

## **Ezra 1:1-4; 3:1-4,10-13 & Luke 2:25-32**

Ezra is a book of hope that comes during one of the darkest periods in Judah's history. Judah, was the southern kingdom of what used to be the united nation of Israel before it split in two. So how did Judah get into this mess, this period of darkness and great despair?

God had rescued his people from slavery in Egypt and promised to make them a nation and give them land. When he rescued them out of Egypt he promised this:

*The Lord will establish you as his holy people, as he promised you on oath, if you keep the commands of the Lord your God and walk in obedience to him. Then all the peoples on earth will see that you are called by the name of the Lord, and they will fear you. The Lord will grant you abundant prosperity — in the fruit of your womb, the young of your livestock and the crops of your ground — in the land he swore to your ancestors to give you.*

God had promised to make them a great nation; that all of their enemies would be defeated; and they would know nothing but prosperity if they followed the God who had rescued them out of Egypt. That's how it was supposed to be. But that's not the way things worked out. They never lived up to their end of the agreement. So, they never experienced all that God had promised. Things were never lower, never darker, never more hopeless than during the time of Ezra.

Following the death of King Josiah, following a two and a half year siege, Jerusalem was conquered. The Temple which was rebuilt

under Josiah, the centre of worship, was destroyed. The Davidic monarchy under the greatest king of Israel, King David, had fallen apart. Israel was no longer an independent nation. Their best people were living in exile in Babylon, hundreds of miles away. They were at the lowest point in their history.

So Judah is in exile with no hope. Jerusalem is decimated. They can't go back. But then something happens ... A new king comes to power, Cyrus, who founded the Persian Empire, which superseded the Babylonian Empire. Cyrus said, "The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth." He wasn't exaggerating. According to one inscription, Cyrus ruled over the largest empire the world had ever seen.

Cyrus, king of the extensive Persian realm, drafted a proclamation that allowed the Israelites to return to their land and rebuild their temple. The temple was the primary ritual means by which God was available to Israel. Divine demands and promises were attached to this institution, and its loss was nothing short of devastating.

Ezra's account of this significant event is more than just the recounting of history. For Ezra, it is the fulfillment of prophecy, and in particular, the prophecy of Jeremiah. It is important to recognize the theological assumptions made by Ezra, namely that the general shape of Israel's history, despite its many vagaries, is determined primarily by Yahweh's judgments and promises. Judah was sent into exile because of sin. They did not obey God's commands; they worshipped other gods. And now Judah would return to its land because of Yahweh's gracious work through the agency of Cyrus the

Persian. Cyrus does not act independently of Yahweh's will. The will of the emperor and the will of Yahweh are somehow, mysteriously intertwined: Yahweh hides behind the will, ambition, and power of Cyrus.

As is evidenced from Cyrus' attitude concerning the God of Israel (whom he did not worship), he was not a true believer in Yahweh. Cyrus' concern was to establish strong buffer states around his empire which would be loyal to him. So, by having his subject peoples resettled in their own countries he hoped to have the gods in various parts of his empire praying for him to his gods, Bel and Nebo. The famous Cyrus Cylinder, which records the capture of Babylon and his program of repatriating his subject peoples in their homelands, includes this statement: "May all the gods whom I have resettled in their sacred cities, daily ask Bel and Nebo for a long life for me."

Jeremiah's prediction of seventy years' captivity, had nearly run out, having done its work on the exiles. But the bulk of them had little of either religious or patriotic enthusiasm, and preferred Babylon to Judea. This was the beginning of the return of just a portion of the exiles, about forty-two thousand. The proclamation permitted any who wished to do so, along with a sanction of the rebuilding of the Temple.

The long years of residence in Babylon had weakened the homesickness which the first generation of captives had painfully experienced. Only a small number of them cared to avail themselves of the opportunity to return. One reason is given by the Jewish

historian Josephus: “Many remained in Babylon, not wishing to leave their possessions behind them.”

The heads of the fathers' houses, the priests and Levites, made the bulk of the emigrants; but in each class it was only those whose spirit God had stirred up, as he had done with Cyrus, that were devout or patriotic enough to face the trauma of removal and the difficulties of re peopling a wasted land. There was nothing to tempt any of the others. There was no heart in which the flame of devotion burned; they were not drawn by that passionate love of the city and soil where God dwelt, which was inseparable from devotion. There was no reason to move to Judah. The departing contingent were the best part of the whole; those who stayed behind were held back by love of ease, cowardice, love of wealth and material possessions.

People are sometimes offered great opportunities for service, which they let slip by! To have doors opened which some are too lazy, too cowardly, too threatened by self-denial to enter, is the tragedy of many a life. It is easier to live among the low levels of the plain of Babylon, than to face the dangers and poverty of the weary march across the desert. The ruins of Jerusalem are a less comfortable abode than the well-furnished houses which have to be left. Prudence says, 'Be content where you are, and let other people take the trouble of such mad schemes as rebuilding the Temple.'

