

1&2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah
Restored, Rebuilt and Redirected
Rev. Jonathan P. Cornell
5-25-14

This morning, you may have noticed we are doing things a little differently. Never fear, it is only for a week. But on this Memorial Day Weekend, where all around our nation we will celebrate with BBQs and parades, honoring the men and women who lead this nation in the face of danger and the threat of freedom, I think it only fitting that we look at what happens when freedom, liberty, and obedience are threatened. Historians say that it is precisely when freedom is no longer cherished, when we forget what got us here, that our the future is in the greatest jeopardy. And as a church that moves through the ages with a message that is 2000 years old, we ought to pay particular attention to what it is that gives us our unique place in the world.

And it just so happens at a pivotal time in Israel's life, they too lost their way. Coincidentally, the part of scripture we're covering in today's message, exile and restoration, also happens to fall in line with the section we're covering this week in our *Inspired* message series. Don't you just love when a plan falls into place?

So here's what's going to happen in the next 40 minutes: I am going to reflect briefly on three occasions, and in between each, there will be more special music led by our choir. Then at the conclusion of the message, we will take time to recognize and show our thanks for all who have led our nation in the appreciation and preservation of liberty.

But before we begin, will you join me in prayer?

The City of Jerusalem, or as it is sometimes referred to as Mt. Zion, was the seat of God's Kingdom on Earth. But in the decades after a Renaissance period of King David and his son Solomon, the kingdoms of Israel and Judah went through a long slow decline. As is the case so often in our lives, prosperity and safety led to complacency. It's easy to remember God when the walls are closing in; it's an entirely different thing when things are safe and we feel like we're on easy street. And so they gradually forgot the story, and singular devotion turned to pluralistic experimentation with all the other god options out there. The result was that their hearts and their minds were led far from Yahweh and they adopted a sort of a-la-carte spirituality – a little dab of this, a pinch of that. Soon Yahweh is all but lost to the people.

The last of the good kings in Judah was one named Josiah. Josiah began ruling when he was 8 years old, and I'm sure that any of you who has ever had an eight year old knows that they probably think—*yeah, that sounds about right*. But in the course of his reign over Judah, there was found something that had actually been lost for a long time: a copy of the book of the law. So under Josiah, there was reform in Judah, and it looked like the people were turning a corner with God. But then tragically Josiah is killed and down they continued, further and further from God. And the call to persevere with God was simply an echo of a distant time, still being heralded by the lone voice of the prophet.

At the end of the book of 2 Chronicles, the author chides the people saying: **The Lord, the God of their fathers, sent persistently to them by his messengers, because he had compassion on his people and on his dwelling place. But they kept mocking the messengers of God, despising his words and scoffing at his prophets, until the wrath of the Lord rose against his people, and there was no remedy. He brought up against them the king of the Chaldeans, who had no compassion. God gave them all into his hand. And all the vessels of the house of God, great and small, and the treasures of the house of the Lord, and the treasures of the king and of his princes, all these he brought to Babylon. And they burned the house of God and broke down the wall of Jerusalem and burned all its palaces with fire and destroyed all its precious vessels. He took into exile in Babylon those who had escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and to his sons until the establishment of the kingdom of Persia, to fulfill the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed its Sabbaths. All the days that it lay desolate it kept Sabbath, to fulfill seventy years.**

Researchers and scientists have performed study after study on the science of cognitive functioning and physical abilities, finding that at about the age of 25, the mind starts to slow and memory retention slowly deteriorates. As our minds get fuller, it becomes harder to recall important things quickly. And our bodies, as well. How many of you have ever tried something later in life expecting to be able to do as well as you did in your youth? This week I did something that I absolutely love to do: I played a game of softball. And let me tell you, I am not the player I once was. And there is a complex medical term for this. It's called getting old.

But being able to stay off the inevitable decline and maintain clarity in one's life is one of the most precious gifts life can bestow. In the midst of all of the competing variables, being able to remain focused is something that takes diligence and great effort, as well as the favor of God.

