

Burning Bridges

As I announced several weeks ago, I'm spending the time between preaching from the Scriptures suggested in We Make the Road by Walking and the beginning of Advent by preaching from Scriptures neglected in all of the lectionaries which I've used in my fifteen years among you. I'll confess a certain selfishness in this approach – it gives me an excuse to dig in to passages I might never otherwise study carefully while relieving me from the duty of finding new things to say about passages that are well-known to all of us. But I also hope that hearing about these orphaned pericopes will inspire all of us, give us some new insight into what it means to love God and our neighbors and to follow in the Way of Jesus.

This morning, we'll begin a brief journey into the book of Ezra. We'll return to Ezra in three weeks, after another sermon by me from Matthew next week and one from Pastor Stephen on the 18th. I was surprised to realize that there are no texts from Ezra in the Revised Common Lectionary and only one from Nehemiah, and I'll come back to the connection between those two books in a moment. Why should this be so? Well, according to commentator Paul Redditt there are three reasons. First, the book of Ezra is heavy on lists – I think I've made a pretty good case that the lists in Matthew and Luke of Jesus' genealogy can make for interesting reading if you know the clues, but it would take a far more talented preacher than I to make much of the lists of returnees from exile in Ezra. Second, the book is also heavy on descriptions of religious ritual and of the rebuilt Temple and its furnishings – also not ripe for exciting preaching. But perhaps most significant is what Redditt calls “the vindictive nature of some of the discourse,” and that, believe it or not, is one of the reasons that I think it's important for us to look at Ezra.

Let me explain that surprising statement. Having been under the tutelage of Charlie Scalise, formally and informally, for some thirty-one years now (Charlie, how is that possible?), I've learned a thing or two from him and one big thing he's taught me is to consider the place of each book of the Bible in the big picture of the canon of Holy Scripture. If we take seriously the idea of the Bible as books written by humans inspired and guided by the Holy Spirit, we discard or disregard any passage at our peril. As Jacob wrestled with the angel of God, so we must wrestle with the written Word of God, even though it is transmitted through fallen and fallible humans. In corollary, I've come to believe that sometimes the message of Scripture is, “See how these people responded to God? Well, don't do that.” Adam and Eve are clearly negative examples as is their son, Cain. On the whole, the Pharisees of the New Testament are negative examples – religious leaders who missed the working of God through Jesus before their very eyes. And I find that the actions of the leaders of the returnees to Judah in Ezra provide several negative examples as well. In the two portions of Ezra I'm going to hold up for your inspection in the next weeks, I think we'll find parallels to some very negative things that continue to happen in our own place and time and the opportunity to think about responses that are more faithful to the ongoing will of God for peace and love among God's people. I think it's appropriate here to quote again from Paul Redditt: “When Ezra and Nehemiah do not measure up, I say so not angrily but sadly and wistfully. I too do not measure up. Whomever God loves and saves thereby is saved by God's grace, and God does not need my permission to save anyone, though God does call on me to spread the gospel of God's love.”

Before I get to the meat of all this, a little introduction to the book of Ezra and its context is in order. Those of you who were raised in the Roman Catholic tradition will already know that what is called the Book of Ezra in one tradition isn't necessarily what is called the Book of Ezra

in another tradition. In the Bibles used by most Protestant denominations, we have the Book of Ezra and the Book of Nehemiah, which tell the story of the return of the exiles to Judah and the rebuilding of the Temple and of the city of Jerusalem. But in most English translations of the Bible in the Catholic tradition, the two books are known as 1 and 2 Esdras (Esdras being the Greek form of Ezra). And, until the third century of the Common Era, Christians considered the two books to be one. Hebrew Bibles did not divide the two until the fifteenth century, CE. What's more, if you look at the NRSV including the Apocrypha, which we use as pew Bibles at Good Shepherd, you'll find books called First and Second Esdras in the Apocrypha, while in Catholic Bibles, these same deuterocanonical books are called Third and Fourth Esdras. To add to the fun, some scholars divide that last book into three parts called Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth Esdras. Oy, gevalt! Those apocryphal or deuterocanonical books consist of a later retelling of the events in Ezra/Nehemiah, as well as apocalyptic visions added several centuries into the Christian era. Needless to say, I'm not dealing with anything but what we know as Ezra. At least, this time around.

Now, for the context of Ezra. As we were reminded two weeks ago, with our look at the prophetic book of Nahum, calamity struck the Hebrew people in 721 BCE, when the Assyrian Empire destroyed what had been the Northern Hebrew Kingdom of Israel, separated from the Southern Kingdom of Judah since the death of Solomon. The Assyrians, as was their practice, carried away much of the population of Israel and replaced them with conquered people from elsewhere in their empire, theoretically making both groups of displaced people easier to control. This is generally remembered when we talk about the "Ten Lost Tribes of Israel." But what that easily remembered phrase covers up is that the Assyrians didn't take everybody. They may have left a substantial number of poor farmers, taking only the leaders of the community. Using both those who were left and their imported population, the Assyrians then set up an Assyrian controlled government based in the former capital of Samaria. So, while the Northern Kingdom ceased to exist as a Hebrew-only state, it did continue. And, as mentioned two weeks ago, the remaining worshippers of Yahweh taught the newcomers to worship the Hebrew God as well. We'll come to the importance of this in a moment.

