

*Returning from Exile*

Matthew 5:4, Ezra 3:10-13

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La Verne Church of the Brethren

Susan Boyer

I often have people ask me why I bother preaching from the Bible, this dusty old irrelevant book of writings compiled by a group of privileged men to control the rest of us. I see this book so differently than so many people I love and respect. I see this book as a story filled with outtakes and intakes, myths and truths told, lessons learned and forgotten, failures and successes, love and enmity, salvation and grace and the God who never deserts us.

As I thought about what it is we should contemplate as we come together for our first in-person worship after wandering in the wilderness for 18 months I was drawn to an old story in this book – a story of the Israelites released from Babylonian Captivity. Under the direction of the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar, his army had come into Jerusalem and destroyed the temple. Then they gathered up the ruling class, the intelligentsia, the artisans, the upper class and forced them into exile. They left behind the poor to deal with the pile of rubble. The ones left in Jerusalem didn't have the means to reconstruct their homeland. When the Babylonian army destroyed Israel's spiritual home and separated this community of faith from each other, they left it in shambles. The Israelites lost so much -- their physical place of worship and each other.

This exile from each other went on for somewhere between 50-70 years. I am beyond weary after a year and a half of separation from all you. The good news is that when Cyrus the Great became the new conqueror of the Neo-Babylonian Empire he decreed that the Israelites who lived in captivity could return home. The biblical narrative tells us that Cyrus didn't just authorize it. He encouraged it. "Go back to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple destroyed by my predecessor."

Suddenly, the Israelites who had been living in a foreign land for decades, including those who had been born in Babylon so had never set eyes on Jerusalem in their lives, had a decision to make. Would they stay where they were clinging to what had now become familiar? Once upon a time, they had been ripped from their place of comfort and lived through grief while navigating the loss of familiarity, safety, independence, social ties, religious expression and their place of privilege in their city. But that was years ago. They adapted. They made a home in Babylon. They figured out new rhythms...new ways to worship. They had created home offices; learned to buy groceries online ;and set up a nice background on Zoom to hide the chaos. They had created lives in this place of captivity. It was their new familiar.

Returning from exile would require hard things of them. They would have to be agile and adapt once again. They would need to help rebuild what had been lost, while creating a new normal. Would they be able to form community again? Did they have

the energy needed to make this transition? Babylon had its advantages. Besides, what had been stripped from them now lay in disarray. Did they have the wherewithal to build something new?

Some were so ready and so eager to return. They put on their green wristbands and jumped into the fray. Some wanted to let others go first and see just how it developed before they uprooted their families and returned to Jerusalem. They wanted others to test the waters to see if it was safe. Others could do the rebuilding and create the needed infrastructures and then they would return. And some never came back. They were too old now to make the journey or they had unvaccinated family members to consider or they simply lived too far away to uproot their lives once again.

The Israelites have a name for the journey the returning exiles made to Jerusalem. They call it Aliyah, which means ascent. It is where the Songs of Ascent come from in the book of Psalms. According to the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, about 50,000 Jews made Aliyah back to their homeland and began the necessary work of rebuilding what had been lost. Their first task was to build the altar. But they didn't want to leave it to the elements, so they appointed Levites to supervise the rebuilding of the whole House of God. They called it "making a beginning".

When they had the foundation laid, the community of faith gathered to celebrate. It was a full-on party. The priests in their beautiful vestments blasted their trumpets and the Levites clashed cymbals and the worshipping community sang about how God's love had never deserted them. It was a day of joy. But the older generation...the ones who knew what it had been like before...stood there looking at the bare bones of the temple where there had once been walls. They were overcome with everything that had been lost. They mourned those who hadn't made it through the exile to see this day. They missed what the temple had once been. They missed the smells and sounds and familiarity of what was longer. They wept aloud right alongside the delighted cheers of those who were so filled with joy. The scripture that Pastor Tom read from the book of Ezra ends with these words:

*...the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people's weeping...*

Joy and sorrow were mingled together in such an intricate way that they were indistinguishable, one from the other. Both emotions were part of that day...equally expressed...equally valid.

