

GOD'S OASIS

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King City United Church

152nd Anniversary

York United Ministries

Sunday, May 7, 2023

Do you ever think about church names? They are important. Church growth experts often say that a church should have a name that conveys in some way what this church is actually about, like the title of a book or movie. It should convey something about what people will find when they get there, a kind of drawing card attracting the people in. At least that's the theory.

I have served nine churches in my career, including the three of York United Ministries. Four of them had place names, Woodville, Hartley, Aurora, and King City, which simply say where the church is. One of them was named after one of the apostles, St. Matthew, but that didn't really convey much either. New Hope has part of its name from one of its historical churches and obviously tries to convey a renewal of hope for the future. York Pines, I suppose, is part placename and part a recognition of the pines that fill the land nearby. Northminster – well, frankly, I'm not sure of the thinking behind that name.

Another was named Peniel. Now there is a descriptive name! At least it was to an earlier generation of Christians who remembered what the word meant and the story behind it. Do you know what it means? It's Hebrew for "face of God." It comes from the story of Jacob. One night he stopped to sleep near a ford of the Jabbok River, east of the Jordan. There he wrestled with a man during the night, who finally blessed him and changed his name to Israel meaning "one who has struggled with God." Jacob named this place Peniel, "face of God," "for I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved."ⁱ

Peniel United Church stands virtually alone in the middle of

farm country and its founders built it with a vision that in that place people would behold the face of God.

As I read the lessons for today, especially the passage in Isaiah, it struck me that a descriptive name for a church might be Oasis, Oasis United Church. It might strike you as an odd sounding name, not as odd as Peniel perhaps, but odd sounding. It seems more suitable for a church in Arizona or Nevada, not southern Ontario. Yet we all understand what an oasis is. We can picture one in our mind's eye. Even children acquainted with Aladdin and other children's stories can picture the cool pool of water surrounded by rich vegetation blocking the sting of blowing sand, tall trees waving in the breeze and providing much needed shelter from the sun. It's an easy image to conjure, an inviting image, a pleasant image, but more importantly it describes something that the world needs so badly, an oasis from the world's desert.

Today we live better than kings of old with creature comforts through science, engineering and technology that couldn't even be imagined in centuries past. But, as Scott Peck begins his book *The Road Less Traveled*, "Life is difficult." Life has always been difficult, and it still is. Certainly, in the first world in which we live life is much less a physical struggle than in the rest of the world, but we still struggle with other difficulties in the workplace or lack of it, in the schoolyard and classroom, in personal relationships, friendships, marriages, families, or even within ourselves with our feelings of self-worth, self-esteem, identity and direction.

We need a place to find answers, to find help, to find rest and respite, to find refreshment and relaxation, renewal and recreation, even rebirth. We need an oasis, a retreat from the world, where our thirst is quenched, and our hunger is satisfied. We need this church, every church to be an oasis, God's oasis, a place of hope based upon the promises of God secured in God's great faithfulness. People need to hear and to learn the message of hope from God. We need it.

The reading from the book of Isaiah is set in Babylon.ⁱⁱ The people of Israel have lived in exile there for a long time. It seemed as if they would never return home to Israel and Jerusalem, to God's promised land, again. From our vantage point now in history we know that Cyrus of Persia was about to defeat the Babylonians and allow the Hebrew people to return home, but they did not know that, except for this prophet whom we call Deutero-Isaiah. The people gather about him. They have no hope. They live in an emotional desert surrounded by a physical desert. And back home they know there is only devastation and destruction that was wrecked on their beautiful city when the Babylonians conquered it and destroyed the Temple fifty years earlier. There seems to be nothing that can be done. The people are helpless and hopeless.

The prophet lifts his eyes, and he lifts their gaze beyond the foreign city around them, above their memory of destruction, over their feelings of despondency. "Don't remember these former things," God says, "don't consider the things of old. Behold, I am doing a new thing. Already it is springing forth; don't you see it?" Just as God parted the Red Sea and the people of Israel escaped bondage in Egypt so God will part the desert; the animals will give God homage and not threaten. There will be water. There will be rivers of water! The people will return home. They will be safe. Why?

Because God is faithful. "You," God says, "are my chosen people. You are the ones I formed for myself so that you might declare my praise." "Yes, you have wearied of me. Yes, you have lived in your desert and have not called upon me. You have turned away from me, forgotten me. You have separated yourself from me and from hope. You have sinned. But I have not forgotten you. I will not remember the former things. I will not remember your sins and your transgressions. I will be with you. I will protect you. I will provide for you. You will cross the desert. You will come home. And once again we will rejoice together."

