe we have lost our innocence as we have witnessed and suffered some trauma of violence, abuse or neglect. Maybe we have suffered intergenerationally as our land, our language and culture and so much more have been taken from us and we can never go back to the way things were. What future can we hope for if we cannot restore what we have lost?

Today is Orange Shirt Sunday and tomorrow is Truth and Reconciliation Day here in Canada where we take the time to acknowledge our broken relationship with first peoples of this land and how we are on a journey of healing as Canadians toward hoped for reconciliation. Even as we cannot restore what has been taken and what has been lost, is it possible for something new to be born? And in this regard let me offer two examples.

The first is Phyllis Webstad, the person who is credited with originating what has become a yearly tradition across Canada – Orange Shirt Day. Some of you know this story. As a young girl Phyllis was forced to go to a residential school. Wearing a bright orange shirt she had bought with her grandmother was a reminder that she was surrounded by a loving family and community even though she was going to a different kind of school separated from all that.

Upon arrival at the school, however, she was forced to take off her shirt and replace it with the drab colours of a school uniform all children were wearing. This was the beginning of a steady process of stripping Phyllis of all that made her a distinctive, unique and precious child of her Creator God. She and other children were forbidden to speak their language, their hair was cut and anything else that linked them to their identity as indigenous children belonging to particular peoples, communities and families were stripped from them. And even though Phyllis did see her family from time to time, the damage in terms of her self-worth was overwhelming, leading her in later life to addiction and relationships where she accepted abuse. So what

happened to Phyllis since all that? Could she ever restore what had been lost? Could she ever move past all that had happened to her?

Before we continue with Phyllis' story I'd like to also bring in the story of another indigenous person: Tomson Highway. His childhood memoir entitled "Permanent Astonishment" was our focus of discussion at our book club gathering this past week. Tomson too went to a residential school, but in his case, it was a choice his parents, like many indigenous parents in northern communities, made given the realities they all lived. In a world dominated by European North America, learning how to function and thrive in that world was going to be essential.

And in Tomson's case, he ended up going to a residential school where all the children were from his and other northern communities, where they continued to speak their language and where they did not suffer the kind of mistreatment and neglect so many other indigenous children did in other schools. So what happened to Tomson? He thrived. Despite the fact that he didn't fit the gender expectations of a typical male in his world, despite the fact that he was much more impassioned by the arts than by sports, despite the fact that he and other children were thrust into a culturally different world in every way possible, despite even abuse all boys suffered by one priest in particular, Tomson was somehow equipped unlike many other children to ride the wave and make possible for his life what for many other children was not possible. How did that happen and what can that teach us?

Well, neither Tomson nor Phyllis could ever restore the world of their childhood as beautiful and magnificent as it was. Bigger powers were forcing change, disruption and displacement. Whole ways of life and identity were being lost. How did they move forward and what can they teach us about moving forward in our lives as individuals and as Canadians?

Let's dive into our scripture readings for some revelatory guidance. Jeremiah the prophet lived in a time of huge upheaval and loss for his people. Great colonial powers, not European, but Babylonian, invaded the land of the indigenous Hebrews and dispossessed them of it. Those who survived the invasion were split up. Many of the leaders, the elite and the nobility were taken into exile to serve in Babylon, while those working the land were left behind to continue farming because their new rulers needed the profits from the produce. Keeping the people down, moving them out, forcing them to serve a foreign agenda, leaving them no time or space to grieve their dead and all they had lost. you can imagine the trauma they were left to absorb and cope with.

There were other prophets and religious officials besides Jeremiah. What was their message and their vision? They gave the people false hopes, telling them that the invasion, disruption and exile will be short lived. People will be able to return and rebuild. Restoration would happen

again and it would happen within the lifetime of the survivors. Things would get better and soon.

