

Peaceful Endings: Institutions

Jeremiah 52: 17-32

¹⁷ The pillars of bronze that were in the house of the LORD, and the stands and the bronze sea that were in the house of the LORD, the Chaldeans broke in pieces, and carried all the bronze to Babylon. ¹⁸ They took away the pots, the shovels, the snuffers, the basins, the ladles, and all the vessels of bronze used in the temple service. ¹⁹ The captain of the guard took away all the small bowls also, the fire pans, the basins, the pots, the lampstands, the ladles, and the bowls for libation, both those of gold and those of silver. ²⁰ As for the two pillars, the one sea, the twelve bronze bulls that were under the sea, and the stands, which King Solomon had made for the house of the LORD, the bronze of all these vessels was beyond weighing. ²¹ As for the pillars, the height of one pillar was eighteen cubits, its circumference was twelve cubits; it was hollow and its thickness was four fingers. ²² Upon it was a capital of bronze; the height of the capital was five cubits; lattice-work and pomegranates, all of bronze, encircled the top of the capital. And the second pillar had the same, with pomegranates. ²³ There were ninety-six pomegranates on the sides; all the pomegranates encircling the lattice-work numbered one hundred.

Deuteronomy 34: 1-12

Then Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, which is opposite Jericho, and the LORD showed him the whole land; Gilead as far as Dan, ² all Naphtali, the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the Western Sea, ³ the Negeb, and the Plain- that is, the valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees- as far as Zoar. ⁴ The LORD said to him, 'This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, "I will give it to your descendants"; I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there.' ⁵ Then Moses, the servant of the LORD, died there in the land of Moab, at the LORD's command. ⁶ He was buried in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor, but no one knows his burial place to this day. ⁷ Moses was one hundred and twenty years old when he died; his sight was unimpaired and his vigour had not abated. ⁸ The Israelites wept for Moses in the plains of Moab for thirty days; then the period of mourning for Moses was ended. ⁹ Joshua son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom, because Moses had laid his hands on him; and the Israelites obeyed him, doing as the LORD had commanded Moses. ¹⁰ Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face. ¹¹ He was unequalled far all the signs and wonders that the LORD sent him to perform in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his servants and his entire land, ¹² and for all the mighty deeds and all the terrifying displays of power that Moses performed in the sight of all Israel.

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Slide: Peace in the Sand (from July 3rd or something you can find)

Back on July 3 we began a series on Peaceful Ending // Peace to the End. The worship committee met two weeks ago and affirmed the manner in which we have navigated some sensitive topics. Good News, we get another one today as we finish up the series. With this in mind I will begin by providing a brief overview of the topics covered, lay out a rationale for looking at peaceful ending when institutions have run their course, touch upon our scripture text of the morning, and move into a few stories. First, a recap of the summer:

On July 3rd I offered an overview of the summer series and we heard two stories of Peace to the End from recent retirees

On July 10th Susanne named the feelings of being overwhelmed in the face of war and offered encouraging illustrations of peacebuilding initiatives.

On July 17th I spoke of Peaceful Endings at the conclusion of life.

On July 24th Susanne tackled colonialism and racism. She noted the seven generations it will take to undo some of that which has been done, and shared stories of how there is construction amidst the rubble.

On July 31st Susanne acknowledge the seriousness of the climate crisis and encouraged us as Christians to have hope.

On August 7th I got us started on a brief consideration of the Book of Revelation by drawing our attention to the centrality of the Lamb: the New Jerusalem comes in the Lamb's time in the Lamb's way.

On August 14 Susanne continued the Revelation by demythologizing the symbols and imagery which would have been understood by 1st century Christians but which confound most of us.

Which brings us to today: Considering the prospects of Institutional ends.

Slide:

[Celebrating and Mourning as 3 Congregations close their doors - Mennonite Church Saskatchewan \(mcsask.ca\)](https://mcsask.ca)

It may seem like an odd topic for us to touch upon, but from where I stand it isn't odd at all. At our 2021 Annual Delegate Session of Mennonite Church Saskatchewan, the delegates gathering virtually heard about the decision of these three congregations to close their doors. Their testimony of that process is quite moving if you have time to watch their video's on line; I have included the web site link as a footnote within my sermon.¹ Since then, two more congregations of

¹ [Celebrating and Mourning as 3 Congregations close their doors - Mennonite Church Saskatchewan \(mcsask.ca\)](https://mcsask.ca)

