

## “Homecoming over Time”

Ezra 3:10-13

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Proper 19

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Clearly some folks didn't think the new temple compared with the old. Some wept while others shouted with joy. Was it the contemporary music that now sounded in the new temple that disappointed some? Was it the fact that the previous temple had been built with the riches of a beloved monarch, remembered as wise and benevolent where this temple had been built with the gifts and labor of the entire community pooling their resources? Was it a difference in paint colors, a change in the preachers, or different choral sounds that surely had changed over the 70 years of exile that had taken place?

It's hard to know whether the temple building itself was any different. Since later chapters in Ezra only give two of the 3 dimensions that were recorded for the earlier temple detailed in the book of Kings, we don't really know how this newer temple compared to King Solomon's original edifice. The Jewish Encyclopedia speculates that the dimensions were likely the same, but that the ornamentation of the first temple was lacking. So if anything, this second temple should have been more ornate, more beautiful, more of an upgrade than the first. So why did some weep while others shouted with joy?<sup>1</sup>

We do know the Ark of the Covenant was missing - yes, the one that later shows up with Harrison Ford in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* - that's the one. According to the Babylonian Talmud, the new temple lacked the Shekinah (the dwelling presence of God), and the Ruach HaKodesh (the spirit of God) that was dwelling in the first temple.<sup>2</sup> In other words, they may have been worshipping in a temple that was built to be the same if not better. They may have been doing the same things they had done in that same place 70 years earlier. But it felt different. It felt sad to some. The presence of God felt less available to some.

I think I know how they feel. I've been waiting for two and a half years for this very day to come. Dreaming about the day when the bagpipes would be playing again, the choir would be processing again. The community would be as "back to normal" as we possibly could be. We've all been waiting for that kind of change. I remember brainstorming as a staff around a table early this past summer about what we thought

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<sup>1</sup> This was a significant error in my writing of the sermon. The Jewish Encyclopedia speculates that the second temple was less ornate than the first, a speculation that would justify the tears of some of the elderly who had seen a more ornate first. I had it backwards in the sermon. Regardless, the conclusions drawn in the sermon remain the same. <https://jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/14309-temple-the-second>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

our congregation would need in the fall. "I think we need a big Rally Day blowout this year," Michael Britt told our staff. And we all worked together to plan this Sunday to be exactly that. A return to the temple that we all remember. A return to all the things that so many have loved about our church through the years. The best choir in Baltimore with a building that makes them sound even better. A place where truth can be spoken, honest questions raised, hopes and dreams for ourselves and our neighbors put at the center of our life together. A return to the temple that we all love.

But of course it's not the same, not because we don't have adequate music. Not because the building isn't what it used to be. Not because we don't remember how to pray and sing and preach and praise the Lord. But because we're all different. Some of us haven't come back to church for reasons that span the gamut - some have health concerns that make a return too much of a risk, others have crippling anxiety that have kept them away. Some have moved, others are out of the habit, and still others - when they're honest - are contemplating just how important church is going to be from now on. And some of us who are here have been wounded by the deaths of beloved family and friends who in our minds and hearts should be here. Praying alongside us, singing alongside us, playing alongside us.

It feels different. Perhaps even God feels less available to some.

The amazing thing about the Israelites on that temple rededication day is that there was room for the weeping alongside the shouts of joy. The gathered community figured out a way to hold both simultaneously. For those who felt the absence of God, there was room for their tears. For those who felt overjoyed at the return to praising the Lord in the very space where their ancestors had praised God, there was room for their joy. It's the hope for every healthy community. It's the basis for every solid relationship - the ability to bring whatever you have to bring, to feel whatever you are feeling, to share whatever you need to share without obliterating the same gift for someone else.

It seems harder and harder to create that kind of space for each other in these troubled times. Data is just starting to be published about the impact of covid but everything that I'm reading is that it's had a profound impact on all of our mental health. Anxiety is up, depression is up, post-traumatic stress disorders are up. And because all of that is up, it's made it even more difficult to deal with the tumult that was brewing in our city and in our country before we even knew the word covid. Quitting rates for people in the helping professions - nurses, teachers, pastors, counselors - all are up. Violence of many kinds is up across the country is all up. Communities are stressed. Why? Because we have less practice at how to be with each other precisely at the same time where we're more stressed and more in need of each other than we've ever been before.

