

Ezra-Nehemiah: Return and Restoration

“The God Who Moves Hearts”

Introduction: We began our look at the books of Ezra and Nehemiah last week by considering a letter from God to his people in exile in Babylon. The letter was penned by the prophet Jeremiah and informed the people that while their exile from the Promised Land would be more than just a couple of inconvenient weeks away from home, it would not last forever. God promised to bring his people home within seventy years. In the meantime, they were to “bloom where they had been planted,” seeking the common good of the place where they now found themselves (Jer. 29:1-14).

This morning, as we enter Ezra 1, those seventy years are over and the return to Jerusalem has begun. To organize it in your minds, it’s helpful at the outset to know that Ezra-Nehemiah (originally one book) narrates three returns, three movements back to Jerusalem, over a one-hundred-year period.

1. The first, led by a fellow named Zerubbabel, began in 538 BC, in which restoring the temple in Jerusalem was the goal (Ez. 1-6). (This is where we’ll begin today.)
2. The second, under Ezra the priest, took place in 458 BC, in which a spiritual rebuilding of the people was the aim, on the foundation of God’s word (Ez. 7-10).
3. The third, under Nehemiah, happened in 445 BC, in which the protective wall around Jerusalem was rebuilt, while further spiritual restoration took place (Neh. 1-13).

As we noted last week, there was more than just physical restoration that needed to take place. The underlying question that runs throughout these accounts of return and restoration is how was this people, who had lived in exile, away from their spiritual home and spiritual roots for several generations, to recover its spiritual identity and vitality? How were they to restore their sense of community and live as God’s faithful ambassadors? How, I hope this series helps us to ponder, are we to do the same, after a year and half of life lived in the “exile” of a pandemic? These are not easy questions, especially when the pandemic seems far from over! So, as we hear this morning how God moved in the hearts of his people, as well as Cyrus the Persian king, how and where might God be moving our own hearts in order to restore his community and move us forward in mission? [READ]

I. There’s a new king in town – God and Cyrus

A. Sometime in 539 BC, while the leaders of the Babylonians were partying, according to Daniel 5, the Persians attacked and soundly defeated the Babylonians. The new Persian king was named Cyrus. He quickly established that he would rule his empire differently than the Babylonians had. His ruling philosophy involved allowing all captured peoples to return to their homes, taking their religious artifacts with them, and worshipping however they pleased. Cyrus believed that subject peoples were best controlled if granted religious freedom. At the same time, he believed that such benevolence would grant him favor in the sight of his god, Marduk of the Babylonians, because, he believed, all of the other gods would be praying for him. In a clay encasement, called the “Cyrus Cylinder,” now kept at the British Museum in London, we hear Cyrus express it this way:

I returned to these sacred cities . . . the sanctuaries of which have been in ruins for a long time, the images which (used) to live therein and established for them permanent sanctuaries. I (also) gathered all their (former) inhabitants and returned their habitations . . . May all the gods whom I have resettled in their sacred cities ask daily Bel and Nebo for a long life for me . . .

B. So, while Cyrus was not a follower of the LORD, we do hear that Cyrus believed that the god of the Israelites, the god named the LORD, also referred to by the Jews as the God of heaven, had somehow granted him favor and needed to be respected, along with all the other gods in existence. This he did by declaring that the captured Israelites could return home. Not only that, he would see that expenses for their trip would be fully funded and that any religious vessels, “spiritual pots and pans” as one writer describes them, that Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the Temple in Jerusalem and set up in his own temple (to declare the superiority of his god Marduk), should also be returned, in the exact amount as had been taken.

C. However, from an Israelite perspective, as they looked back on it, there was more to the story than simply a proclamation and the signing of some documents by Cyrus; all of this had happened because the LORD had moved the heart of Cyrus to act on behalf of Lord’s people. This was the God of heaven and earth, sovereignly working through human beings, some faithful, some not, to accomplish his purposes. This God had the power to move the powers that be. In the midst of human planning, this God’s plans were moving forward. Helping them to conclude this was the fact that their return had echoes of the experience of their ancestors during the exodus from Egypt, when neighbors of the Israelites sped them on their way with silver and gold, as well as other gifts, just as now their neighbors in exile were doing (cf. Ex. 12:35f). Just as it was, we saw last week, God’s hand that had brought the Babylonians in judgment against his people and had them taken into exile, so it was his hand that was bringing them back home again. As one commentator observes, while there are no overt miracles in Ezra, there is just one imperial decision after another that is quietly initiated by the LORD.