But here's what Jeremiah, the lone prophet, had to say about that: "Do not let the prophets and the diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, says the Lord." Wow! Pretty harsh condemnation there Jeremiah. So what do you hear God saying to the people? "For thus says the Lord," continues Jeremiah: "Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place." In other words, there will be no possibility for you to return or restore what you have lost in your lifetime. It will take generations. Seventy years is several generations if you take it literally, but seventy is a multiple of seven, which biblically speaking means a time of completion like the seven days of creation. It will take the time it takes. Don't look over your shoulder thinking it's going to come fast. It won't. What has changed has changed everything. You need to face that and come to terms with that.

Wow! Pretty devastating Jeremiah! No wonder very few were interested in heeding Jeremiah's prophecy. But for those few who were willing to listen to one with courage to speak a harder truth, what guidance from the Lord did Jeremiah offer for how they were to live given this long-term upheaval and devastating loss?

"Thus says the Lord of hosts" to all the exiles sent to Babylon: "Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare." Wow! So what does this mean?

It means that given what has happened, don't focus on restoration, but open your hearts and your energies to resurrection. Resurrection means that the life you have to build is a new life. Yes, you carry all that is precious of your loves and memories of your past life with you, but you build something new with it all, open to your new circumstances in the new place you are in. You invest in your new life and open yourself to all the new ways you may find blessing and purpose in it. Wow! A difficult message to hear if you're still stuck in the past and all you have lost. But an important message if you have enough love, courage and will to rise up into whatever will come, trusting all you have been through will become the seeds of a new kind of flourishing of life.

So how does that kind of message land for you? If you read all of the book of Jeremiah you will see Jeremiah's prophecies were largely rejected and Jeremiah suffered a lot as a result. People were not ready to hear his message. It was too difficult. Many were too stuck in the bitterness

of their loss. But history has proved Jeremiah right and this is why his book of prophecy is in the biblical canon. History proved that his vision was more authentic a vision of God for the people. Resurrection not restoration. Easter is not a restoration of life before Good Friday, but a totally new kind of life, taking the Good Friday that has changed everything and making of it something beautifully new.

We can't control what happens in the world and what happens to us. Yes we must influence toward good wherever we can, with all our protest and compassionate service, our good work and generous hearts. But even we can get caught up in systems of injustice and colonial oppression because we are so inside them. We benefit from them and cannot see all the hurt and harm they cause those afflicted by this same system.

And it's the same with our personal hurts, harms and losses. When we are so inside what we have lost and are weighed down by it, it's very hard to step outside of all that and see the possibilities of resurrection. We long for restoration and it's hard to get past the sorrow. It's hard to see how our sorrows and losses can become means of blessing in a new life where we can offer special compassion and presence to other sufferers because of what we've been through and how we have come through. We build new connections and new kinds of intimacy, gratitude and even joy.

So, what about Phyllis Webstad and Tomson Highway? Phyllis made something beautiful out of her life... She moved past a life of addiction and abuse, began to rebuild her self-worth and developed a rich family circle around her. This was only possible because she also re-connected with her indigenous traditions and spirituality, her indigenous identity and community. And now, she teaches and empowers others to rise up also, walking the journey alongside them from death to resurrection.

With Tomson Highway, you can look him up on the internet. He has become a successful artist, writer, musician, mentoring many others, and as a two-spirit person also championing the cause of LGBTQI+ identities. And all this he credits first to his parents who believed in him and empowered him with an "all-things-are-possible" spirit, embracing every moment and experience of life on mother earth as a wondrous gift from Creator God and Christ-Spirit.

So what about you and me and us together? As Canadians, may our journey of learning, repenting, and seeking ways to rebuild connections with first peoples of this land and our mother earth not be about resurrection into a new way of life in all our relations? And what about our personal lives, with all we have been through - the beautiful and the good as well as the tragic and the painful? May it not all serve the cause of resurrection into ever new ways of being, of connection, of believing, hoping, loving and caring?

May it be so, for you and for me and for us together... Amen.

