

“Location and Dislocation” 1 Samuel 8:4-21 & John 2:13-22

I wonder...is there a political issue today that makes your blood boil? Is there something that makes you mad enough to do something about it? Can you imagine a political situation so important that you would be willing to fight...maybe even risk your life to change it?

I realize this is not really a fair question. We live in a society so far removed from the days of colonial militia's and the clash of empires that it is almost impossible for us to place ourselves into a story like the one of our Loyalist ancestors, where armed conflict seemed like the only reasonable option. We simply don't face their situation; we cannot easily comprehend their circumstances.

And yet, this is exactly what many of us, dressed in wool today, attempt to do through historical re-enactment. By submersing ourselves in the material culture of the everyday people of the late 18th century, we attempt to see the world through eyes of the everyday folks at ground zero of revolution.

As Revolutionary war reenactors, we certainly are interested in the overarching historical narrative of the period, but what really captures our imaginations is the story of a farmer come soldier in a raiding party in the Mohawk Valley, the story of the woman forced to flee with her children as the "Committee of Safety" ransacks her home in the name of "liberty", the story of the African American slave slipping away from his Virginia plantation to join the British army. These are the stories that challenge our big ideas about the war to free America from its oppressive colonial king.

Of course, in this part of the country that story begins with the famous words penned 400 miles away in Philadelphia in 1776. Words that claim, "That all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." It's hard to imagine how such amiable words could divide a nation like it did.

But for many, those words, from the *Declaration of Independence*, were rich with irony. For nearly 1/3 of the population of the colonies, it seemed

that independence from Britain would not bring "life, liberty or happiness," but instead would bring a system of "survival of the fittest" and mob rule.

In our Old Testament text this afternoon we have heard the prophet Samuel warn Israel of the dangers of being governed by a King. Until then Israel had judges and prophets who would listen for God's word and they would follow, however imperfectly, God's command. But now, Israel has cried out for a king.

Following God's instruction, Samuel warns the people, "[A king] will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. He will take one-tenth of your grain and give them to his officers" (1 Sam 8:11-18)... the list goes on. But of course, this is not only the downside of having a king; this is also the problem of any form of centralized government; democratic or otherwise.

Even seemingly benevolent democracies build large standing armies to protect the nation's interests, national banks to store and accumulate surpluses of wealth, a national tax system to sustain it and a significant bureaucracy to administer it. As we well know, even "well intentioned" governments are wrought with corruption and injustice. Even democracies that set out to achieve things like "life, liberty and freedom" can inflict oppression and bondage on those who stand just outside the privileged majority.

Imagine the tough conversations going on around the dinner tables of those ordinary folks living in the colonies in those difficult years leading up to the Revolution. Imagine the angst people must have felt, trying to discern how they fit into this unwelcome conflict. Support the king and accept the way things are, or reject the King and risk everything on a big idea from Philadelphia?

A few months ago, my reenactment group, The Loyalist Fifes and Drums, participated in the rededication of a restored monument at the beautiful UEL Park just down the road in Adolphustown. The monument was originally dedicated in 1886, during the centennial celebrations of the Loyalist landing. The monument's engraving reads, "IN MEMORY OF THE UNITED EMPIRE

LOYALISTS WHO THROUGH LOYALTY TO BRITISH INSTITUTIONS LEFT THE U.S. & LANDED ON THESE SHORES ON THE 16th OF JUNE A.D. 1784."

"Through loyalty to British institutions?" That is certainly how the history books recall the story, but I'm not sure that is the whole story for the nearly 40,000 exiled refugees who had fought and fled the U.S. more than two-hundred years ago.

In her book *Loyalist Mosaic*, Joan Magee suggests that of the 1/3 of the population of the Colonies who sided with the crown the vast majority were not "blue blooded English" but they were African Americans, Scotch-Irish Catholics, Germans, Scots, Swedes and Dutch¹. The vast majority were illiterate subsistence farmers². Their religious affiliations were as diverse as their ethnicities. They were Congregationalists, Anglicans, Methodists, Presbyterians, Roman Catholics, Dutch Reformed, Baptists, Mennonites, French Huguenots, German Reformed, Jews and Moravians³.