We all have neglected opportunities, dismissing calls to high deeds in our lives. How much wiser, happier, nobler, were the daring souls who rose to the occasion, and flung ease and wealth and companionship behind them, because they heard the divine

command framed in the royal permission, and humbly answered, 'Here am I; send me'!

The journey back to Judah took this broken band about four months. In the seventh month, the returnees were set to build “the altar of the God of Israel,” and restart the cult’s proper function as a place of ritual and sacrifice. This event was a moment of restoration, when Israel’s cult would be set in place as prescribed in the law of Moses. The restoration of the altar reaches back not only to Mosaic law given at Sinai, but also to the time when Solomon first established the altar at Jerusalem. The words: “The people assembled as one man,” suggest they all agreed that the rebuilding project must begin.

They built the altar first so that they could offer sacrifices in accordance with the Law. It was imperative for the returnees to return to the Mosaic Covenant, because their forefathers had left the covenant, causing the nation to be driven into captivity. The former exiles did not want to repeat that same mistake. Strengthening this connection are the words of praise voiced in Ezra: “For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel.” These are the same words voiced at the dedication of Solomon’s temple. The restored altar establishes a line of continuity between the exiles’ return to the land and the two most important, promise-bearing institutions of monarchic Israel: the temple and the palace.

But there were other concerns. According to Ezra, the returnees set up the altar “because they were in dread of the neighbouring peoples.” After returning to their ancestral homeland, they feared for their safety, and sought shelter and protection in God’s altar. Those

“neighbouring peoples” included Jews who were not part of the exile to Babylon, the sick, the weak, and the poor of the land. Understandably, tensions arose between returnees and inhabitants.

Despite their fears of the peoples around them, the returnees built the altar, and offered burnt offerings on it, starting on the first day of the seventh month. These were the first sacrifices made since the destruction of the temple 50 years earlier. The sacrifices showed that the people wanted to be responsive to the Laws of God.

After the establishment of the altar came the laying of the temple foundation, which was followed by shouts of joy and responsive singing: “For it is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel.” However, the sounds of praise and shouting mingled with weeping from those who had seen the temple in its former glory and found it too painful to celebrate the new foundation, as they wept at the site of the diminished house of worship. This moment of fulfillment was also a moment of loss.

The returnees were also trying to determine what it means to live into a new future that God is creating in their midst. What that future looks like is only beginning to emerge, and with mixed results. The former glory of the temple and the presence of God, is lacking in this new intention of the temple. The new temple was to be under the patronage of a foreign ruler, Cyrus, not an indigenous ruler like Solomon or David.

And finally, whereas Solomon’s temple was built while his kingdom was militarily strong, the new altar was established while this small

band of Jews was still under threat. The future would not be the past. What gives continuity to the past, present, and future, however is the faithfulness of God.

The emphasis on the temple in Ezra sets the tone for this and other post-exilic books. The temple was of utmost importance in the life of the people of Israel. Without the temple there could be no sacrificial system, which was the nation's lifeblood in its relationship to God. "The God of heaven" is also the God of Israel who Cyrus said was found in Jerusalem.

Today's message is a message of hope for those who are going through a hard time in a part of their lives, a low period, and feeling helpless to do anything about it. It doesn't have to be anything dramatic. It can just be that sense that things aren't all that we'd hoped they'd be. We expected more.

So what brings that loss of hope, that darkness? A relationship? Our spiritual life? Our job? Our family? The church? Where do we feel that low point where we really need to be restored? So, why was Judah restored when they were at their lowest point, when they couldn't help themselves? At the human level, it just looks like an arbitrary decision of a new king. It looks like a coincidence or just a random thing.

But Ezra explains why Judah was restored. He says, "The Lord moved the heart of Cyrus." God, who raised up nations to chastise his people, now raised up a ruler to restore his people. It was all in

God's hands. Restoration is God's work. Judah didn't do anything to restore itself. It was a sovereign act of God in which God moved the heart of a king to accomplish his purposes. The question for us is: Is restoration still God's work today? Does God still restore lives and relationships and churches, or is it all up to us? There's a whole school of thought that says it is all up to us. Many people believe that the Bible somehow says, "God helps those who help themselves."

But fixing or restoring ourselves or our situation never works. It has been reported that self-help is a \$6 billion-dollar-a-year industry. But, despite all of the books and seminars, "the goals go unmet: the 20 pounds always stays on, the pocketbook is always empty and life's desires remain unfulfilled."

But here's Ezra's message, the message of the whole Bible: it's not our job to fix or restore ourselves. Restoration is God's work. God doesn't help those who help themselves. God helps those who are completely helpless, who have no chance, no way of restoring themselves. This should take the pressure off of us. We don't have to fix our own lives. We don't have to fix our churches and our relationships. We don't have to be our own saviour, because God has provided a better Savior for us than we could ever be.

So, is the Bible simply good advice or is it good news? If the Bible is good advice, then the pressure's on us to follow that advice. So advice is what we do, and we humans don't seem to be able to follow the advice all that well, or to follow all that God has commanded.