MC Sask have ceased operations (Wymark and Prince Albert). In a book she edited for the Alban Institute, which by the way closed in 2014², Beth Ann Gaede cites correspondence from Gilson A. C. Waldkoenig: “Why is it we do funerals so well but often balk at even recognizing the death of a congregation? Couldn’t we do grief ministry and funerals as well for social groups as for individuals?”³

I am not suggesting Nutana Park Mennonite is on the ropes. Far from it, I would say, as I apply some of the material in Gaede’s book to our congregation. Examples of this would be some of the following: today’s event with the roll kuchen and bouncy castle; the financial commitment to sponsor refugees alongside denominational dues / building upkeep / and paying staff; willingness volunteers for fellowship, education, worship, administration—a of these are good signs according to the survey questions. Still, though, the days may come when this congregation may face important conversations. So why bring up the topic?

Well, we do have people from these closed congregation among us: who grew up there or recently worshipped there. There are other people a part of this congregation whose home church may close within the next 5 years. Many of us still live with mixed emotions at the closer of Ten Thousand Villages which pioneered fair trade gifts and crafts. We must also take into consideration the various entities in the secular world more personal to one of us or the other which has gone or may go extinct. Institutional loss is a normal part of life.

In a chapter within Gaede’s book Keith Spencer writes, “congregations are not immortal. Further, like individuals, congregations are born, grow, may get sick, can recover, will age, and will eventually die. Death may come unexpectedly and suddenly. Death may come slowly after a long period of illness. But death will come. Like a few people...some churches may live for many, many years. In those cases, churches may seem more like Galapagos tortoises, or even giant redwoods, than human beings. But tortoises, and even redwoods eventually die. Death is a natural event”.⁴ Again, my assessment is that NPMC may has a periodic cough or allergy but that we are fairly healthy when compared to markers of health. Before we get to a story, I will look at our scripture texts of the day.

Slide: Mt. Nebo

[Looking at “Promised Land” from Mt. Nebo, Jordan – Journey Around The Globe](#)

As scriptures to focus the sermon I settled on sections from Jeremiah 52 as well as Deuteronomy 34. In keeping with our series theme, both are found in the final

² [Alban Institute closes | The Christian Century](#)

³ Beth Ann Gaede (editor), *Ending with Hope: A Resource For Closing Congregations* (Bethesda, MD: The Alban Institute, 2002): preface p. viii.

⁴ Keith Spencer, “Assessing Congregational Viability” in *Ending with Hope*, p. 19.

chapter of their respective books. The verses from Deuteronomy are even the last words of the five books of Moses called the Pentateuch. Jeremiah 52 is a general review which chronicles the destruction of both Jerusalem and the temple in 586 BCE; I chose a portion of Jeremiah 52 which reference the temple's demise.

The bad news, we hear in the text, is that the Temple has been sacked and the loot sent across desert to Babylon. Since the time of Solomon, the Temple had been the central and unifying point of Hebrew worship. At the dedication service of the Temple, Solomon is heard to say that this is the place for God "to dwell forever" (2nd Chronicles 6:3). In a dream God affirms Solomon's intentions (2nd Chronicles 7:12-19). You can imagine the theological dissonance in 586 when the Temple walls come tumbling down and the good stuff carted off. What happens when the Temple doors are unhinged, melted down, and for shipped to Babylon? Rebirth happens. The decentralized synagogue model of worship and study become the norm.⁵ The end of the Temple is not the end of Jewish religious life, but rather harkens a new beginning.

Deuteronomy 34 details the transition of leadership from Moses to Joshua. All this happens on Mt. Nebo which is the place from which the picture on our screens was taken. I have chosen this passage for two reasons. First, it affirms that the tasks laid out for us, or the institutions we love, continue long after we are gone. Moses dies, but the people journey on under new leadership. The church of Ephesus disappears and the Spirit raises up churches elsewhere. TTV closes, and yet fair trade and support of artisans is everywhere; the power of the idea has been transferred to others not named TTV. This is of some comfort but is it fair?

Deuteronomy commentator Patrick Miller takes the position that it was exceedingly unfair that in light of the incredible faithfulness of Moses he is denied entry to the land.⁶ Is it fair that some of the institutions we have valued closed? Is it fair when a person dies far too young? Maybe not, but all things will die. Miller, rightly I would say, taps into the grief we sometimes feel when a loved one or a beloved institution ceases to be among us. Fair or not fair, the God's journey with God's people continues; and that in itself is important to recognize.

