

“The Hidden Christmas Story?”

III. Rebuilding the Temple

Ezra 1:1-4, 3:1-4: 10-13

ADVENT 3

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For this Advent season, the Narrative Lectionary has covered a period in Israel’s history that we rarely read or hear about- the Babylonian exile and the return of the exiles to their devastated and desolated homeland and the task of rebuilding Jerusalem’s walls and temple and restoring their own lives.

Like Advent, this period was a time between the time- a time to look back and learn, a time to look forward and dream, a time to live in the moment and experience God.

In last week’s sermon, I likened the Israelite’s Babylonian exile to the church’s condition today.

Many Christians live with the nagging tension of being at home neither in this cultural world nor in the Church as they’ve known it.

It seems that many of our older, loyal, faithful members still hope and pray that the ground will shift back and our society will embrace once again the values it once shared with the Christian community.

We live in what philosophers term a “post-modern” post-Christian age.

The era of Christendom, which molded our churches into their current form, is over.

We find ourselves cut off and alone in an increasingly changing culture that is at best indifferent and at worst antagonistic

towards the church.

The parish or local church no longer occupies
a central place in people's lives.

The Christian church is dying in the West.

This painful fact is the cause of a great deal of
denial by those who long for the "good old days"
when churches and Sunday Schools were full.

Surely God will not let the church die, they opine.

If this is the church of the "Sunday Christian"
for when the church's teachings have little or
no effect on people's lifestyles, values, and
priorities from Monday to Saturday,
should it continue?

This version of Christianity is only a façade,
a means for its adherents to appear like
fine, upstanding people without allowing
the claims and commands of Jesus to
surface in their everyday lives.

What is left behind are the few faithful
and true disciples who want to rediscover
the Christian life experience as it was
intended to be: a radical, subversive,
compassionate community of Christ followers.

The prophets of old called the Jews who remained
faithful to God during the Babylonians exile-
the remnant.

They suffered unspeakable deprivation because
of their faith in Yahweh.

During the time of exile they were subjected to
the most pointless and humiliating suppression
by their captors.

Perhaps the most famous case in point was
Nebuchadnezzar's royal decree that at
the appointed signal, all the people- Babylonians,
Jews, and all other nationalities subjugated by
Babylon- were to prostrate themselves before
an enormous idol, ninety feet tall and
made of gold, on the plain of Dura.

Whenever the citizens and slaves heard the
sound of imperial instruments, they were
to throw themselves to the ground and
worship this strange effigy.

Those who refused did so on pain of death.
This is the kind of thing that totalitarian regimes
seem to enjoy: the demand that the people act
like ‘sheeple’ and obey every wish and whim
of their rulers.

Nebuchadnezzar’s decree was no different from
the Nazi’s requirement that Jews wear a
yellow star of David on their clothing or
the Stalinists degree that dissident intellectuals
and artists affirm the ideology of the state.

If one disobeyed Nebuchadnezzar decree,
there was death by fire in an imperial furnace.

Nebuchadnezzar’s furnace was no different from
Hitler’s Auschwitz or Stalin’s Siberian gulags.
The furnace is a symbol of control, or earthly power
that demands absolute allegiance without
question and without exception.

That is why the story in Daniel chapter three
of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and
their refusal to bow down to the idol has
such power today.

There are faithful dissidents today who stand up
to the persecution and evil powers, and say as
those three in Babylon did, “But even if God
does not rescue us from the flames, we
want you to know, Your majesty, that we
will not serve your gods or worship the
image of gold you have set up” (Daniel 3:18).

God did rescue these three men from fiery
deaths as he rescued his people from exile.

As the book of Ezra begins, the sound of
singing is absent.

Israel’s thousand-year history as a nation has

come to an end, she would never again be what she has been.

The book of Ezra opens a half-century after Jerusalem's collapse and the destruction of Solomon's temple.

The initial chapters of Ezra tell the story of the first two generations of returning exiles and how they rebuild the ruined temple.

The first sentence of the book of Ezra is also the concluding sentence of Chronicles. "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 a written edict" freeing all conquered peoples, allowing them to return to their homelands.

