



A HOUSE REBUILT: RETURNING & REBUILDING

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20th Message

Ezra 1-6; Haggai 1-2; Zechariah 1, 8

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SERIES: EPIC

When I drive to my kid's home in South Lake Tahoe, I regularly pass the neighborhood that the Angora Fire destroyed (June 42, 2007). That fire raged for three days and in the end it destroyed 300 homes and business'. The once majestic trees of this forested land looked like an army of incredibly tall blackened toothpicks keeping watch over the charred ground below. For those who lost their land and homes, it was devastating.

When it happened six years ago I remember thinking: "You Can't Go Home Again." This is the title of a book which has been stuck in my mind over the years because it captures so well the sorrow and regret that such devastating loss can affect in the human heart. When something like this happens it will change a person. It will change a community. They will remember the smell of the fire—of ash, soot, water, and damp. They might recall rummaging through the wreckage of their homes, finding bits of a life that was now gone. How do you rebuild when something like this has happened in your life? How do you rebuild when you mess up so badly, you cause the devastation?

Today we have before us the story of Israel returning to the land of their fathers and rebuilding their temple which was destroyed by the Babylonians. All that remained of that special place, where God's presence dwelled on earth, was ash and rubble. Many years have passed since the exiled people of God have stood on the land of Judah. Now God is fulfilling his promise to bring his people home which he made through the prophet Jeremiah so many years before.

Jeremiah 29:10-14:

¹⁰This is what the LORD says: "When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to this place. ¹¹For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. ¹²Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. ¹³You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. ¹⁴I will be found by you," declares the LORD, "and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you," declares the LORD, "and will bring you back to

the place from which I carried you into exile."

It is amazing to me that God gave such a gracious promise to his people at the same time that he told them that they would be disciplined for their recurrent disobedience. What does that tell us about God? It tells us that he never leaves his people without hope. How great is that? There is always hope in God's promises.

Background

Paul Taylor has been telling us the story of the divided kingdom of Israel. We have heard how both northern Israel and southern Judah grew progressively unfaithful to God until Israel was banished, and Judah was taken captive by Babylon and the holy city Jerusalem. Then the holy temple was turned to ash and ruin. As Paul said some weeks back, the israelites had become not just irreligious people but bad people. They needed to wake up to their sin. They needed a lesson in humility. The Babylonian captivity in 586 was it.

This morning we are in the first week of a new *EPIC* era called, *A House Rebuilt*. For three weeks we will be hearing the story of Judah's deliverance from Babylonian captivity. The first week we will hear how the exiles return to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. The second week we are back in Babylon (now Persia) where God uses Esther to save the Jews from sure death, and the third week we will hear about the spiritual and physical rebuilding of Jerusalem. Our time period of 100 years covers three books of history, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther and three books of prophecy Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. On the world scene Persia has conquered Babylon and has taken center stage as the new world power.

This morning our story begins with a decree made by Cyrus the King of Persia.

Ezra 1:1-4:

¹In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah, the LORD moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm and to put it in writing:

²“This is what Cyrus king of Persia says:

“The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. ³Anyone of his people among you—may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple of the LORD, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem. ⁴And the people of any place where survivors may now be living are to provide him with silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with freewill offerings for the temple of God in Jerusalem.”

Cyrus is God’s agent of deliverance for the Jewish people which is really kind of astonishing isn’t it? We sometimes think the world powers around us are out of God’s control, but here we see how much in control God really is. He “put it on the heart” of this pagan king of Persia, to accomplish God’s plan for Israel.

It sounds like Cyrus is quite a Yahweh fearer from what I just read to you, but in the historical records of the time Cyrus said and did this kind of thing with other conquered nations as well. The Persian’s thought it was best to let their conquered subjects remain in their home lands and worship their national gods as they wished. This made for more contented subjects they believed. When Persia conquered Babylon this policy change was the perfect avenue for God’s plans of deliverance.

Along with Cyrus, God also put it on the heart of many exiles to return to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. While most Hebrews remained behind in Babylon, having made a life for themselves in that country some 50,000 brave souls committed themselves to the return and rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem. They must have been a faithful group. Many of them had never seen Jerusalem because of having grown up in Babylon. Some older ones among them must have remembered Jerusalem as a burnt out city in ruins and recognized the effort it would take to rebuild. In leaving Babylon they left behind a sophisticated city where some had risen to high rank while others had thriving businesses only to return to a desolate landscape and burnt out ruins.

