

## **December 17th: Return**

This Fall we return to the Narrative Lectionary—a year long collection of readings that take us from the origins of God’s people to the first century world. These readings are chosen on purpose, because they help us trace a particular theme throughout our scripture texts—and this year our theme is “Love in Action.” Over the course of the year, we’ll read a wide variety of passages, from Old Testament stories, wisdom literature, prophetic teachings, scenes from the life of Jesus, and instructions for the early church—but in each, there’s a compelling action that is embedded into the narrative. Last year’s theme was “A Family Story,” and we focused on the identity and purpose of God’s beloved children—but this time around, we’ll be taking a closer look at the movement behind that belonging—the verbs that form the foundation of our faith and life together. Of course, love is the most important verb of all, so we’ll also be tracing how God’s love was shown to our spiritual ancestors and discover how God’s love is still being shown to us today.

As we study together, the goal isn’t simply to increase our knowledge of God—the goal is to increase in love towards God and towards each other. So as we read, and as we reflect, I want to challenge all of us to respond to these stories with action—with real, tangible ways that we can each show love to our hurting world. I want us to take these words of wisdom from our text and transform them into positive change in our community—so that our neighborhood, our city, our country, can be a place where God’s love is seen and felt by everyone.

As we prepare to listen for God’s voice, let’s begin with prayer.

*Faithful God,*

*In an ever changing world, you are our constant loving presence. In the midst of unexpected transitions, you are with us to guide us and give us strength. As we experience all kinds of disruptions and disorientations, you remind us of our true identity and our true purpose. This week, grant us the courage we need to navigate new and unfamiliar circumstances, grant us wisdom to discern how to*

*best live as your beloved children, and as we plan for the future, grant us your peace that passes all understanding. Amen.*

Today is the third Sunday in the season of Advent, and we are continuing our mini-series on the writings of our Old Testament prophets. As I've shared over the past two weeks, the situations of invasion and exile are inseparable from the need for a Messiah—God's people are in desperate need of hope during these centuries of devastation and disorientation, and so these texts revolve around this idea of a coming Savior who will make all things new and put all things to right.

We've already looked at passages from the major prophets Jeremiah and Isaiah, but today we turn to a lesser known author by the name of Ezra. Jeremiah and Isaiah were active during the time of siege and captivity, but Ezra is speaking to God's people from a few decades or even generations in the future—in the time period after God's people have returned to the land of Judah after their exile in Babylon is over. A lot has happened in that time, and God's people are you in a complicated place, both emotionally and spiritually.

At the beginning of Ezra's writings, God's people are just starting to settle back into the land of Israel. They come back to a city that had been destroyed, the temple restored by King Josiah that had been torn down, fields that had been burnt to the ground, and a landscape that was marred by war and violence. So the people coming back from Babylon are basically starting from scratch.

You might think that returning to their homeland would be a joyful process, but I think Ezra's writings show us that this isn't exactly the case. We'll get into that more in just a bit, but first let's talk a little bit about how this particular passage of Ezra's writing begins.

Verse 6 starts with this introduction: "On the first day of the seventh month they began to offer burnt offerings to the LORD, though the foundation of the LORD's temple had not yet been laid." So in this verse we learn that God's people have held onto some rituals and practices of their faith while in exile,

and have resumed their worship of God once they returned to Jerusalem. This includes sacrifices to God, but in a manner that is different from what they were used to because their former altar had been destroyed.

Next, we hear that preparations for a new temple are underway.

Ezra writes, “Then they gave money to the masons and carpenters, and gave food and drink and olive oil to the people of Sidon and Tyre, so that they would bring cedar logs by sea from Lebanon to Joppa, as authorized by Cyrus king of Persia.” Once all of these artisans were hired and once all of the supplies were gathered, we learn that the first step is to lay a new foundation. And that makes sense—just like their community must start from scratch to rebuild their lives together, the religious aspects of their life together must be rebuilt from the ground up.

How many of you have been part of a building project like this before?

Maybe you built a house, or maybe you worked construction for a time, or maybe you were here when Bremerton UMC constructed our Welcome Center just a few years ago, or maybe you just watch a lot of HGTV.

Well, when I was eight years old, my family decided to move from our house into a larger home, and we spent months visiting the building site in our new neighborhood. We watched as the land was leveled, the markings were laid out, the giant hole in the ground was dug, the concrete was poured, and the walls started to take shape. We watched as the driveway was made, the trees were planted, and as bit by bit, our new house became a reality. To some extent, it was fun, right? We got to imagine what our new life would look like, we got to dream about the pool we would place out back, we got to fantasize about the flowers that would be in the window boxes.