These words were addressed to a people with the awesome task of crossing the desert and rebuilding their life. And so, these words are also addressed to us in the midst of our deserts as we rebuild our lives and hope and strength. God is with us. God will do a new thing.

The church needs to be an oasis in the desert where this message is spoken and heard and learned and believed.

But people need more than this. They need to experience it. God is doing a new thing now and they need to experience it.

I saw a cartoon of a man in a desert of sand. The sun beat down viciously upon him. He crawled on his hands and knees from dune to dune. Off in the distance he saw something on the horizon. Something sticking out of the sand. A sign of hope! A palm tree perhaps beckoning him to springs of water. On he crawled until there it was in front of him, a post, and on that post a computer terminal with the sign *oasis.com*.

I'm sure at *oasis.com* he could learn all he would ever need or want to know about oases. But he wouldn't find drink or food or shelter, or hope. People need more than information and words. They need action. They need to experience hope as it comes to reality and actuality. They need to know that the promises of God are already fulfilled.

"God is faithful," the apostle Paul writes. "All the promises of God find their Yes in him." "In Jesus Christ...was not Yes and No; but in him it is always Yes." Moreover, God has brought us together in Christ. We have a sense of sharing God's Spirit and we have been commissioned to spread this good news.ⁱⁱⁱ

And therefore, our mission is that we reach out into God's world with love, hope and care inviting others to journey with us, to worship and learn of God, but also to develop a sense of personal worth. Thereby our vision is strengthened. Thereby those we meet will see God in us. And so, it goes round again.

People in our community need us to live out our vision and

to fulfil our mission. They need to be invited into this oasis and to hear and learn of love and hope and care, but more to experience it as Christ within.

A couple was celebrating their fiftieth wedding anniversary. In her comments the woman complained a bit that her husband was not very demonstrative. He had not told her he loved her very much. His reply: "I told you I loved you the day we were married. If anything changes, I'll let you know!" We all know that this doesn't work, does it? We need love to be demonstrated. We need promises to be fulfilled.

And we need to know that those promises are not confined to this oasis, to this place, even to these people. People need to know that God's love and care are breaking out into the world. We need to be rivers of refreshment spreading the oasis, bringing bloom into the barrenness, spreading productivity and fertility into the emptiness, sharing the resources of God.

This is stewardship, sharing the gifts of God, using the resources of God as God would use them.

This is evangelism, inviting others on the spiritual journey with us to worship and learn of God, "one hungry beggar telling another hungry beggar where he was found food."^{iv}

This is mission, our mission to be God's people in the world, reaching out to others with love, hope and care.

This is our faith that God is already doing a new thing. Even now it is springing forth.

Katie Gillis was living in her own personal desert. Every Thursday was chemotherapy day, and she would go to the hospital and wait with other parents and children. It was a desert place, a difficult place, a place where danger, fear and pain lurked around every corner. All the people looked tired and frightened.

But on this particular Thursday, there was laughter. It came from an eight-month-old baby boy bouncing on his mother's knee and laughing. She laughed back and her eyes shone with joy.

Katie watched and tears came to her eyes. She felt a rush of emotions, anger, fear, sadness, pity. Her musing was broken by a voice calling the mother and child to the treatment room.

As they walked by Katie noticed that the baby was calm. His eyes were bright and there was an expression of complete trust on his face. "I know I will never forget that expression," she wrote.

"[That baby] changed my life. He taught me that anger, tears and sadness are only for those who have given up. He also taught me to trust. This I will carry with me always."

"Everyone, some sooner than others, must endure his or her own personal [desert]. It is important to keep searching for the small joys, although they are sometimes the most elusive. Trust that these joys will appear, sometimes unexpectedly, and often in life's darkest moments ... for instance, in the smile on a baby's face."^v

"Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?"

So may it be for you and me. So may it be. Amen.

ⁱ Genesis 32: 24-31, In Hosea 12: 4 the man is identified as an angel.

ⁱⁱ Isaiah 43: 18-25,

ⁱⁱⁱ 2 Corinthians 1: 18-25.

^{iv} Quote from D. T. Niles.

^v Katie Gillis, "My Hero," *Chicken Soup for the Surviving Soul*, ed. Jack Canfield, Mark Victor Hansen, Patty Aubery & Nancy Mitchell, R.N. (1996).