

*Ezra-Nehemiah: Return and Restoration*

“The Foundation for Restoration”

Introduction: As we opened the books of Ezra-Nehemiah last week we noted that they narrate for us a couple of building projects accomplished by God’s people, Israel, in the late 6<sup>th</sup> and early 5<sup>th</sup> c. BC. Namely, the restoration of the Temple, and then the city wall, of Jerusalem. But we also noted that what needed to be rebuilt and restored was God’s people themselves. They had just spent 70 years in exile in Babylon. But now, God, in his mercy, was bringing them back home, having stirred the heart of Cyrus, the Persian king, to take care of the details.

The underlying question, we said, that runs throughout this account of return and restoration is how this people, who had lived away from their spiritual home and spiritual roots for several generations, to recover their spiritual identity and vitality? How was their sense of community to be restored? How were they to begin to live again on the mission to which God had called them, to be a blessing to the peoples around them?

As we explore these questions, we want to see how they might help us restore our own sense of community and mission, as we work our way out of our own exile, the “exile” of pandemic. What we’ll see right off the bat is that the foundation for restoration that is laid, what God’s people have always needed to restore and recalibrate their community and mission, is the foundation of worship.

I. Reestablishing the Liturgical Year

A. The chapter has two sections, the first dealing with the rebuilding of the altar, and the second with the laying of the foundation for the Temple. Tying them together is a restoration of worship within their liturgical year, described in the text as “all the appointed sacred festivals to the LORD” (v. 5), which they began to reinstitute. If the word “liturgy” means a prescribed form or ritual, it can be used to describe how a time of worship is laid out, or how an entire year unfolds. The sacred festivals that made up the liturgical year for the Israelites were prescribed by God to help them review and remember His Story, how he had been active in the world and was leading the world. Finding their place in this Story would enable the Israelites to begin to recover their identity, and sense of community and mission.

B. The first task these folks undertook, then, after getting settled was a rebuilding of the altar. The altar was the place of sacrifice, the means by which God’s people became reconnected to him. Let’s notice a few things about this project:

1. First, the altar was a project taken on by people who gathered as “one man” (v. 1, lit.). It was to be community work; all had a role to play. Any differences were to be put aside to accomplish the restoration of worship.
2. Second, the altar was built carefully, according to the Law of Moses. Cyrus, the Persian king may have sanctioned and made possible their building project, but only the word of God, that calibrated all of life, could sanction and properly inform their worship.
3. Third, the altar was built in the midst of fear, fear that we’ll see next week included attempts by those living in the land to intimidate the workers into stopping construction. Yet the returnees kept going,

recognizing that the best antidote to fear is worship, to remember who it is who really has the power over the powers that be.

4. Fourth, it took place in the seventh month. This is probably because that month on the Israelite liturgical calendar was highly significant. Month seven was a time of deep reflection and celebration, much like our month of December. Three celebrations took place in this seventh month: The Festival of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement, and the Festival of Tabernacles. Each of these required various burnt offerings, for which the altar was required. We also see that a daily rhythm of morning and evening sacrifice was begun. Again, all of these would have helped the returning Israelites remember the story they were living in and the God who had called them and faithfully provided for them. As scholar Donna Petter puts it, we won't know who we are until we know whose we are.

Psalm 77 comes to mind here. In a time of great distress, the psalmist cries out (vv. 7-12):

“Will the Lord reject forever? Will he never show his favor again? Has his unfailing love vanished forever? Has God forgotten to be merciful?” Then I thought, “To this I will appeal: the years of the right hand of the Most High. I will remember the deeds of the LORD; yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago. I will meditate on all your works and consider all your mighty deeds.”