But some parts were not so fun. First, we were all impatient—it took much longer than we thought it would. The whole process of packing up our old house and getting ready to move into the new one was a frustrating process—it

seemingly took forever. After just a few weeks and a few visits, I just wanted it to be over! Second—it was bittersweet. We loved the idea of our new home, but parts of us were sad that we had to say goodbye to the house where we had lived for almost a decade. We said goodbye to neighbors, to friends who lived down the street, to the man next door who was always so kind to us. I gave up my big room over the garage for a smaller bedroom, we gave up our cute little cul-de-sac for a corner lot off of a busier road, and we gave up what was familiar for what was unknown. And third, on one of these visits to our building site, one of my younger brothers narrowly missed getting sprayed by a skunk who had been lurking on our property. So that really stunk. Literally stunk.

We hear that the recently returned residents of Jerusalem are going through a similarly complicated process as they navigate the building and rebuilding process. Ezra writes, “When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests in their vestments and with trumpets, and the Levites (the sons of Asaph) with cymbals, took their places to praise the LORD, as prescribed by David king of Israel. With praise and thanksgiving they sang to the LORD: “He is good; his love toward Israel endures forever.” And all the people gave a great shout of praise to the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid.”

This celebration seems good, right?

Well, our passage concludes with these verses, “But many of the older priests and Levites and family heads, who had seen the former temple, wept aloud when they saw the foundation of this temple being laid, while many others shouted for joy. No one could distinguish the sound of the shouts of joy from the sound of weeping, because the people made so much noise. And the sound was heard far away.”

Did you catch that? Ezra specifically tells us that these combined sounds of shouting and weeping were heard from far away. Ezra wants his ancient audience, and all future audiences, to know that these intertwined emotions

were so loud that they could be heard in the distance. God's people made so much noise that it was hard to tell what expressions were happy and which ones were not. Not only were their internal emotions all mixed up, but their public displays were commingled too.

Perhaps some of these returning Jews were grieving that the life they had once known would never be the same. Perhaps they were feeling disoriented after multiple generations in a foreign land. Perhaps they even missed Babylon if it was all that they had known. Perhaps they worried that this new temple wouldn't live up to the hype of the one that their ancestors had built. Perhaps they struggled to see how this new altar would help them, and they saw other projects or needs as a higher priority. Perhaps they were uncertain about the future and were anxious about this new beginning.

So when I say that our verb for today is: to return, I don't necessarily mean in the "coming back from exile" sense, but in a more metaphorical or modern sense. While we might not have been held captive in a foreign land, we have faced challenges in our own context that might be similar or parallel to this rebuilding effort in Jerusalem.

In fact, the global church did experience a hugely disorienting event over the past few years as we grappled with the reality of a pandemic and the tremendous loss of life that it caused. That season, with all of its anxieties, uncertainties, challenges, and grief, deeply impacted churches of all shapes and sizes, including our own.

But now, as we return to so-called "normal" operations, and return to our previous habits and practices, I think there's some wisdom from this passage that we can apply to our own circumstances. As we return to our usual worship schedules and programming, I think we might need to face the reality that rebuilding our communities and rebuilding our life together is going to be complicated work.

As we gather to lay the foundation for new things, and as we prepare to reconstruct a sense of hope and vitality, we might struggle with conflicting emotions. In fact, even today, some of us might be identifying with these returning Judeans, whose both happy and sad cries are intermingled. We might be identifying with this reality of being both joyful and sorrowful as we enter into a new season, or as we prepare for this new future as a congregation. We might be feeling the weight of this task, or the heaviness of saying goodbye to what has been lost. We might be feeling the gravity of our own personal situations, in which we are grappling with a need to move forward, but also a desire to grieve what used to be. There will be celebration, but also a process of letting go. There will be optimism for the future, and nostalgia for the past. That's natural, and our spiritual ancestors understand.

As we wrestle with those emotions, we might need to ask ourselves: what is it that we are called to "return to?" What rituals are part of that return? What events and activities are essential and which ones are not? What about our history do we want to hold on to, and what is it time to let go of? How much energy should we dedicate towards processing our past, and how much energy should we dedicate towards planning for our future?

Ezra tells us that this return to their homeland and the return to the temple is a good and necessary thing—it is the start of a new era in the life of God's people. Even if it is complicated, it is the start of a Jewish revitalization—a revitalization which laid the foundation for Jesus and his ministry. It's not just about the temple or the altar or the specific sacrifice, it's about coming together as God's people, it's about renewed hope and rediscovering our collective purpose. This moment of return is about the future, not about the past.

This is a new era for us as well. Even if it's complicated, it is the start of our revitalization—a revitalization that we hope will leave a strong legacy and make a meaningful impact on our community for generations to come. Our return to so-called "normal" operations can lay the foundation for a brand new ministry to our city, a brand new chance to connect with neighbors and friends

who desperately need a place to belong and be loved. This could be the catalyst for new relationships, new partnerships, new life right here in our little corner of the world. This could be the time when we get to be part of God's bigger plan for restoration and wholeness. This could be the season where we create something so compelling and so beautiful that we can't help but share it with the world.

Think of what we could build together, my friends. What a powerful return it could be.

Amen.