Losing focus not only affects us individually, it affects whole communities corporately. When communities and nations fall into what's called "group think" things that were once central to the core of their identity can devalue into peripheral non-essentials. This can happen in churches, as well, primarily when we don't keep first things first. When the mission of God gets replaced by the work of doing church.

I want to show you a picture that was taken by the photographer Michael Frank as a part of series highlighting the decline of the city of Detroit. It's a picture of the Woodward Avenue Presbyterian Church. And as you look at this picture, you've got to ask yourself: "How did it get to that?" How did something so majestic, so hauntingly beautiful, go from a place of devoted worship to a deserted mausoleum? We don't know the specifics, but if I know anything about Presbyterians, it wasn't because they knew too little. It was probably because they knew too much, or more accurately, they were educated beyond their level of discipleship.

God removed the people from their home, displaced them into a foreign land, taking them to Babylon, so that there they could see their identity dissolve into another's culture, and there realize that God did not leave them, but rather it was the other way around. And there they remained for 70 years, a sort of extended Sabbath to wrap their heads around just how vulnerable and dependent upon God they were, and that freedom—the kind they found with God—was a rare and precious gift not to be taken lightly.

Pause: Music

And then after a very long intermission, 70 years, we turn to the very next book in Scripture, the book of Ezra. And finally it's time for some good news. Seems there's a new king in town. Persia, the most formidable empire in the neighborhood, has a new king named Cyrus, and Cyrus—a foreign king, mind you—hears a word from the Lord from the prophet Jeremiah.

And we pick up with Ezra 1:1 where it says: **The Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing: “Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people, may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the Lord, the God of Israel—he is the God who is in Jerusalem.”**

It was time for the people of God to gather and return home to Zion. Israel was being restored. God was working through a group of foreign kings – Cyrus and a later one named Artaxerxes I. The people were coming home.

And there is profoundly beautiful and simple lesson that begins here, something that I think speaks powerfully to us today. And it's not something new for us, not something that researchers and scholars have done, nor focus groups come up with. No, this lesson comes straight out of the pages of the Old Testament when God restores his people. **There are three things that happen when God brings his people home. First, they are restored. Then, they're rebuilt; you can read about later in Ezra and Nehemiah. And finally, the people's lives are rededicated.**

Out of places where desolation and destruction exist can come a new life, and it takes place, in other words, when God's people are gathered in for worship, built up in their faith and discipleship, and sent out to demonstrate that faith in the world around them. Gather. Build. Send.

The greatest theologian of the 20th century was a man by the name of Karl Barth. He was a Swiss theologian during the Nazi Regime in WWII and was a part of what is called the Confessing Church Movement that actively resisted and opposed the Third Reich in Europe. And Karl Barth's massive 13 volume work called the Church Dogmatics. Here is a picture of my set.

In seminary when we were assigned a chapter from the Dogmatics, what you will often find in reading Barth is that we would be reading along and realize that his footnotes were longer than the main portion of the chapter. To say that he is among one of the theological heavyweights of all time would be a massive understatement. But what is so wonderful about Barth is within the immense depth of his ability to comprehend and express theological thought, there is also a profound simplicity that he exhibits. There was one time when Barth was asked to summarize his Church Dogmatics in a sentence and he said this, "Jesus loves me this I know for the Bible tells me so." And this was not simply a cop out or a childish answer. But rather this is the sort of simplicity that exists on the far side of complexity. That he was able to see through all the philosophical and theological nuance and still distill all the vastness of the scriptures down to this one simple and timeless truth. And in all of his study of scripture, Barth revealed what God's pattern in history is. You want to know what that pattern is? Gather, Build, and Send.

And this pattern of Gather, Build, and Send not so much emphasizes what we do, but what God does through us. **God gathers us, God builds us, and God sends us.** And friends this is how God worked with Abraham, this is how Jesus operated with his disciples, it is how the Holy Spirit works, and it is how God brought a people who were displaced, disoriented, and discouraged back to a land flowing with milk and honey, back to prosperity. God gathers, God builds, and then God sends.

