

REFLECTION: Lent 5, March 29/09

The people of Judah were devastated: homeless, exiled, adrift in a foreign land among people whose language, culture and faith were dramatically different from their own. Until now, they really had thought that somehow things were going to turn out OK for them. Caught between the might of the Assyrian empire to the north and the power of Egypt to the south, they had trusted in their army and in political alliances to save them. First, their king was killed. Then their new king was made a puppet ruler under the Babylonians, who had crushed Assyria, Egypt, and everything in between. Jerusalem's rulers and its young men were marched away; but again, their leaders denied reality and revolted against the Babylonians. This time the temple treasury was looted, the king and 10,000 of Judah's brightest, strongest and best were marched away; and then – yet again – the rulers rebelled, this time allying with Egypt to defy the Babylonians. The inevitable happened, and after months of siege their capital city was burned to the ground, with most of the rest of the people forced to make the long march to Babylon. Through all this, the people had heard the warnings of the prophet Jeremiah – they'd heard him lamenting and moaning in the streets for the coming fate of the nation; but they didn't want to believe it. They closed their eyes to the obvious, refused to hear the warning of God's prophet, and even had him arrested more than once. Yet in the aftermath of this disaster, God gave Jeremiah a different word to speak: a word of hope in the midst of exile, of life to arise from the smoldering remains of a holy city and the despairing remains of a holy people.

Out of that time of exile in Babylon came the gathering together of the Scriptures, the beginning of the synagogues, the development of religious leaders whose primary purpose was teaching and passing on the faith, as well as rituals that were more personal and more portable than the rituals of temple and court. It was a terrible, painful experience: but out of that experience was born the Judaism which has lasted thousands of years, and is still a force in the modern world.

Unless a grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.

There was a son of a rich Italian businessman. He was charming, witty, liked by everyone. Because he was so well-liked, no-one ever made any effort to control or discipline him. He attracted a crowd of other young men around him, who got into all kinds of trouble. He wanted to join the army and win military glory – his first effort landed him in a dungeon for a year. After being ransomed, he joined the Fourth Crusade (this was the 1100s, you see), this time complete with fancy armour and expensive weaponry. He never made it as far as the battle. One day's ride out of his home town, he had a dream in which God told him he had it all wrong and told him to return home. And return home he did. The boy who wanted nothing more than to be liked was humiliated, laughed at, called a coward by the village and raged at by his father for the money wasted on armor. He started to spend more time in prayer. He went off to a cave and wept for his

sins. Sometimes God's grace overwhelmed him with joy. But life couldn't just stop for God. There was a business to run, customers to wait on.

One day while riding through the countryside, this young man came face to face with a leper. Figuring this was a test from God, he jumped down from his horse and kissed the hand of the leper. When his kiss of peace was returned, he was filled with joy. As he rode off, he turned around for a last wave, and saw that the leper had disappeared. He reasoned he had passed God's test.

His search for conversion led him to the ancient church at San Damiano. While he was praying there, he heard Christ on the crucifix speak to him, "Francis, repair my church." (that was his name, by the way.) Francis assumed this meant church with a small c -- the crumbling building he was in. He enraged his father by selling cloth to repair the building. His father dragged him before the bishop for theft, insisting that he make reparation and give up his rights as heir. The bishop simply told Francis to give back what he had taken, and God would provide. Francis tore off most of his clothing, renounced his inheritance, and went off into the freezing woods -- singing. And when robbers beat him later and took his clothes, he climbed out of the ditch and went off singing again. From then on Francis had nothing...and everything.

He took the Gospels as the rule of his life, Jesus Christ as his literal example. He dressed in rough clothes, begged for his sustenance, and preached purity and peace. He founded the Franciscan order based on a simple statement by Jesus: "*Leave all and follow me*". He composed songs and hymns to God and nature. He lived with animals, worked with his hands, cared for lepers, cleaned churches, and sent food to thieves. His life was transformed by the call of God. Indeed, by his example, he repaired much that was wrong with the Catholic church of his day.

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Three congregations in Winnipeg: all with large buildings, worship spaces that were lacking in flexibility, dwindling congregations, financial problems, and questions about their future. They could all see the writing on the wall. They could stay as they were, care for the needs of their elderly members, offer pastoral care to individuals and palliative care to a dying church, and all of it would be gone in a few years. Or, they could try something new. Some of them were talking about doing church differently; some were talking about the need for different worship styles. After many painful conversations, they finally decided that they needed to let go of what had been, in order to do something entirely new. Two of the three church buildings were sold, and the funds used to create a new ministry within a renovated third building.

This was not without loss. As is the case with most amalgamations, some of those people left, and did not choose the new church as their new home. But

those who stayed and became part of the transformation, saw something living emerging from the ashes of the past. St Mary's Road congregation is not perfect by any means – they've had some real ups and downs over the years since the congregation was formed. But they have created something which is drawing people to the church. They offer three concurrent worship services. One is called the Tree of Life: a traditional service with organist, choir, and a typical UC worship outline; it's mostly attended by seniors, with a few young families and some people in midlife. That services draws about 100 people. Then there's Journey Path: a contemporary service with a full projection screen, video clips, a worship band, and an avoidance of church jargon and traditional liturgy. It tends to attract people in their 30s and 40s, about 170 of them. And then there's Rainbow, a children's service that includes worship time and small-group learning time. There are about 45 children and 15 youth in regular attendance at Rainbow. The members of the different congregations get to know each other by participating in a variety of small group ministries, from healing touch to a book club. St. Mary's Road motto is: "An intentional life/ a stubborn hope/ a journey of faith."

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