King Cyrus appointed Zerubbable, a descendant of David to lead this rebuilding team. He also sent back with the returning exiles all of the valuable and sacred temple objects that were plundered by Babylon and kept in the royal treasury.

Can you see how God’s hand is in every aspect of this

return? He is involved with our lives too, but we often can’t see it as clearly. I am glad for these Old Testament stories which reveal how God is working behind the scenes, so I can know he is still working in this community and in each individual life as well.

Returning and Rebuilding Underway

Ezra 3:1-3:

¹When the seventh month came and the Israelites had settled in their towns, the people assembled as one man in Jerusalem. ²Then Jeshua son of Jozadak and his fellow priests and Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and his associates began to build the altar of the God of Israel to sacrifice burnt offerings on it, in accordance with what is written in the Law of Moses the man of God. ³Despite their fear of the peoples around them, they built the altar on its foundation and sacrificed burnt offerings on it to the LORD, both the morning and evening sacrifices.

The rebuilding of the temple begins with the altar because it is the heart of the temple. With the sacrificial system in place, the people of God are defined once again by the worship of Yahweh as prescribed by Moses in the Law. The altar was rebuilt exactly on the spot that it was originally placed—per God’s instructions. Having been so disobedient for so many generations they were now doing things God’s way and making a great start at rebuilding their relationship with God.

The composition of the rebuilding community is also important. There were the Levitical priests who could offer the sacrifices and lead in the special holy days for God’s community. There were worship leaders to lead the community in their sacred songs, and there was Zerubbable leading in the rebuilding project as governor. He was a descendant of David and would have been qualified to sit on the throne of David. But he wasn’t the one to sit on that throne for Israel needed an eternal king, not another earthly king. For that eternal king—the Messiah of God.

They are making a good start at returning and rebuilding God’s way. But, immediately they are opposed and they are afraid of this opposition group. Who is this group? They are identified a little later in the narrative as Samaritans. These are the people from up north who intermarried with their Assyrian conquerors. They were of mixed ancestry and they worshipped God in a synchronistic way. When the southern kingdom was exiled to Babylon, they moved

south and intermarried with the Israelites left behind on the land of Judah. They caused no end of trouble to the Israelites. Notice that immediately as the returnees made progress to do the will of God, they met opposition.

Have you ever experienced that? I think most of us have experienced something similar to this. Consider the alcoholic who finds God and wants to rebuild his/her life. How many family members and friends actually help his or her recovery? Often they are the very ones giving the most resistance. Why is this?

Maybe it is because they don't want to have to do the same. They don't want to give up their drinking. They may feel they are being judged if you change up your life. Then there are others who might feel superior to you so they don't feel the need to help you. If we are honest with ourselves, we've probably been on one or both sides of this equation at one time or another. What do we do then to rebuild?

We need to find a community which will support our new change. This is what the rebuilding community of Israel is about. It takes a community to build worship together—it is not a one man show.

I remember when my husband and I first came to church and then started going regularly. One of our very good friends said to us, "You will get over the God thing. Everyone goes back to church when they first have kids. It won't last." Encouraging words aren't they? We needed the community here at PBC to keep us moving forward in our new faith. We needed to worship God with God's people so we weren't trying to rebuild our life in God alone.

But opposition is to be expected. It is not really the people in your life that are after you; it is someone else entirely. We have an enemy who wants us to remain in sin and exile from God.

I Peter 5:8 warns us that we need, "to be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary the devil prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour."

So when we return to God and try to rebuild our life, we need to expect opposition. It doesn't mean we are doing something wrong, it might mean that we are right on track and the enemy wants to destroy us before we can rebuild our life in God. We can't let fear of people stop us.

Fear didn't stop Israel from continuing to rebuild and pretty soon they had finished the foundation.

Mixed Response to the Temple's Foundation

Ezra 3:10-13:

¹⁰When 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. ¹¹With praise and thanksgiving they sang to the LORD:

**"He is good;
his love to 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. ¹²But 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. ¹³No 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.

With one major aspect of rebuilding done, the people of God stop to celebrate what God has done for them. Here is what they say about God, "He is good; his love to Israel endures forever."

What a perfect expression of faith and joy. They know God keeps his promises and they praise him for this aspect of his goodness. How often in the exile had they wondered if he would keep his word to them? How often had they wondered if God had abandoned them? And now they knew that God had delivered them. What a joy.