With local names like Asselstine, Brant, Dittrick, Dafoe, Goodyear, Herkimer, Huff, Wannamaker, and Vanalstine these were hardly staunch monarchists willing to give life and limb to preserve "British institutions."

So why did they do it? Why did they leave homes and families and a way of life to fight their neighbors? Well, that's a tough question to answer. There is no tidy one-size-fits-all solution that can be nicely carved into a monument for all time.

There were certainly some who did it out of self-interest; they owned businesses or held positions of office that would be in jeopardy if the British didn't control the colonies, but this was a small minority. African Americans were loyal because they were promised their freedom from slavery if they left their "masters" and joined Loyalist regiments. Aboriginal allies fought alongside the Loyalists because it seemed to them like the best option between two rather bad options.

¹ Magee, Joan. *Loyalist Mosaic, A Multi-Ethnic Heritage*. Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1984. p.22.

² Allen, Robert S. *The Loyal Americans: The Military Role of the Loyalist Provincial Corps and their Settlement in British North America, 1775-1784*. National Museums of Canada, 1983. p.100.

³ Knowles, Norman J. *Inventing the Loyalists: the Ontario Loyalist tradition and the creation of usable pasts*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997. p.17

But the largest reason for remaining loyal was that being ruled by a tyrant 4000 miles away seemed like a better option than being ruled by 4000 tyrants a few miles away. For the minority groups of the 13 colonies, they knew they would be no better represented by a government selected by popular vote than they would by a king. Neither option promised much freedom or liberty.

In the last line of our reading from 1 Samuel the people of Israel proclaim, "Give us a king over us, so that we also may be like other nations and that our king may govern us and go out before us and lead us into war." You could easily replace the word King with the word President and you would find similar outcomes. Kings may lead nations into war, but so do Presidents (and Prime Ministers for that matter).

The Loyalists (our loyalists) provide an important counter narrative to those on both sides of the War for Independence. A narrative so frequently missed by the history books. They were not necessarily taking up arms to defend their rightful King but more likely they were taking up arms to prevent the tyranny of the alternative.

This diverse group who would find themselves evacuated by British ships and bateau into the wilds of Upper Canada after the Revolution were not likely unanimous in their love for monarchy; but they knew that as a minority voice in the new United States they were not in a position to thrive in its conception of democracy.

Biblical Scholar, Walter Brueggemann argues that God's good order, as it is revealed in our sacred scriptures, is one built upon neighborliness, where there is care for the widow, the orphan, the alien and the poor⁴. God's good order is about "shalom" not individual wealth and success, which arguably are the very pillars of American style prosperity.

In the years following the settlement of Upper Canada, this unlikely collection of people worked, however imperfectly, to sustain and support one another as they rebuilt their lives in this harsh environment. Together they would forge a nation that would always be just a little bit different, just a little bit more tolerant, and just a little bit more diverse.

⁴ Brueggemann, Walter. *Reality, Grief, Hope: Three Urgent Prophetic Tasks*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co. 2014. p.164.

The hard reality of the Loyalists transplanted into a strange land reminds me of God's command to the Israelites exiled in Babylon. Because like the Loyalists, the Israelites never imagined that Israel would fall and exile would be their lot. They were like fish out of water...dislocated and without a sense of identity or purpose. What now? Jeremiah delivers God's message to them saying:

This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper (Jer 29:4-7).

For the Loyalists, exile in the wilds of Canada was not how they expected their story to end. They had fought hard, followed their conscience and hoped for a different outcome. Canada was the kind of place you might threaten to send your kids if they didn't eat their peas at dinner time, but now it was also home.

In our sacred scriptures, time of exile, be it in the wilderness searching for the Promised Land or captivity in Babylon) is not only a time of loss and grief. Sometimes exile can be fruitful and God-filled too. There are possibilities in times of dislocation that do not exist in times of location.

On February 3rd 1792, a group of neighbors gathered in this spot to begin plans to build a church. As a result of that meeting they wrote, "Dear Friends and Brethren, As Almighty God has been pleased to visit us in this wilderness land with the light of a preached gospel, we think it requisite to build a Meeting-house or Church for the more convenient assembling of ourselves together for social worship before the Lord.⁵" Even in exile God was there...God was doing a new thing.