And as much as I'd love to place some of the blame on the absence of God for all of our dysfunction. As much anger as I have for God for not intervening in the middle of more of our messes - our political dysfunction and division, our climate crisis that our

leaders haven't had the guts to address adequately, our public health missteps caused not by scientists failing to do their jobs but by leaders who politicized public health. As much as I would like to blame God for some of our messes, blaming other people is kind of the heart of America's dysfunction right now. Finding a scapegoat on which to heap all of our blame. It's our favorite American pastime.

It's amazing to me that the Israelites didn't join in that kind of blame game and they had every reason to. In their case, God had claimed credit for initiating the exile. God had said I'm using a foreign invader - Babylon - to punish you for your faithlessness. The Israelites had every reason to blame God.

But standing at the temple dedication that day I think the people there realized that the real reason for some of their grief, for some of their worry, for some of their fear about the present and the future wasn't because the temple was different from what they imagined, it wasn't because the Ark was missing, it wasn't that the Spirit of the Lord was MIA. The tears flowed freely that day for some because the power of that beloved place had crystallized for them just how much they had changed. How much they had lost in the 70 years of their exile. How much had been taken from them during their period away. On that temple dedication day, the reality of their transformation finally came into view.

How much we have lost during the last two and half years, losses that we couldn't even process together appropriately because we had to stay at home? Losses that we are still holding right now with our beloved Minister of Music on a ventilator, fresh off of mourning Sandra and Ellen and Lee and Ken and Ernie and fathers and siblings and cousins and grandparents.

I think the Israelites showed us on that day that returning from exile isn't something that you do on just one day. It's a change that unfolds over time. And one of the most important things that we can do for each other and maybe for the world right now is to continue striving to create a community where we can hold each other through our different rates of exile return. To make space for the joy that some are experiencing alongside the fear and anxiety that others hold when they walk into a space where people are gathered alongside the grief that some are holding and will continue to hold - grief over your personal losses, or grief over our corporate ones in the world. Those are changes that unfold.

But I think the Israelites also showed us that if you want to get back to something that seems more normal, or if you want to move forward into something that's more like giving that the exile you've been living through, you can't stand still. You've got to move forward even when moving forward seems like the most difficult thing to do.

Dr. Lena Wen was on Midday with Tom Hall this week. And she shared why her family has made the decision to go back to living their lives pretty close to how they were living before the pandemic. "Changes in policy guidance and changes in our

behavior are to be expected over the course of a pandemic,” she told Tom. This is not flip flipping, “this is to be expected because circumstances have changed dramatically.” . . .”Getting rid of covid is no longer on the table,” she said. “Now everyone 6 months or over has access to vaccines and we have a lot more treatments.” We still need to invest in new treatments for those who are still too vulnerable, she said. But for the rest of us the risk calculations have changed dramatically.<sup>3</sup>

The Israelites rebuilt the temple in a world that was no more secure than the one that had led to the temple’s destruction. The Empires of the world had changed in name but Israel was still at the mercy of powerful forces larger than they could ever hope to be. Their future was no more secure than it ever had been. For some, their grief over what they had lost was more present than joy about the future. But they moved forward anyway. The gift of grief, after all, is a gift intended to help us live with loss, not be ended by it.

Through more than 150 years these walls have seen a great deal of joy - new life, new hope, new joy. And they’ve also seen their fair share of tears - burying our loved ones, letting go of old dreams. But in truth it’s never been the walls that have made the difference - it’s the steadfast love of the Lord, embodied in the people who belong here. Love in cards and casseroles to those who are enduring new losses. Love in visits and prayers for those close to us whose immediate future is uncertain. Love in gifts of music and volunteer time with children learning to read and refugees making a home and other Baltimoreans trying to put our city on a trajectory of healing and justice where vacants and unsafe water and violence on our streets are a thing of the past. As this new beginning unfolds, may each of us bring whatever we have to build that community together, making space for whatever else others have to bring so that joy and pain, hope and despair can be held together in this beloved community of God’s people.

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<sup>3</sup> Midday with Tom Hall,  
<https://www.wypr.org/show/midday/2022-09-06/healthwatch-with-dr-leana-wen-new-covid-boosters-school-safety>