And then ...

Some of the older leaders started remembering the magnificent temple of Solomon and cried over what had been lost. The comparison with the puny foundation apparently is too much for them to bear. This was their "You Can't Go Home Again" moment. They saw what God was doing in the new temple, but remembered the old one and were disappointed. The younger builders only knew this temple so they rejoiced at what God had done through them. This mixture of joy and sorrow is a good description of this second temple period in Israel's history. Robbed of the Ark of the Covenant and the physical beauty of Solomon's temple, there is a sense of regret that Judah's sin had caused all this loss. Regret over sin can be

a good thing if it humbles them. It can be a bad thing if it gets them stuck in the past when God wants to move them forward.

The devastation of Jerusalem and the temple has had a deep and abiding effect on Israel. You can see how at this point in the story. While there is joy at what God is doing, there is also the sober awareness of what they have caused through their own sin. It was their disobedience that caused the devastation that befell their city and temple (Ezra 5). They knew it was God's judgment that allowed Babylon to destroy them. When they looked at this "less than" temple they were reminded of that fact.

I kept asking myself while I was studying this second temple why there had to be one? Why couldn't there just be a first temple? How would God's story be different if only the first temple stood? Perhaps if Israel had only the first glorious temple they could have said, "God is our great deliverer who brought us out of the bondage of Egyptian slavery. He brought us to the land he promised our forefather Abraham and a David King will sit on the throne forever." End of story. All of what I just said is true, but what would they know about themselves if they had not had to make a second temple? In the first temple story Israel could have thought they were victims rescued by God from Egyptian slavery, but in the second temple story they are the guilty ones and God is effectively rescuing them from themselves and their sin. What they really needed deliverance from was not Egyptian slavery, but their slavery to sin. Perhaps the second temple was supposed to point Israel to their need of a Savior, who would save them from their sin.

From here on out the people of God will look for the Messiah of God to come and make a new day for them. That is their hope. The hope is for the Messiah to come and to accomplish for Israel what she cannot accomplish for herself. This is what the prophets are directing Israel to, by this point. But what would that Messiah be like? Israel thought they needed a king to bring peace, come in victory, and cause all nations to submit to his rule in Jerusalem. And they will have an eternal king sitting on the throne of David forever who will do just that, but first they needed a Savior who would save them from themselves. And so do we.

The first Hebrew who put his foot into the Jordan and was baptized by John the Baptist knew he needed cleansing from his sin. Perhaps the exile and the second temple was part of the preparation for this understanding among the Jewish community. Perhaps the memory of a burned out temple and the rebuilding of hope pointed to their sin and God's faithfulness in a way the first temple could not.

I remember the story of a church that put a huge cross in the middle of its auditorium. The congregation had to listen to the preacher's words through the cross. And the preacher had to speak to the congregation through the cross as well. What a good and humbling reminder of what it took for God to save his people from their sins. It took the death of his son, Jesus the Messiah of God, on a cross. For as Romans 3:23 says, "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." The cross is our reminder that we always need God. We cannot do anything without him.

So, when we think of this rebuilding story, let's think about how good God is to keep his loving promises to us in the face of all our brokenness and sin. He had to give up his Son, the Messiah of God, to make a way for us all to come home to him.

Now as we continue, the crying of the elders discouraged Zerubbable. And the enemies of Israel continued to think up ways to stop the building project until they finally succeeded. It was stopped for 16 years. But God had a plan to finish what he had begun so he sent his prophet Haggai to get the people going.

Haggai 1:2-4;7-8:

²This is what the LORD Almighty says: "These people say, 'The time has not yet come for the LORD's house to be built.'"

³Then the word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai: "Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?"

^{1:7}This is what the LORD Almighty says: "Give careful thought to your ways. ⁸Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build the house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored," says the LORD.

Yikes! It sounds like Silicon Valley. They were building up a nice comfortable life for themselves and letting God's project stagnate. Now, they did it because the opposition became overwhelming on the surface. The Samaritans had gotten a work stoppage order from the then King of Persia to block the building project, but God doesn't see this work stoppage order as a problem. Remember, he causes kings to do his will, doesn't he?

The people apparently did not really believe God was with them or that they could trust him. So this is what he says next through Haggai:

Haggai:1:13:

“I am with you,” declares the LORD.