D. Here we see, though certainly cannot fully explain, how God gives individuals the freedom to act, while he acts at the same time to ensure that his will is done. The prophecy of Jeremiah is being fulfilled. This is the God who keeps his promises. He has not been defeated and in fact can be trusted as he works his purposes out, even in the midst of trying times. Who would’ve imagined that God’s sovereign “moving of the heart” of a Persian king would result in a tiny community, tucked away in a little corner of the world, becoming the people from whom the savior of the world would come, and ultimately evolving into a multinational community of faith that would long outlast the Persian Empire, or any other empire that the world will ever see?! This is the God who is at work in the world. Do we believe it?

Illustration: At our closing summer vesper service in NH last week, we asked a friend, who we had not been able to connect with during the summer, how she was doing. She answered honestly, “Not well!” Rama then gently probed whether this was caused by something personal going on in her life, or simply the sense of being overwhelmed by all that is going on in the world. She said it was the latter. I think all of us might be inclined to answer in that same way. This is not an easy time! In the midst of our trials and our tears, in this time of “exile,” can we trust that God’s hand is “still on the wheel,” that, despite disease and floods, terrorism and racism, political and social unrest, God is still working his purposes out? Can we trust that God still has a role for his church, the gathering of his people into community?

II. There's a new people coming to town – God and the returning Israelites

A. Let me just say a word about that, especially to those of you still participating virtually with us. Know that I've truly struggled with how best to lead us all in this time of return and restoration, even on this day we've called "homecoming." On the one hand, I am so glad that we have been able to livestream our worship and offer it to you at home. For those of you who are unable physically to make it to 39 Main St., I'm glad we can come to you. For those of you who have underlying conditions and do not feel it's safe for you to be among a large group of people, I'm glad we can come to you. And for those of you who are exploring the Christian faith, or what we're about as a church, and probably wouldn't come to so explore in person because what we do here still seems kind of weird to you, I'm glad we can come to you. For all of these reasons, we will continue to offer a virtual worship option.

B. But, on the other hand, for those of you who are still at home because it's more convenient or more comfortable, I appreciate that, but I'm also praying that God would move your hearts to rethink that decision! For many, life in Babylon had become comfortable. Going back to Jerusalem was not going to be easy. It meant returning to a place where their home had been destroyed, it would not be a place free from opposition, and for those who had been born in Babylon, it had never actually ever been home. So, not all in exile chose to return. Yet, because the text goes on to focus on those who returned, not those who didn't, there is something about God's desire, and our need, for community that we need to pay attention to.

Authors Kris Rocke (not the comedian!) and Joel Van Dyke point out in their book, *Geography of Grace*, that when the resurrected Christ appeared to his disciples, the first thing he did was to show them the wounds of his suffering. Then he immediately constituted them as a community, saying, "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you" (Jn. 20:19-21), not be "you" as individuals, but "y'all" as a community. "It is a community," they write, "that de-centers, disrupts, subverts, and re-centers all of humanity," (231).

C. We have a relational God and so our faith is a relational faith. Since God's promise to Abraham (Ge. 12), God has determined to work in the world, in and through community. There is something about being formed together, as we worship, learn, and even fellowship over coffee and a munchkin, ways that we encourage, challenge, and rub up against one another, that takes place in no other way, and that we can't "fast forward" by (you know who you are!). It's not that we're not a church when worshipping from home when health circumstances have been extreme. But the fruit of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control – is relational and grows in us as, and when, we are in relationship.

D. Additionally, we as followers of Jesus are called to be a "peculiar people," to use the old King James translation. As Peter puts it, using language originally describing Israel to now describe the community that is the church:

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. – 1 Pet. 2:9

We are peculiar because we're called to live differently from the world around us and in so living, reveal the living God. We are peculiar, as another writer, James Bryan Smith explains, because we have a peculiar God. This God loves humans so much that he became one of them and died for them. This God forgives when we don't deserve it. This God is generous, giving a day's pay to workers who only worked

an hour. This God loves to hang out with sinners. This God allowed a good friend to die before going to care for him. This God runs after his children, even though they have rejected him. But living differently so that we can reveal this peculiar God, isn't easy, surrounded, as we are, on a daily basis, by life in the kingdom of the world. We need to be in a mutually supportive, kingdom of God community to do so.

So, wherever you may be this morning, I would encourage you to ask where it is that God may be moving your heart or stirring your spirit. Because as we notice, God moved not only the heart of Cyrus, but also the hearts of his people, to make the difficult trek to Jerusalem and do the difficult work of restoring their place of worship and with it, their community of faith. Could God be moving your heart to return to in-person worship? Could he be moving your heart to engage in service in some way? Could he be moving your heart to reach out to someone you know is lonely? Could he be moving your heart to begin re-connecting with a small group of people? I hope you can spend some time this week having a conversation with God around these, and other, questions, that may arise. I will be praying that he might reveal what being part of a community of faith might look like for you in these days.