

“Return and Renewal”
July 18, 2021

Ezra 1:1-11
Philippians 2:12-13

We are entering a new time in the life of our congregation.

The pandemic has challenged and changed our lives, our congregation, our nation, and our world for a year and a half. It is not *over* by any means—the suffering continues unabated in many places around the world and along with other nations we face the threats and uncertainty of the Delta variant. But in the United States, and particularly in Johnson County and Iowa City, we seem to be getting a handle on Covid.

Our church reopening committee met this past week and agreed that the time and circumstances were right for us to resume in-person worship. We will do this beginning on Sunday, August 1, meeting, as is our custom, at 10:15 a.m.

We are taking a prudent approach. Masks will be required for all worshippers. We will keep social distance in the pews. We will not sing. We will continue to track new cases and hospitalizations and adjust what we are doing accordingly. Those who are ready and feel comfortable with these arrangements are invited to join us in person.

While it won't happen in August 1, our plan is to begin live-streaming the worship services, so that you can still join us online—and in real time—if that is your choice. And the worship services will also be posted online permanently for viewing at other times.

This morning—and in the weeks ahead—I turn to the books of Ezra and Nehemiah for texts for the sermon. These two relatively short Old Testament books come at the end of the historical narratives of First and Second Samuel, First and Second Kings, and First and Second Chronicles. They tell of the Jewish people returning to and rebuilding Jerusalem after nearly 60 years in exile in Babylon. In doing so, they speak to our situation as we return and reopen and resume, no doubt also doing some rebuilding and restoration of our own.

A little background: The historical books of the Hebrew Bible tell of the rise of a united Israel to a great nation under David and Solomon, of its division into the northern and southern kingdoms of Israel and Judah, and of the eventual fall of both kingdoms, culminating in the destruction of Jerusalem, the capital of Judah. II Chronicles ends by telling briefly of the siege of Jerusalem, the destruction of the Temple, and the carrying off of the people into exile in Babylon.

Ezra and Nehemiah tell of the return of the people to Jerusalem at the end of the exile. They tell how over several generations people sought to rebuild their lives and their community after horrific devastation.

As is often the case with the Bible, much in the two books is quite removed from our situation. Much is either obscure or troubling or both. These books don't speak directly to our circumstances as a congregation emerging from a pandemic some two and a half millennia later.

But these books *do speak*. And if we listen, we will discover that there is much here to encourage and inform and inspire us in the tasks that we face in the months ahead.

This morning we heard the beginning of these events: the edict of Cyrus, the King of Persia, fulfilling the words of the prophet Jeremiah, telling the people to return home.

We are reminded that this return was “a more or less insignificant event in the corner of the vast Persian Empire, which stretched from Greece, toward the east, beyond modern Afghanistan.”¹

And our “return” to our own place of worship and service, to “this church on this corner in this community” is a minor event but also one of great significance in our hearts and our lives—and, I think, in the life of our community as well. We have longed for the time when we can once again see the light streaming through the stained glass, hear the deep organ tones, and look upon each other with gladness once more.

In political terms, Cyrus brought about the end of the exile. But the heart of faith understood that he was guided by the living God.

Such an understanding does not always come easily. As one person put it: “When church and government are as impermanent as the grass that withers and the flower that decays, there is sometimes no evident reason why faith should still be the best alternative and why God’s promises should be trusted.”²

You might agree. While our Congregationalist ancestors often saw the hand of God everywhere, our sight is not as clear. We are reluctant to ascribe everything to God and God’s will—perhaps rightly so. We hear too many stories in these days of people who readily forego vaccination, trusting instead, they say, on the care of God.

Our own holy skepticism shouts in reply: “One way that God cares for us in providing scientists to create vaccines!”

We keep our eyes open to the new providence of God. The author of Ezra “confessed that God had faithfully fulfilled the word spoken through Jeremiah and had enlisted the great Emperor Cyrus in the divine plan.”³ Human action and God’s actions are often connected, intertwined.

So, Paul tells the Philippian Christians and tells us: “Work out your salvation with fear and trembling”—and, yes, that can cause us some consternation. But we also believe that, as Paul reminds us, “it is God who is at work in us, enabling us both to will and to work for God’s good pleasure.”

The challenges of reopening and returning are many.

There are the practical, utilitarian matters of making sure there are masks and hand sanitizer available. We’re still trying to reimagine a safe coffee hour—so that will be a few weeks down the road once we are back.

There’s the greater issue that all of this will be new—and not new in a fresh, springlike way, but more, new in an unfamiliar and different way. Worship will be strange when we don’t stand and sing our favorite hymns with loud, joyful voices. Worship will be new when we don’t pass an

offering plate from one member to another. Worship will be different when everyone is wearing a mask.

We need to recognize that we have changed because of all that we have gone through. We return as different people seeking ways of worship that grow out of the changes we have experienced. We return as different people who will be called to serve a community that has changed. We return as different people who bring new questions, new concerns to occasions for Christian education and nurture.

We remember what we were—after all, it has been less than a year and half since our worship and programs quickly evolved. In that sense we are much different from the exiles returning to Jerusalem after sixty years. Most of them would not have any memories of the city and the life of the people there. And the memories that people did have were no doubt fading over time.

We can perhaps imagine ourselves as similar to the exiles returning to Jerusalem in one way, however. Like them, we bring great treasure with us. Look at the exiles as they gather up silver, gold, goods, animals, and gifts. Watch as they set out with five thousand four hundred gold and silver vessels. We bring, not necessarily gold and silver, but all we have learned about ourselves and our lives and our faith over the past 16 months. We bring our great hopes and our deep commitments and our renewed involvement.

Here's the good news: there is no promise that any of this will be easy. There is no guarantee that all will approve of everything we do. There is no assurance that the way ahead will be smooth.

Yes, that's the good news.

This, after all, is the truth of the Gospel that we discover in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

In faith, we do not blithely say that everything will be all right—for we know that conflicts arise between people—even people who care for one another. We know that those outside of congregations can regard them with suspicion. And we follow the One who was often spurned and rejected by others.

At the same time, neither do we say that nothing will be all right—for we also know and celebrate the resurrection and find ourselves alive in the power of the resurrection. That power gives us the freedom at each moment to choose the way of love, to choose the way of compassion, to choose the way of justice and mercy. And in making such choices we become co-creators with God. We are given the opportunity to make this congregation and this world that much more like God's vision for it.

We each have our own calling, our own work to do.

Together as a congregation we have our larger work as well. We have sought to be faithful to that congregational calling in many different and surprising ways since March of last year. My sense is that there will be new surprises and challenges as we return.

Let us return. And in the days to come, let us be open to the renewing work of the Spirit of God in our midst.

¹ Ralph W. Klein, Ezra, NIB, pg. 680-681.

² *ibid.*

³ *ibid.*