What Jeremiah had prophesied 70 years earlier was being fulfilled by the most unlikely of persons- a Persian king

God is doing a new thing.

God has set in motion God's plans and purposes for God's people, and God is doing it through a pagan king, of all people!

The Israelites have been waiting for two generations to rescue them and now through the beings and edict of Cyrus, God is making good on his promise.

So Ezra is the second chapter of the story of God's people beginning to return home. Cyrus, the enlightened Persian conquer, an unknowing instrument of the LORD permits a wave of exiles to return to the city of Jerusalem to rebuild its protective walls and its holy temple, the house of the LORD.

Before Nehemiah leads the effort to rebuild Jerusalem's walls, a priest named Ezra arrives with two other priests, Zerubbabel and Jeshua.

And once they settle in, the first thing they do is

build an altar.

Why an altar?

To symbolize the worship of Yahweh, the LORD

God, was at the center of their identity as a people.

To remind them that their story was another chapter

in the much bigger story of God, to remind them who they are and whose they are.

Then, they went to work laying the foundations of a new temple.

All of this was possible because the Spirit of God was at work among them.

God has stirred not just King Cyrus, but God was stirring the people's hearts as well.

In this new chapter, there were echoes of the past.

God was doing a new thing that pointed them back to creation.

Listen to this line in Ezra, chapter three, verse eight

“In the second year after their arrival at the house of God in Jerusalem, in the second month, Zerubbabel and Jeshua made a beginning, together with the rest of the people.”

They made a beginning, or more accurately, God was making a beginning.

Just like God did in the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, through God's Spirit and Word, God is making a new beginning for the exiles who are returning home.

There is another echo here from the past.

The new thing God is doing pointed them back to the Exodus, when God rescued them from slavery and brought them through the wilderness to the Promised Land.

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah tell a story about a second Exodus.

God is bringing his people out of bondage and into a new life of freedom.

There's one more echo we shouldn't miss.

God is also doing again for them what God

did through David and Solomon.
a building of a house in which God will
dwell with them in a powerful way.

A new temple!

God was doing a new thing, a new thing that
connected with the past, and it moved people
to shouts of praise.

But there were those present who remembered
the first temple.

They saw that it was not going to be just like the
old one- it didn't compare to the glory of that
first temple they carried in their memory.

And so they went.

They lamented because, with this new thing
God was doing, they were also experiencing loss

Perhaps the reality hit in that moment that
they couldn't go back to the way it used to be.

We know what this is like, don't we?

The reality of life is that change happens.

Sometimes that change is something we desire,
other times it is change we dread.

But even when change is a good thing,
it always brings with it a sense of loss. Always.

When I first saw this text for today assigned in
the Narrative Lectionary, I couldn't imagine
a more appropriate scripture passage for
us to read and hear.

For the thirty plus years I have served as your pastor,
we have undergone many changes- staffing
changes, program and ministry changes, changes
with our building and changes with the death
of people whom we love.

Beloved people of God,
there will never be a time when we, as God's
people, are not in transition.

That's because the church as well as the world
are not yet what they are supposed to be.

And we are Advent people- not just for the
month of December but as we live in the
time between the times.

We live in “the already but not yet”- Jesus has
already come to us in the child born in Bethlehem,
and we’re still waiting for him to return
as the exalted King.

And that also means change.

We can grieve change when it happens. It’s okay.

But at some point we have to make a decision.

Will we trust God and step into the new thing
God is doing even though it may be different
from the past?

Or will we try to get back to the past,
which is impossible but it does get us stuck
in the present-often stuck in a place of
cynicism, bitterness, and even despair.

When God does a new thing, God points us
back into the past.

But not to get us to try to return to the past.

But because by remembering the past-
and especially God’s faithfulness in the past-
God moves us forward into a hopeful future

To be disciples, to be the body of Christ-the church,
means we live as “stretched” people,
stretched in between what God has done
and what God has yet to do.

A symbol for Jesus is the anchor.

The New Testament writer of Hebrew tells us that.

An anchor doesn’t keep us stuck in the past
or hold us back but steadies us and holds
us up securely as we move into the wide
open sea of God’s hopeful future.

AMEN