In many ways, in this region, in those early days, it was Methodism that offered this diverse ethno-cultural group a viable spiritual option; the glue that bound them together. It was the flexibility of Methodism and its

⁵ Lamb, William J. *William Losee: Ontario's Pioneer Methodist Missionary*. Adolphustown: Trustees of the Old Hay Bay Church. 1974. p.9.

ability and willingness to respond to the immediate spiritual needs of this multicultural group that resulted in the exponential growth of the denomination and the spiritual vitality of this region⁶.

Unlike other denominations, who took for granted that they would be powerful and influential in the new land, Methodism brought the gospel to people in a way that met real needs and responded to the changing reality.

And this is the ancestry of the United Church of Canada. This is why we have gathered in this place today; to celebrate our unique identity as it is remembered by those innovators, who in the midst of exile built this place of worship. This is the bedrock foundation on which our church was built.

Deep in our "organizational DNA" is a church that, from the very beginning, stood for a different kind of justice and that took a stand in the midst of a dominant culture. In this place we are reminded of a church that adapted to suit the needs of the people, and met them where they were. In this place we are reminded of the "Get 'r done" approach that has sustained the faith in this country to this day.

Our ancestors include people who gave up everything; hearth and home and community and opportunity because they could not see how the new republic could ever be a community of shalom. What they built here was their new start.

Perhaps the most poignant lesson of the Revolutionary War is that even the most established of human governance systems are destined to fail. No one expected the greatest super power in the world to be sent packing by a revolution in the Colonies. It was unthinkable at the time.

Likewise, in our Gospel lesson Jesus stood before the greatest symbol of establishment of his day, and he warned of its imminent demise. But, "It has taken 40 years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it up in 3 days," scoffed the crowds. Economic and political temples will always fall, because they are not built on God's economy of shalom.

In many ways, those of us who continue to have faith in a faithless world are people in exile; strangers in a strange land. In his speech to the United Church's 42nd General Council last week, nominee for Moderator Rev.

⁶ Semple, Neil. *The Lord's Dominion: The History of Canadian Methodism*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996. p.8.

Dr. John Young said, "Exile is a place where you are displaced and uprooted. We as a church have been displaced in our society and culture." "In exile" he said, "We must either reinvent ourselves or we will die. In reinventing there must be continuity even as we change to respond to our changing context and time."

Perhaps God's word for those exiled Israelites in Babylon, which I read from Jeremiah, are words for us too. Build, plant, eat, marry and give in marriage. In other words, get on with being God's community of shalom. Don't put off real life hoping for something better, for just the right structure or governing system, or even for the tide to turn and the young families to come flooding back to church. But instead, live into the reality that God has given you. Get to work building for God's kingdom here and now.

It's the ordinary stuff of life that takes people from dislocation to location. Jesus' life, death and resurrection demonstrate that God's redeeming love is found in the ordinary places of life.

It is important that as people in exile we enter into the story of both our sacred scriptures and our historical past. Because when we are able to make the story real, we are able to see a God who has done great things in the past, and anticipate a God who will do great things in the future.

Our loyalist ancestors were people in search of shalom, and that search led them into exile. But that was not their final legacy. This building stands as a symbol of their willingness to continue their work as God's people gathered in a strange land. This place of worship stands as a symbol of God's presence in exile.

Likewise, as a church in exile, the work we engage in today will be our legacy. How will we reimagine our context and build for God's kingdom, which is "already" but "not yet." How will we continue to be a church that responds to the changing needs of a world desperately in need of the redeeming and abundant-life message of Jesus Christ? How will we be an alternative community that imagines the radical possibilities of God's shalom...because if we don't no one else will.

We will be the body of Christ when we are willing to build and plant for the Kingdom. We will move from dislocation into location when we engage in being a community of shalom, where all are welcome and neighbors are

By Michael Putnam

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drawn together for the common purpose of being the body of Christ together.

As the founders of this church said, "God has been pleased to visit us in this wilderness land." We are not alone, we are the church of Jesus Christ. Shalom. Amen.