Pause: Music

In an age of selfies and Facebook, where culture is narcissistic, where it seems the most important virtue is self-actualization, it is good for us to be reminded of what generations who have come before us have long known—namely that what this nation's greatest gift to the world has been is a haven for the lost, the lonely, and the hopeful. America has always been a place where people from every nation, creed, and family can gather. In fact, the statue that welcomes foreigners into New York harbor, the statue of Liberty, has inscribed in it the words of an Emma Lazarus poem:

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glow world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
"Keep ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

Like this statue, **our church ought to be a place where anyone can find welcome, anyone can be gathered in in safety, and that anyone can become a someone. But like our nation, the strength of our church is not just found in its safety. No, we gather the masses in to be built up.** Anyone who knows or has been through basic training knows that enlisting is the easy part; it's the grueling preparation that makes you all that you can be. Here, too, worship and fellowship are important, but really we exist together, like Proverbs says, to be iron that sharpens iron. If you are not actively growing, challenging your faith in such a way that it becomes more robust and rooted, I think you've got to question your motives here.

The illustration that I love so much comes from the field of battle. The churches that will not be doomed to end up as Woodward Avenue did are those that see themselves as an aircraft carrier and not a cruise ship. Cruise ships, as you know, exist to gather people in, and keep them safe and comfortable and content. There are many churches like that, too. Aircraft carriers exist to welcome in tired and empty vessels, fill them up with fuel, give them a time to rest their engines, and then send them back into the mission that gives meaning to their lives. Gather. Build. Send.

If we are only concerned with sticking to the laurels of what worked for us in the past, we too run the risk of looking like many other churches, once grand places of worship and devotion, now desolate and empty vestiges of days past. But you see it just as I do: God is doing a new thing here among us. Soil that was tilled and planted in years past is beginning to sprout with new growth. The question is, will we continue to nurture it? Will we lay down our lives so that new experiences, new expressions, new encounters with the living God can take place? Gather. Build. Send.

I want to close with a story that typifies the kind of significance I think we ought to see in our life together. June 4th 1942, the US Navy's Battle of Midway. In World War II naval warfare, there were three kinds of planes: dive bombers, fighter planes, and torpedo planes. In a coordinated attack, the dive bombers came in first from directly overhead, escorted by fighter planes, to distract the enemy and to give the slow, vulnerable torpedo planes their chance to come in low, skimming across the water. But that morning logistical foul-ups on the decks of the aircraft carriers kept the fighter planes and dive bombers down on the carrier for over an hour. Meanwhile, the circling torpedo planes were burning up so much fuel that if they delayed longer they might not make it to their target. So the torpedo planes were commanded to proceed alone to attack the Japanese fleet commanded by Vice Admiral Nagumo.

When they arrived, still there was no sign of the fighters and dive bombers. These American young men, raw Marine pilots, aware of how much was riding on this moment, aware of the threat to their homeland, to freedom and their country, these brave torpedo pilots – 83 of them – went in alone and unescorted, knowing full well they were going to die.

And die they did. They were slaughtered. Like clay pigeons at a trap shoot, one by one, they burst into flames and arched smoking into the sea. Not one torpedo even touched a

Japanese ship.

But just as the last torpedo plane went down, high overhead those American dive bombers finally arrived. And to their utter astonishment, all the enemy fighters and guns were down at water level looking for torpedo planes.

The American Hell Divers came screaming down in what has been called the most decisive five minutes in the history of warfare. The destruction of the Japanese Navy at Midway was the turning point in World War II, even though the war dragged on longer, and it was because 83 young men chose not to live to be 100 and a half and flew into the teeth of those guns. Sixty-nine men gave their lives that day...

The purpose of life is not to live as long and as cushy comfortably and as safely as you can. You're here to make your life count. Jesus said, all those who seek to save their lives will lose them, and those who lose their lives for my sake will save them. As we remember what makes this nation great, there is much that also makes this church great. And the key for us now and always is three simple, but ever challenging words, Gather. Build. Send.