

Back to Normal? Ezra 1:1-4; 3:1-3, 10-13; Ps. 137:1-6 9/12/21

When I scheduled this sermon early in the summer, vaccination rates were up, infection numbers were way down, youth were beginning to receive the vaccine, and it appeared that this Fall would be a return to normal here at GPC. But fewer people than expected got the vaccinations, the more contagious Delta variant hit, infection rates skyrocketed, and while some of our activities have returned, we're certainly not back to normal. And some wonder whether we'll ever be.

I think a passage from the somewhat obscure book of Ezra can speak to our situation. But you need some background to fully understand what's going on. We go all the way back to Genesis, where God created the world to be good, only to see humanity fall from grace, and descend into rebellion, broken relationships, and violence. In Gen. 12, God initiated a divine rescue plan, choosing to work through the descendants of one man and woman, Abraham and Sarah. God promised to give them their own land and to bless the whole world through their descendants. They were to be a light to the nations, an example of what it means to be a people who follow the Creator.

Unfortunately, the Hebrews continually gave in to the temptation to follow other gods, squabbled among themselves, watched their kings engage in treachery and idolatry, and were anything but a light to the

nations. The prophets warned them that their oppression of the poor and idolatry must stop or judgment would follow, but they didn't listen. So, in 586 BC, God allowed the Babylonians to take Jerusalem, their capital. They leveled the city, including the temple, which the Israelites believed was invincible since it was God's dwelling place. Most of the population was carted off to Babylon to serve their captors. It was a time of spiritual disorientation, as captured in Ps. 137.

¹By the rivers of Babylon— there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion.

²On the willows there we hung up our harps.

³For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"

⁴How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?

⁵If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither!

⁶Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy. (Ps. 137:1-6)

It was a terrible time of disillusionment and loss. But God had promised that a remnant of his people would one day return to their land.

And, in 538 B.C., about 50 years after their captivity began, it happened. After the Persians defeated the Babylonians, we read this in Ezra 1. *In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, in order that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, the LORD stirred up the spirit of King Cyrus of Persia so that he sent a herald throughout all his kingdom, and also in a written edict declared:* ²*“Thus says King Cyrus of Persia: The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem in Judah.* ³*Any of those among you who are of his people—may their God be with them! — are now permitted to go up to Jerusalem in Judah, and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel—he is the God who is in Jerusalem;* ⁴*and let all survivors, in whatever place they reside, be assisted by the people of their place with silver and gold, with goods and with animals, besides freewill offerings for the house of God in Jerusalem.”* (Ezra 1:1-4)

Wow! God intervened in a big way to get his people back on track, using King Cyrus to allow the captive Israelites to return to Jerusalem, in a move consistent with his policies elsewhere. He even helped fund the reconstruction of their temple! About 50,000 of them returned, but what did they find? A leveled city with the temple flattened, the walls destroyed, housing in rubble, and hostile surrounding peoples. Where should they even begin? Interestingly, they began with the construction of the temple,

but not just because they were such a pious people, although that may have been part of the reason. Listen to these words from chapter 3. ³*They set up the altar on its foundation, because they were in dread of the neighboring peoples, and they offered burnt offerings upon it to the LORD, morning and evening.* (Ez. 3:3) They built the altar in order to offer sacrifices to God, so that God would protect them from their enemies! But it was a start, and they were headed in the right direction.

Now, for the main event! They gathered materials and held a capital stewardship campaign and began the construction of the whole temple as we read in verse 10. ¹⁰*When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests in their vestments were stationed to praise the LORD with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, according to the directions of King David of Israel; ¹¹and they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the LORD, "For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel." And all the people responded with a great shout when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid. ¹²But many of the priests and Levites and heads of families, old people who had seen the first house on its foundations, wept with a loud voice when they saw this house, though many shouted aloud for joy, ¹³so that the people could not distinguish the*

sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people's weeping, for the people shouted so loudly that the sound was heard far away. (Ez. 3:10-13)

Well, that's odd. You would have thought there would have been universal joy among the people as the construction began. But that's not what happened. Many of the older folks, who remembered the grand, glorious temple built by Solomon, wept when they saw the meager beginnings of the new temple. They probably knew that they would not live to see its completion. And they were right. It would be another 20 years before it was done.

The Israelites had returned to Canaan, hoping for a return to normality, but things were not the same, nor would they ever be the same. It took many decades to rebuild the housing and to secure the city by rebuilding the walls. On the other hand, innovations that were developed in the Babylonian captivity proved helpful. For example, since there was no Jewish temple in Babylon, the Jews began local synagogues for worship and religious instruction. After they returned to Israel, these synagogues proliferated throughout the country, allowing for the religious training of far more people than was possible through the temple. In addition, some of the worst kinds of oppression of the poor were halted, thank God. At times, the people became more of a light to the nations as they followed God's

laws more fully. And, remember, it was through these people that Jesus- the light of the world- came to our planet.

Like those Israelites, we are in a rebuilding time. We lost a lot during the pandemic, didn't we? Families were separated, unable to gather, even to hold funerals for those they loved. Kids lost some academic progress which will be hard to make up, and college kids lost a year of their campus experience. People lost jobs or learned to work from home. And our country has been deeply divided over how best to respond to the pandemic, leading to deep suspicions of the government and one another. We've lost a lot.

We lost a lot here at GPC, too. Our worship attendance is only about 60% of what it was prior to the pandemic. We're not sure if we'll have enough people to sustain three worship services anymore. Many of our fellowship and learning groups either shut down or went virtual. The same with our children's ministries. We don't know if they'll come back. All of our mission trips were cancelled. Again, we don't know which ones will survive going forward. And while Zoom meetings are helpful, they're not the same as being together in person! We've lost some of our connectedness.

Some of us are like those older people of Israel- weeping over what has been lost and fearful about what is to come. And I think that's OK- at

least for a while. We do need to grieve our losses. But at some point, we need to look ahead at the new reality, and there may be some good things we can learn from this time of disruption like the Israelites did! We are certainly better-positioned to make use of new communication and meeting technologies, which may help us reach out to more people. And, as we re-set our worship and other ministries, we have an opportunity to ask, “What really helps us achieve our mission, and what do we need to let go of?” What kind of staffing alignment makes sense in light of our new reality? And, perhaps we need to repent of only reaching out to certain kinds of people and ignoring others. There will be some things to let go of. And, there will be some new things to launch.

This transition time presents us with some real challenges, but also some opportunities to look hard at what God is doing among us and our community, and at what God may want to do with and through us in the future. I hope you’ll join in the conversation as we continue to discern God’s direction for us. And I hope you’ll be having your own personal conversations with the Lord about how God may want to do new things in your life. What do you need to let go of and what do you need to embrace in order to become a better follower of Jesus, the light of the world and Lord of all?