

A Story of Starting Over ... Yet Again  
Rev. Eliza C. Jaremko  
First Presbyterian Church  
Ezra 1:1-11; Ezra 3:8-13  
November 25, 2018

You may notice that its *not* Christmas in here yet. In fact, it's not even Advent. Not until next week, when I promise we'll begin singing Advent and Christmas Carols. But until then, you'll just have to wait.

It seems like Christmas keeps getting earlier and earlier in these last years – we've been seeing Christmas commercials since Halloween. Personally, it drives me completely batty. I'm an 'everything in it's own time' kind of person. Put that tree away until December!

My Grandmother Cramer shared this pet peeve with me. So to tease us both, every year she'd send me a Halloween card for my birthday in September. A Christmas card for Halloween. A Valentine's Card for Christmas. Only because it was Grandma, did I display all of those proudly out of season.

Grandma passed away 2 weeks ago. In the last few years, a number of strokes left her unable to chat or write or send those funny holiday cards. As I was thinking about them the other day, I felt a twinge of guilt. Because I hadn't noticed their absence, until I realized I'd never get them again.

A death, a tragedy, a change in life or circumstance, often makes us look back on little things like this – things we take for granted; things we hadn't noticed; things we didn't realize were so important until they were officially gone. It makes us yearn for the good ole days. The way things used to be. The golden age long since passed.

Today in our biblical journey, we find the Israelites in a similar situation. They had previously suffered a great loss. 48 years ago, the Babylonians plundered their city, destroyed their Temple, captured them, and took them to live 800 miles away in exile.

Last week, we sat with Daniel in the Lion's Den in Babylonian exile. This week, in the book of Ezra, our first scripture passage tells us that The Persian Empire has defeated the Babylonians, and the Persian King, Cyrus, allows for conquered peoples to worship freely. So he rights a great wrong: he

sends the Israelites back to Judea, with all their silver and gold and the holy elements plundered from the Temple.

In our second scripture from Ezra 3, we find the Israelites trying to find their way in their new old land. They've been back 2 years, making it 50 years since the temple destruction and exile. Now they are looking to start over yet again. After their great loss, they yearn to return to the things they lost. The things that were taken from them. The things they didn't appreciate they had until they lost them.

Their first order of business is to build a new Temple on the same location as Solomon's Temple. Now remember, it's *only* been 50 years. Which means, many among them remember the first, grand, gold encrusted Temple that Solomon had built 500 years before. They had seen it with their own eyes. They had worshipped there. They had met God there. Although 50 years had passed, they remembered it like it was yesterday. The 60 year olds had been 10. The 70 year olds had been 20. They had vivid memories of its grandeur and beauty and importance to their life and faith. And now, they had a vision of recreating those memories for their children and grandchildren, who were born in exile.

They wanted to re-create a long lost tradition. Get back to sending those holiday cards. Gather a big family around the Thanksgiving table. Take a sleigh ride. Even if...the card receiver didn't get the joke; or if family now lived too far away; or if there wasn't any snow. Return to the golden age, even if a new age has already come.

Did you notice the disparity between the generations in the passage? The older generation want the Temple to look exactly the same as before. The younger generation yearn for a new version of something they never had.

So here they are: they've all come back to their homeland: their Promised Land. This place that was promised to Abraham, that Moses led them to, that Joshua conquered, that David united, that Solomon wisely ruled. The place they lost. Their home. Now they are back.

So together, the people lay the foundations of the Temple. And when they do, they throw a big, rocking party! They break out the music! They play the loudest instruments: trumpets and cymbals.

They sing together: can you imagine a choir of hundreds of thousands? They dance and rejoice – because it’s finally happened. God has brought them back. They are going to re-build what they’ve always heard about from their parents – this great Temple where God can live. The place where heaven and earth can meet.

How incredibly exciting is that? Scripture tells us that the people responded with a great shout!

But... and there’s always a “but” isn’t there? It’s only the younger generations, who never saw the old temple, who shout with joy. The book of Ezra tells us, “*BUT [those] who had seen the first house on it’s foundations, wept with a loud voice when they saw this house*” (v.12). For this house wasn’t as grande. It wasn’t as big or as marvelous. They didn’t have the same resources as returned exiles as Solomon did at the height of his reign. They couldn’t build it to look the same. The golden age had truly gone.