But what if the Bible is good news? What if the Bible is about a God who did what we couldn't do for ourselves, who forgave us and reconciled us to himself? In today's Gospel, we once again see God keeping his promise to save God's people. The people are no longer under the rule of Cyrus. The Emperor Augustus and Herod are now in charge. They were once again back in dark times. Simeon recognizes the Holy Child who will continue God's plan to rescue the people and through him, reveal God to all the nations. So good news is about what God has done for us, about how God transforms us in every area of our lives, our work lives, our relationships, our churches.

We may try to live by our own power, but God is still the one who does the restoration, just as he did in the time of Ezra by the restoration of Jerusalem, its Temple, and God's people, and just like he did by sending his Son to continue God's restoration work. It makes all the difference in the world whether you are trying to save yourself, or if you are trusting what God has already done in Christ and allowing him to transform you. As hard as it is for us to believe that we have the power to restore, restoration is always the work of God alone, and that is the hope and anticipation that lead us through Advent.

**Amen.**

## **THE PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE**

### **Advent 2 - Sunday December 10, 2023**

Filled with expectation and longing, let us pray for the church, those in need, and for all of God's creation.

O God, we pray for enduring peace. Bring peace throughout the world. Give peace to the victims of war, the refugees, the widowed and the orphans. Give peace to family and friends; to those who have quarrelled and need to be reconciled. Give peace in our own divided hearts. Change our hearts to soften and be open to being peacemakers. We know that without justice there can be no peace. Equip, empower and encourage all who are involved in peacekeeping and negotiation talks. May your enduring peace come to fulfillment when all people are respected and valued regardless of our differences of race, religion, sexual identity, economic circumstances or cultural backgrounds. Let peace come when the earth's natural resources are used wisely for the common good. Let peace come when money and power is used to serve and not to enslave the world.

O God, establish harmony in all Creation, that all living things may co-exist and thrive according to your loving and generous purposes. Heal and restore the earth with your life-nourishing goodness and power. Prepare the earth itself for your coming, that the valleys, the mountains, the oceans, waters, and the wilderness might reflect your glory and in awe and wonder we might sing your praises.

O God, You guide our feet into the way of peace. Give wisdom to leaders of nations being implored by the secretary-general of the United Nations to act decisively to push for a cease-fire and ultimately bring an end to war and conflict in Gaza and Israel. Send your Spirit to those who hold power and authority among the nations. Lead them to provide humanitarian aid to those who are in growing desperate situations as human pawns in political forces beyond their control. Bring your righteousness and justice to all ongoing efforts to bring about peace in war-torn regions of the world.

Gracious God, we continue to pray for the people of Israel and Gaza. We pray for those who are fleeing their homes; grant them a safe passage. We pray for those who have lost loved ones; be their comforter. We pray for those who are still being held hostage; let them see freedom. We pray for all who are injured in body, mind, and spirit; let there be healing. God, you are the Prince of Peace - bring peace to this Holy Land.

O God, You offer a peace that passes all understanding and bring hope to those who are experiencing emotional darkness, hopelessness, depression and despair. With the shortening of daylight hours, and the bombarding messages and expectations of a holiday season filled with love, joy and peace, help us to recognize that these can contribute to the emotional pain of feeling out of step with the world, with you, and with oneself. Help us to be sensitive and show compassion to those who may be feeling lonely, isolated, or experiencing loss and grief this Christmas season. We lift up those without homes or jobs, those who are dying, those who long for forgiveness and reconciliation, and the sick and suffering. By your word and through your people, bring encouragement and heartfelt lovingkindness to those who have lost hope in the face of depression, death and disease, especially those we name aloud or in the silence of our hearts ... Give them faith in your eternal promises.

O God, You come to your people and set us free. As we are strengthened and sent out, help us prepare your way through our words and actions in our daily lives. Shape this faith community into a place of welcome and support for all people. Feed and strengthen us by your gifts of grace, that we may share them with others.

We pray for Bishops Susan and Kathy, pastors, deacons, lay leaders, musicians and the church, asking that we might prophesy to the world regarding your resurrection and life. Today we uplift Chetwynd Shared Ministry in Chetwynd, Christ Lutheran in Chilliwack - Rev. Dean Andersen, and the churches of Palestine and Israel, and our sister congregation San Juan Camino D'Esperanza in Peru.

We pray for comfort for those everywhere, as natural disasters and weather affect the lives of so many. We pray for those near Indonesia's Merapi volcano eruption where 11 climbers died and many more are missing. We pray for those facing major storms and other extreme weather occurrences. We pray for your peace in the midst of the storms.

God of joy and exultation, you are the bringer of peace that passes all understanding. You strengthen the weak; you enrich the poor and give hope to those who live in anxiety or fear. Look upon our needs this day and fulfill our heart's desires according to your eternal purposes. Prepare our hearts to worship and praise you for the good news of salvation and keep us faithful in your service until the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace, who taught us to pray ....

**Our Father .....**