Slide: Grace Mennonite of Prince Albert

This shifts us to a personal reflection from Ed Olfert. Ed contributes articles for the *Canadian Mennonite* and is part of the Tiefengrund Mennonite Church. Ed writes,

⁵ John Bright, *A History of Israel* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1981), pp. 436-438.

⁶ Patrick Miller, *Deuteronomy* in commentary series *Interpretation: A Bible-Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1990), pp 244-245.

The ending of the formal life of Grace Mennonite Church in Prince Albert brought a broad range of feelings. The biggest of those for me, a former and longtime minister there, was one of thanksgiving.

Thanksgiving because I believe that the legacy of Grace has been its impact in modelling to the larger community both opportunities and responsibilities to live well and faithfully. From long before my years there, which began in the mid nineties, Grace worked to make the products of Ten Thousand Villages available in Prince Albert. This fostered a growing sensitivity within the city to the plight of impoverished artisans worldwide.

Since those mid nineties, GMC was closely involved with prison visitation, certainly an eye opener for those of the city who saw the institutions as primarily a producer of well paid federal and provincial jobs. To relate to inmates as human beings with spirits and important stories was outside the pale. Grace supported this ministry with some passion.

Grace also showed leadership in the faith communities of PA in relating to, and embracing, non-Christian faiths. The congregation of a nearby mosque was invited for a potluck, an Indigenous Blanket service was held in the sanctuary and named as worship. An annual Church event was serving a Christmas banquet to the students of an inner-city community school.

These are but a few memories that come to mind as I think of the presence of Grace Mennonite where it was planted. I pray that a legacy has been left that can grow.

Ed Olfert

Lois Siemens, a former pastor of now closed Superb Mennonite echoes some of what Ed all alluded to in his reflection in relation to the community of Superb from which Superb Mennonite originally took its name. She writes, “When the town of Superb closed due to railroad closures and the school closing, the buildings were demolished, except for the elevator and one house. BUT the community lives on. They meet in the village of Major at the town hall 3 - 4 times a year. Thanksgiving, Christmas, Halloween, end of school year...Plus women who lived around the church came to quilt on Wednesdays. We were quite an ecumenical group.”⁷

Slide: (Lois Siemens slide photo)

I conclude this sermon with something I mentioned earlier-- failing health in a person or institution can be reversed. This is highlighted in a book authored by S. Roy Kaufman entitled *The Drama of a Rural Community's Life Cycle* which traces

⁷ Email correspondence from Lois Siemens, August 18, 2022.

one rural community's journey through decline towards revitalization.⁸ When people pull together alongside effective leadership, the course of churches, communities, and institutions can move from decline to vibrancy.

It is also true that there are sometimes forces greater than good will which make such revitalization more challenging or impossible. Here I am thinking of depopulation in the rural setting or demographic shifts within the urban setting. It may not seem fair, like Moses on Mt. Nebo or those in Jerusalem around the year 586. Death, however, leads to rebirth. Is that not a central feature of our Christian story?

At the closing of Superb Mennonite Church⁹, the pews which are pictured and some of which are now at Bethany Manor, it was affirmed that even though Superb Mennonite is closed, it's spirit continues in the people shaped by that congregation. Gwen our office assistant, for example, grew to love music as she grew up in that congregation. Duff, our beloved Duff, was shaped by the choirs and compassion of Superb Mennonite. Jill Wiens, now a teacher at RJC, grew up in the Superb congregation, our current moderator of MC Sask (Terry Stefaniuk) became a Mennonite at Superb Mennonite. Laurie and Shelby, of this congregation, are most recently from the Superb congregation. Superb Mennonite Church came to a peaceful ending displaying a spirit of peace to the end. Has Superb Mennonite closed? Yes. But is Superb Mennonite and the Spirit which animated it gone? No. The seeds of the Spirit sown in Superb has scattered hither and yon. One soon begins to see that when a chapter to a book concludes, like Deuteronomy 34 and Jeremiah 52, a new saga begins. The Spirit of God continues to guide and shape whoever the actors and institutions happen to be. This can give us some peace when we come to the end. Amen.

Patrick Preheim, co-pastor Nutana Park Mennonite Church

⁸ S. Roy Kaufman, *The Drama of a Rural Community's Life Cycle: Its Prehistory, Birth, Growth, Maturity, Decline and Rebirth* (Eugen, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2020), pp 191-239 (Part III: Toward the Rebirth of the Community).

⁹ May 31, 2020 Superb Mennonite Church Final Worship Service