

“Cracked Cisterns”
Stouffville United Church
Sunday, September 1, 2019

Jeremiah 2 and Hebrews 13

In 1804, Abraham and Elizabeth Reesor Stouffer arrived here in what we know today as Stouffville, from Chambersburg, Pennsylvania. Our town was originally named Stoufferville. Elizabeth’s brother, Peter Reesor, came with them on this journey. Peter Reesor would settle to the south in what would be called Reesorville, later known as Markham.

From Jean Barkey’s book, “Stouffville: 1877-1977”, is an account of their journey to Canada. “Peter Reesor and Abraham Stouffer emigrated to Canada. Their means of transporting their families and possessions was four large, strong covered wagons each drawn by four or six horses ... The Stouffer-Reesor menage included pigs, fowl, sheep, cows, oxen, housewares, some farm implements, and food enough for the trek. This six-week trek took them through trackless forests, which frequently required that the menfolk cut a path for the wagons Bridges were built over rivers that could not be forded.”¹

Abraham Stouffer died at the age of 72 in 1851, and his wife Elizabeth died 2 years later at the age of 61. They are buried in the Altona Mennonite Burial Grounds.

As part of my doctorate work, I enlisted Marg Curtis to help me to envision Stouffville as it was in the 1940’s and 1950’s. She meticulously produced hand drawn maps of Main Street, North and South sides, from Park Drive to Albert Street, with accompanying notes of who lived and worked in which building. I offer a few names from the 99 residences/businesses she listed:

Atkinson’s Farm Implement Dealership – father of Marion Wells

The Rutledge’s – Beulah King’s parents

Lehman’s Shoe Store – Jean Barclay’s mother’s family

Shaw Store – sold ladies’ clothing, fabric by the yard. Purchased by the Spoffords who donated the communion table.

Dental office of Bill Murphy – Marion Boadway’s brother

Train Station – Toronto Star and Telegram newspapers arrived on the evening 7 pm train.

Schell Lumber – Marie Cote and Harry Schell’s father

The *Town clock* was attached to a building that housed the firehall, council chambers, town clerk’s office, washrooms at rear, small jail cell, town maintenance department supplies. Upstairs a meeting room and police office.

When I look at Marg’s documents and put them against the photographs of Main Street from Jean Barkey’s history of Stouffville book, I see a continuation of spirit – the brick facades of the earlier buildings still intact, the hustle and bustle of people, commerce, and community tightly knit and confident in its identity.

¹ Jean Barkey, *Stouffville: 1877-1977 A Pictorial History of a Prosperous Ontario Community*, 2.

Both Stouffville United and St. James' Presbyterian are highlighted in Jean's book. And both our congregations have been mainstays of this town in so many ways – from Sunday morning worship, with preaching that is centered in the Word, with music and hymns that lift our souls, offering us a sense of community that cares and looks after each other, celebrating our highs and comforting us in our lows. All churches have a DNA in terms of their founding stories, and the rituals that are predictable and central to the congregation. These have served us truthfully and faithfully for generations.

In the five years between 2011 and 2016, Stouffville grew 22% making it the second fastest growing municipality in York Region. From a population of 950 citizens in 1885², the town is now projecting a population of almost 56,000 by 2020. And this growth has not always been welcomed. There is a discernable resistance in the town towards the 'newcomer'. Over the last several years, in articles and Letters to the Editor in our local Tribune newspaper, these tensions have been captured in words and photographs. For example, a letter lamenting the influx of new people who do not appreciate the historic tenor of the town, asked, "Who puts a brand new condominium in the middle of a town that has been in existence since 1804?"³ Another example: A front page feature of a renovation to a building, just around the corner from this church, on Main Street that changed the historic 1800's façade, with the headline, "Stucco on Main Street causes stir."⁴ The article continued, "You don't expect a developer to come into an early 1900's building and put stucco on a historic front. It's going to look like garbage."⁵ And the next day, someone vandalized the building, spraying the stucco with black paint in capitalized letters, 'IT LOOKS LIKE GARBAGE.' There is clearly a strain in the community, reflecting the significant changes to the demographics of the town in the last several years.

Our passage from Jeremiah lands us smack dab in the middle of a community. A very ancient community with a long history. And things aren't going all that well. God is speaking to 'all the families of the house of Israel'. It seems that the people, the priests, the rulers, the prophets have stopped asking the simple question, "Where is the Lord?" They have forgotten what to ask for, they have forgotten the voice and the presence of God. But most importantly, they have forgotten the story of their salvation. They forgot how God brought them up from the land of Egypt, they forgot who led them in the wilderness, they forgot who brought them to a land of milk and honey. The people forgot, and the rulers forgot, and the priests forgot.

God says, 'My people have changed their glory for something that does not profit. My people have committed 2 evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water.'

In the time of Jeremiah, the city of Jerusalem was under siege from the armies of Babylon. Here is a descriptive account: "The people of Jerusalem are dying of thirst – and the truth beneath these verses is both literal and spiritual. The Babylonians have laid siege to the city, or soon will, the great and relentless army from the north surrounding the holy city, cutting off both aid and supplies. The city's water is almost gone. While there was water in abundance

² *Ibid.*, 13.

³ Stouffville Sun-Tribune, Thursday, November 2, 2017, 6.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 22.

when the aqueducts still worked, that flow of running water has been stopped, and the city's great cisterns are by now cracked and leaky. The people's water is running out."⁶

In Jeremiah's time, and in our rapidly changing time, not only here in Stouffville but worldwide, it is still a precarious time. That even though *we* know the story of salvation within our hearts, and our communities of faith profess it through their caring and loving acts to others, we wonder about the future of the church in a world with different values and expectations.

Sunday is no longer a Sabbath day. Church attendance is falling everywhere. We are not the presence in the center of society that we once were.

Nadia Bolz-Weber reflects on the staying power of God no matter what is going on in the world. In her book, *Accidental Saints*, she writes, "I believe that the power of Christianity – the thing that made the very first disciples drop their nets and walk away from everything they knew, the thing that caused Mary Magdalene to return to the tomb and then announce the resurrection of Christ, the thing that the early Christians martyred themselves for, is something that cannot be killed ... Because in the end, there is still Jesus."⁷

Thank God, there is still Jesus.

No matter how many people forget the story, there is still Jesus.

No matter how the culture forgets church,
there is still Jesus.

No matter how much we wish our children
and our children's children would go to church,
and they never do,

there is still Jesus

who brings us hope.

Jesus is always in this world.

As Paul writes in Hebrews 13,

"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday,
and today,
and forever."

Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁶ Feasting on the Word, Theological Perspective, 6.

⁷ Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Accidental Saints: Finding God in all the Wrong People*, (New York: Convergent Books, 2015), 10.