A new age was coming to fruition. Ezra tells us that although the older generations wept “*many shouted aloud for joy, so 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*” (v.13).

I love that: that the weeping and the joyful shouts all blended together to create one harmonious noise that could be heard from far away. For that is the sound of starting over. The sound of change. The sound of what was lost. The sound of what is yet to come.

This is not just the story of the Israelites in 539BCE. No, this is our story. The story of each and every generation. In our lifetimes, we will be those young shouts of joy. We will be those older cries of loss. For change, as always, comes with difficulty. We live our lives within this tension— between the nostalgia of the past and the realities in the present.

Often in that tension, we lift up the past as the better times. We get distracted by our present struggles in a way that makes us believe those good old days were better. Perhaps, here at church many look back with fondness to when the sanctuary was literally busting at its seams, and we had to build a

larger sanctuary just to fit everyone in. While others rejoice in what we have now: a church of welcome, of care, of service, of genuine love for one another. Often when we goldenize the past, we forget the past had its problems too.

The Israelites forgot that 50 years ago, they lived in political turmoil, violence, war, poverty, and upheaval. Sure, they had the Temple, but life was hard then too. For the real truth is: every age has its goods and bads. And we never get to enjoy living in the Golden Age, for it is always, always in the past. Maybe 50 years from now, people will talk about how great things were back in the “teens.” (We’ll find out then, I suppose).

As Saint Augustine wrote in *Confessions*: “We are forced to act within a tiny window of time – the present – since the past is unrecoverable and the future is not yet available.”<sup>1</sup> So *how* can we honor those great times of the past, live for what’s happening now in the present, and keep our eyes on the future? How can we live into the Golden Age that is dawning?

My family and I said goodbye to my Grandma last Tuesday. She had assigned each of her 7 grandchildren parts for her funeral service. So I officiated, and my brother and cousins read and sang. At the end of the service, the 7 of us served as pallbearers. As we placed her casket into the hearse, I announced for all of us, “Goodbye Grandma.” Then the seven of us just stood there, staring and not knowing how to be or act now that this great force in our life (our golden age) had gone. Then my brother looked at us – 7 adult cousins who are the best of friends today because of our grandma. Then he shouted, “I love you guys,” and he pulled us all into a big, smooshy, funny group hug. So our shouts of laughter joined with our cries of sorrow – sounds that could not be distinguished from far away.

We all live with our great losses. The people and places and traditions who have left us. But we also live with the joy of those we have in the present. Those we can hug and hold on to and laugh with even in the midst of our tears. The Golden Age is both passed and right here with us now. For God always, always God golden. For God joins in our cries. God joins our songs of joy. God blends those

---

<sup>1</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*. As quoted in *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Theological Perspective*, pg. 436.

sounds together – so that from far away, from heaven above and earth below, our sounds blend into one beautiful chorus.

**Ezra 1:1-7**

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:

<sup>2</sup> ‘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. <sup>3</sup>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; <sup>4</sup>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.’

<sup>5</sup> The heads of the families of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levites—everyone whose spirit God had stirred—got ready to go up and rebuild the house of the Lord in Jerusalem. <sup>6</sup>All their neighbours aided them with silver vessels, with gold, with goods, with animals, and with valuable gifts, besides all that was freely offered. <sup>7</sup>King Cyrus himself brought out the vessels of the house of the Lord that Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and placed in the house of his gods. ... All these Sheshbazzar brought up, when the exiles were brought up from Babylonia to Jerusalem.

**Ezra 3:8-13****Foundations Laid for the Temple**

8 In the second year after their arrival at the house of God at Jerusalem, in the second month, Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and Jeshua son of Jozadak made a beginning, together with the rest of their people, the priests and the Levites and all who had come to Jerusalem from the captivity. They appointed the Levites, from twenty years old and upwards, to have the oversight of the work on the house of the Lord. <sup>9</sup>And Jeshua with his sons and his kin, and Kadmiel and his sons, Binnui and Hodaviah along with the sons of Henadad, the Levites, their sons and kin, together took charge of the workers in the house of God.

<sup>10</sup> 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; <sup>11</sup>and they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the Lord,

‘For he is good,

for his steadfast love endures for ever towards 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. <sup>12</sup>But 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, <sup>13</sup>so 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.