D. Through worship, God's people remember. They remember who he is and what he has done. We, too, live in a story that calls us to remember, the same story as the Israelites, the Story of the God who is reconciling all things to himself in Christ. We just enter a bit further down the road than our ancestors in the faith, but like them, we are called to remember that story, called to remember whose we are so that we can better understand and live out who we are. Our yearly liturgy begins by having us wait for the coming of the Messiah, the Savior of the world. After his birth is celebrated, we reflect on his life, and his invitation us to follow him and align our longings and loves with his in the kingdom of God. We then ponder his death for our sin, his resurrection and gift of eternal life, and the gift of his Spirit, empowering us to live as his ambassadors until he calls us home, or returns, whichever comes first. Keeping our eye on this story—from Advent to Christmas to Epiphany to Lent to Easter to Pentecost—as we come together to worship is how community and mission can be restored.

E. Such remembering continued as the Israelites moved on to lay the foundation for the Temple. When all the materials had arrived, and after the foundation was laid, there was more worship, worship that celebrated the goodness of the Lord and his faithful love for his people:

With praise and thanksgiving they sang to the LORD: “He is good; his love toward Israel endures forever.”

And in that there was great joy, though some, also, were crying. While these may have been tears of joy, more likely is that they were tears of disappointment coming from those who remembered the Temple of old, the Temple built by Solomon. This new one did not look like it was going to be anywhere near the grandeur of that former one. Perhaps, like in our own day, a new normal was ahead for this people, yet, as we will see, it would be a new normal through which God would still be actively present and guiding.

## II. Liturgy that Forms and Shapes

A. As we move into whatever the future might hold, the foundation of worship, cemented by the Story of God, is what will keep us grounded, especially if we recognize that there are many

competing liturgies, many competing rituals that encourage us to worship something other than God. As many have observed, there is no such thing as not worshipping. Everyone worships, everyone pursues something they believe will fill them. The question is, what is that, and do we realize it? As Calvin College professor of philosophy, James K. A. Smith observes, quoting an even more famous theologian by the name of Bruce Springsteen, “Everybody’s got a hungry heart.” We all, in other words, have desires that need to be fed. What, then, are we feeding ours? Can we recognize the liturgies that vie for our attention, the liturgies that seek to capture and satisfy our heart?

B. In his book, *You Are What You Love*, Smith highlights three subtle, yet powerful and competing, cultural liturgies. There is the liturgy we find in the temple that is the Mall. This is a liturgy that attempts to show us how broken we are by highlighting what we don’t have, and then attempts to heal that brokenness by the acquisition of stuff. There is the liturgy we find at the sports stadium, especially when the flag is stretched out over the entire football field, the gathered people stand and sing about our revolutionary beginnings, and celebrate rockets glowing and bombs bursting, while fighter jets scream overhead. It’s the liturgy that seeks to glorify, and encourage us to put our trust in, military power, using our love affair with sports and competition to feed that trust. There is the liturgy that takes place at educational institutions across the country, one that declares that the acquisition of knowledge, while often shutting off reference to the divine, is the way to reach and experience the good life.

C. In light of this competition for our hearts, Smith urges us to take an inventory of our daily, weekly, monthly, and annual routines, in order to pay attention to the secular, cultural liturgies in our lives:

- What are the things you do that do something to you? What are they encouraging you to love?
- What vision of the good life is carried in those liturgies? What kind of person do they want you to become?
- What story is being lifted up? What is the end goal or chapter of that story?

D. To enable us to push back on these varied but very real cultural liturgies, Smith calls us to worship, Christian worship, worship that employs practices shaped by the Story of God, practices such as song and offering, quiet and confession, prayer and preaching of the word, baptism and communion. These are practices that direct and train our hearts to desire and pursue the shalom that God offers. Smith writes:

Worship is the arena in which God recalibrates our hearts, reforms our desires, and rehabilitates our loves. Worship isn’t just something we do; it is where God does something *to* us. [p. 77]

Worship, then, is not to be an escape from the world, but that which shapes us for life in the world, forming us for who we are by reminding us of whose we are. Like Israel returning from exile, may our gathering for worship be the foundation that shapes us into the missional community God desires us to be.