

“Deep Memory, Deep Joy”  
July 25, 2021

Ezra 3:10-13  
Matthew 13:51-53

On these summer Sundays, as we move cautiously toward resuming in-person worship services on August 1, we are listening to the stories of the return of the Jewish people to Jerusalem after nearly sixty years of exile in Babylon. Our time apart has not been nearly as long, nor has our devastation been as great. But we have been separated and the pandemic has wreaked havoc on our lives, on our community, and on our world.

It continues to do so. Even as we seek and hope for a new normal, the delta variant threatens a new surge. On Thursday, CDC Director Rochelle Walensky, said: “The delta variant is more aggressive and much more transmissible than previously circulating strains. It is one of the most infectious respiratory viruses we know of and that I have seen in my 20-year career.”

“We are yet at another pivotal moment in this pandemic,” she added.

This is the context in which we seek to come together once more.

On the positive side, the vast majority of adults in our congregation have been vaccinated. Everyone inside our building will be required to wear a mask. And while cases in Iowa have been rising with a disturbing steadiness, the CDC data tracker shows a low level of community transmission here in Johnson County, what UI epidemiologist, Eli Perencevich, called “the Vermont part of Iowa.”

On the other hand, we face a Covid variant that spreads rapidly. We find ourselves once more in an unpredictable, changing situation—although we’re kind of becoming used to that. The challenges of coming together again are great and we want to do all that can in this situation to keep one another safe and to keep our community safe.

As I said last Sunday, much in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah is quite removed from our situation. These books don’t speak directly to our circumstances as a congregation in a pandemic some two and a half millennia after the end of the exile.

But these books *do speak*.

And this morning’s lesson speaks to the experience of resuming worship. It tells us something of what we might expect in the coming weeks: weeping and shouts of joy.

The rebuilt Temple would be larger than the one that had been destroyed. But really, it wouldn’t be as spectacular. The Temple that Solomon built was glorious, but reports of this new temple often stressed that the new one just wasn’t as impressive.

And so, some have suggested that the weeping of, as Ezra puts it, “old people who had seen the first house on its foundations,” reflected their disappointment as they remembered the grandeur of the past.

This brings to mind the question: “How many Congregationalists does it take to change a light bulb?”

50. One to change the bulb and 49 to sit around and say how much better the old light bulb was.

Even so, as the people gathered with trumpets and cymbals, they sang the old Psalm giving thanks to the Lord: “For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel.” Listen carefully to those words, because they have been changed. The several psalms that include this refrain simply say: “God’s steadfast love endure forever.”

Ezra’s version adds that this love is in a specific direction, “toward Israel.”

We can certainly understand those specific people’s specific gratitude toward the God who had redeemed them and brought them back home. And it is good to remember God’s steadfast love toward this congregation as well. We are coming through these days. It has not been easy. It is not easy now. Still, we affirm God’s steadfast love.

But Psalm 136, which we read this morning, puts God’s love for Israel in the greater context of God’s love for all creation. God’s love, this psalm tells us, extends from creation, through evolution, through the calling and exodus of Israel, to reach all people.

God’s love endures. We’re at one of those times that is testing this affirmation as we face great death on a global scale, a deepening climate crisis and increasing violence and death in the cities of our nation. And this is the context in which we should see our own return.

Here in the United States our situation is different than from many—most—other places around the world. Call it privilege. Call it blessing. We have such great access to vaccines and much of the supply is unused. Anyone who wants to be vaccinated can be—and a large percentage of our population continue to reject this opportunity.

This is not the case elsewhere. Those who watch this worship service in places such as Brazil and Uganda—and we are grateful and honored that you join us in this way—those who watch this worship service in places such as Brazil and Uganda, their families and friends, their neighbors and others do not have the access to vaccinations or health care that we do.

Let us then come together with the humble awareness that our worship is a great privilege. It is an opportunity not to be taken lightly. I say this, not as a call for everyone to show up here next Sunday. But we should recognize that our position as well-off people with great resources calls us to be people who are agents of God’s steadfast love for all creation, to continue to seek ways of bringing God’s wholeness and healing to this broken world, especially now.

With eagerness and wariness, with gratitude and humility then, we return to worship, for it is our source of refreshment and renewal. This is a time of remembrance and vision, of weeping and shouting for joy.

Let us honor the memory held in this place. This sanctuary can indeed be called a sacred space—and that sacredness is felt by many who come in here. We give thanks for the traditions and the worship that has kept us going through these pandemic months. We give thanks for the singing and the scripture and the prayers from this place that have sustained us when we have not been able to be here. We honor our past, not because we are a memorial society, but because those memories are the strong bonds that hold us together; they are the long path that we have walked together. And in those memories, we find much that can shine a light as we make the path ahead.

There is weeping. There is the weeping of gratitude for what we have received in this place. There is the weeping of sorrow over what we have missed in these months. There is the weeping of happiness in seeing each other in person rather than in a Zoom box, of hearing each other in person rather than over the telephone.

Even as we weep, however, we also rejoice in the new thing that God is doing in us and among us. We shout for joy. Ezra tells of the foundation of the Temple and the walls of the city being rebuilt—but rebuilding is not simply restoring or recreating what once was. So, we can also shout for joy as we anticipate the new.

In the past year we have sung new songs, we have ordered our worship in new ways, we have been sent out to seek the good in a different world. In the past year many people discovered our congregation for the first time, worshipping with us online because a friend told them about this church or a simple Google search led them here. They didn't know our past, but they joined with us in our worshipful shouts of new joy.

Worship calls to our deepest feelings.

Worship calls out our deepest feelings—even for us Congregationalists!

Weeping and shouting, grief and joy.

My sense is that we will find all of this as we worship together once more.

In ancient Jerusalem, those who remembered wept. Those who were of a new generation shouted for joy.

And this is the challenge and the opportunity that we are given in these coming days—to bring deep memory and great joy to our present time, to build something new for these new days on the sure foundation that we have.

In our worship, then, like those trained for the realm of God, we will need to bring out the best of the new and the best of the old. Neither will suffice on their own.

But together—oh, together we will discover the treasure in both the new and the old, finding deep memory and deep joy.

Together our revitalized worship will prepare us for revitalized ministry and mission as transformed people in a changing world.