This is the simplest and most important phrase Israel could have heard and it is the most profound phrase we can hear in our lives as well.

“I am with you,” declares the LORD.

What does it take to rebuild the temple? What does it take to rebuild your life? “God with you.” That is what the temple always represented. It was the place on earth where God was present.

Do we realize that when we are not sure of God’s presence we stop moving forward in the things God calls us to do and be? We look at our circumstances and we look at ourselves and think: “I can’t do this. It is too hard.” But God’s **“I am with you”** makes all things possible.

We are in the most danger of believing that God is not with us when we or our community has sinned. Maybe our lives have fallen apart because of our own doing. We think God is done with us. He has left us. He must be disgusted with us. You know what we need to hear then? God’s **“I am with you.”**

When you are suffering through no fault of your own what do you need to hear? God’s **“I am with you.”** What do we usually think we need? Something far less like a new job, or a new spouse, or more money, or freedom from an addiction we can’t beat, or a better diagnosis or new friends. But what we really need is: God with us. And that is what Haggai promises the people. God is with you.

Begin rebuilding

Our speaker this past weekend at the women’s retreat told us that she was a full grown adult and a hard boiled atheist when God interrupted her life and made himself known to her. She said she had gone to church only to get rid of a persistent Christian who kept inviting her to go to church with her. She said as the congregation sang worship music she sat in a back pew and felt God’s warm presence wash over her. Pretty soon tears were streaming down her face. She had only come to get rid of an annoying friend, but God had something else in mind. She had a life changing encounter with the living God. She knew instantly that his name was Jesus. He totally changed her life. Now she teaches others how to come into the presence of God and have a deeper relationship with him. I think God has a sense of humor.

What is God calling you to rebuild this morning? Remember his promise that he is with you. He can do anything with you. Even make you not want to get rid of that annoying Christian friend that keeps inviting you to church. He gives up on no one. He can use anyone. Because he is good and his love endures forever.

As if the presence of God were not enough, he gives Israel a new promise through the prophet Zechariah to encourage the temple workers.

Zechariah 8:3, 23:

³I will return to Zion and dwell in Jerusalem. Then Jerusalem will be called the City of Truth and the mountain of the LORD Almighty will be called the Holy Mountain . . .”

^{8:23}This is what the LORD Almighty says; “In those days ten men from all languages and nations will take firm hold of one Jew by the hem of this robe and say, “let us go with you, because we have heard God is with you.”

God has given Zechariah a glorious picture of the future Messianic kingdom in which God dwells with his people. All the nations of the earth stream in to meet him on the holy mountain in the holy city, Jerusalem. The temple will be filled with his glory. And with these challenges and promises he gets his people moving forward again. The rebuild is complete.

Ezra 6:14-16:

¹⁴ So the elders of the Jews continued to build and prosper under the preaching of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah, a descendant of Iddo. They finished building the temple according to the command of the God of Israel and the decrees of Cyrus, Darius and Artaxerxes, kings of Persia. ¹⁵The temple was completed on the third day of the month Adar, in the sixth year of the reign of King Darius.

¹⁶Then the people of Israel-the priests, the Levites and the rest of the exiles-celebrated the dedication of the house of God with joy.”

In Conclusion

The Tahoe valley I told you about in the beginning of our time together is now rebuilt. Where once there was nothing but rubble now there are new homes and

new growth trees are filling in the still somewhat barren landscape. There are a few black toothpick giants still standing to remind everyone that a fire once raged through the valley, but mostly you see green growth and a thriving community.

The people of Judah likewise rebuilt the temple out of ash and rubble and against all odds. It took them 25 years. Rebuilding takes time. Don't expect change overnight. They were able to rebuild their temple because God was with them and he had a glorious plan for their lives.

How do you rebuild your life when something devastating happens to you? How do you rebuild your life when you do something devastating to yourself? Return to God. Stop going your way and go God's way.

How do we return? Jeremiah 29 the passage I read from in the beginning tells us to cry out to him, come to him, pray to him, and seek him with all our hearts and he will be found. We can do that can't we? He will begin the rebuilding of our lives in him.

Prayer

Psalm 146: 3-5:

**Put not your trust in princes,
in a son of man, in whom there is no help.
When his breath departs he returns to his earth;
on that very day his plans perish.
Happy is he whose help is the God of Jacob,
whose hope is in the LORD his God.**

For this period of Israel's history, the following reference books were used:

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