We understand these two emotions. Joy and sorrow are tangible in this sanctuary. We lost people whose absence is palpable in this space. We are weary and grieving. Worship looks different. We are seeing old and new faces but with masks on. It is just all so strange. And yet, the delight and comfort of being here together makes us want to shout for joy and with deep relief even through our masks. This is a moment of sheer humanity concerning what it means to live on this side of the last 18 months of pandemic living. There were so many days I worried I would never get to worship with you again in this sanctuary. At Vespers....the Peace Camp celebration...the picnic....all of the times we have met together in person this summer have filled me with such

delight I thought I would burst. I know the pandemic isn't over. There is a journey yet to travel **but** we are together with all of our grief and all of our delights. This is an authentic moment of fulfillment and loss.

Those of you sitting in this sanctuary or out on the courtyard today had a decision to make about whether or not you would return from exile and step back onto the church campus. For some of you this is the first time you have ever been inside this space. And for others, this place is filled with memories. Together, we are the first ones to make the Aliyah – the return ascent to this spiritual center. You are the early adapters. The scouts for the rest of the community. The ones who have come that you might send back word about what you experienced here.

I want to make sure that those of you joining us from home are also connected to this spiritual center. Time and distance may separate us, but we are family to each other. What we learned this past year is that the church does not stop being the church when we are separated from one another. In the story Ezra tells, the Israelites lived into a new future that God was creating in their midst. As they "made a beginning" they didn't know what would emerge. As we gather in this sanctuary or on the courtyard or around our computer screens, we know that things will look different because we are different. The future is not the past. We, along with the God who does not desert us, are the ones to begin the building of our future...inside this building and outside this building.

It isn't always a piece of cake to rebuild after exile. The rebuilders in our biblical story faced some tensions with each other. They had some differing opinions. People's angst lived out right in the midst of their interactions with each other. They had been apart for some time, and they didn't yet fully know the struggles of the other. They actually didn't all even know each other. They had to figure out how to walk with each other again. They had to figure how to navigate all the entangled and wonderful and beautiful messiness of community. They had to figure out how to make collective decisions again; what changes they needed to make in their religious life; how to share resources; and how to care for and hold each other in love.

We have to figure out those same things and we start by simply reclaiming each other. For those of you present in this sanctuary or at the outside viewing area today we are going to enjoy brunch together on the courtyard immediately after this service. No reservations were required. I encourage you, if you feel comfortable doing so, to please be part of this meal. Our future as a community of faith is dependent on us getting acquainted and/or reacquainted with each other. We need to share our stories of laments and gratitudes. We need to feel like our losses and delights are recognized. We need to listen to the journey others have been on these last 18 months. We need to be heard and we need to listen.

For those of you who are not in this sanctuary today, who are watching this at home, the same is true for you. We want to hear your losses and delights. Shoot the church an email and let us know your story of survival from this past year and a half. Our connection with each other is the foundation we must build in order for the church to be

strong and whole. We must “make a beginning.” We are the spiritual center for each other. We are the church. This is just a building that houses our sacred community.

I know that we are walking into uncharted territory again but I want to tell you the good news....the truth of who we are that fills me with joy. This church knows how to change and adapt and grow. You know how to pivot when a new direction is needed. We figured out how to worship, mourn our saints, feed the hungry, fund our ministries, keep music alive, stand up for justice and care for each other while there was a global pandemic and we couldn't be together. Friends, we've got this.

Today is a happy day. We have come together to have this community help us carry our burdens and to hear our gratitudes. Now we pivot towards the future and pick up hope and the promise of connection and reconnection; of return and rejoicing; of joy mixed with the redemption to come. We have to stay attentive; be courageous in the struggle and keep on praying. O happy day, we have come to be present to each moment...night and day. O happy day, we have returned to hope and love and pray together.

On your way out of the sanctuary today there are tables by the doors to the outside. They are covered with stones of hope. Take one. If you are watching from home, I invite you to find a small stone and name it hope. Let us all hold our stones in the palm of our hands. Feel the weight of it there. Know that our community, our spiritual center, which has never left us, is joining us in holding on to hope for each other and for this community on this happy, happy day of returning. Amen.