Although they escaped destruction by the Assyrians, the Southern Hebrew Kingdom of Judah fell to the next dominant empire of the Fertile Crescent, the Babylonians. In 597 BCE, the Babylonians besieged and destroyed Jerusalem, destroying the Temple of Yahweh built by Solomon in the process. Like the Assyrians, they, too, carried off the leaders and artisans of Judean society, leaving poor farmers in the land. Unlike the Assyrians, they kept their Jewish captives in and around the capital city of Babylon, where they formed a discrete element of Babylonian society. This Jewish community of Babylon remained as a functioning and sometimes thriving subculture until the 1960s, producing important Jewish scholarship over the centuries.

But in 539 BCE, not quite 60 years after the destruction of Jerusalem, the Babylonians were defeated by the Persian Empire under Emperor Cyrus. Unlike the Assyrians and the Babylonians, who only ever offered the stick to those they'd conquered, the Persians opted for the carrot approach, doing what was possible to win over the conquered and make them allies, or at least compliant. As recorded in the first chapter of Ezra, Cyrus returned the looted treasures of the Jerusalem Temple to the captives in Babylon and offered them the opportunity to return

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home and rebuild the Temple. Grateful Jews proclaimed that the Persian Cyrus was “the anointed one of God,” which you may remember translates in Hebrew to “the Messiah.” References to the Messiah in the book of Isaiah, which Christians have appropriated in reference to Jesus, probably originally referred to Cyrus.

With this background in mind, we can read the fourth chapter of Ezra with a little more nuance. In verse one, we read of “the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin,” who request permission to help with the rebuilding of the Temple. When they are refused, verse four says, “Then the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah, and made them afraid to build...” So, who were these “adversaries, the people of the land?” They were, by and large, the poor farming families who’d been left behind by the Assyrian and Babylonian conquests, the descendants of the Children of Israel. Some, of course, had intermarried with the people brought in by the Assyrians but it’s very likely that the majority of them were worshippers of the God of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel and Leah. They came to help rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem because it was dedicated to the same God that they worshipped.

The problem was that, between the time of the destruction of Jerusalem and the return of the exiles, the Hebrews who were left in the Promised Land and those carried away to Babylon had become estranged. Those who had remained in *Eretz Yisrael*, the Land of Israel, had stayed out of trouble by obeying the successive Assyrian and Babylonian administrations set up in Samaria, continuing to worship Yahweh as they had done for generations, offering sacrifice at holy sites other than the destroyed Jerusalem, following the dictates of the Law of Moses as they had it. The returnees, however, came to Jerusalem with a mandate from the new and powerful government of Persia, led by a descendant of David (Zerubbabel), and following a new edition of the Books of Moses as well as prophetic books and other writings which had been added to the canon. For them, only sacrifices offered in the Jerusalem temple were valid. The returnees, remember, were descendants of the cream of Judean society, while the “people of the land,” were only poor farmers. On the one hand, much had changed in 60 years – religiously in particular. On the other hand, nothing had changed. Those who have ruled often disregard those who have been ruled by them. When you add together the age old distinctions between rich and poor, city and country, “ins” and “outs,” with the religious purity test that each side considered the other to have failed, conflict is bound to ensue. These things have consequences. In the latter portion of our story, we learn that the rebuilding of the Temple and the city were blocked by those whose help had been rejected. The party of Zerubbabel had unnecessarily burned a bridge between themselves and their cousins and they paid for it. As the returnees were eventually successful in building the Temple and the walls of Jerusalem and keeping their opponents out, they came up with a new label for those who had been ruled by Assyrian and Babylonian administrations in Samaria. They were called Samaritans and the conflict between the Jews and the Samaritans lasted until Jesus’ day and beyond.

So, with this additional context, do our sympathies remain solely with those who wrote the book of Ezra to present their side of the story, the returnees from Babylon? Or are we more inclined to see “the people of the land” as equal claimants to the promises of God to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? Ultimately, it doesn’t matter to the conflict of the sixth century BCE, but it may shed some light on our own conflicts. After hearing this story, we may ask, for example, if the two sides in this disagreement instituted purity tests, one against the other, what sort of purity tests do

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we use to create the divides between “us” and “them?” Where are we building walls instead of tearing them down? Where are we burning bridges instead of building them?

In our broader society, we see all sorts of purity tests, dividing people by gender, race, socioeconomic standing, education, and more. Good Shepherd is the spiritual home of several of us who passed through the fire of religious purity tests. Charlie and Pam, Charlotte and Jane, Connie and I, all remember the theological purity tests of the fundamentalists who took over the Southern Baptist Convention. The fundamentalists “cleansed” the SBC of those who didn’t agree with them. Anyone who was part of Good Shepherd in the early 2000’s remembers the “purity test” set up by American Baptist Churches of the Northwest (now, Mission Northwest) which led to the creation of the Evergreen Association. It’s been interesting to see who perceives that bridge as “burned” and who does not. The past three presidents of Seattle Baptist Union – Judy Gay, David Kile, and Connie Boyer – have all reached out to Mission Northwest churches to remind them that they are welcome in SBU, only to be frustrated by little acknowledgment of that welcome. And, to return to the broader U.S. society, there are the purity tests set up between Democrats and Republicans and even among their own parties. I can testify that, locally, if you’re not just the right sort of Democrat, adhering exactly to the wishes of local party leaders, you might as well not call yourself a Democrat at all.

But the fact is, we all need each other. How much sooner and better could Jerusalem and its Temple have been rebuilt if those of the exile and those of the remnant had put aside their differences and worked together? And how much more fully could the will of God for all people been expressed through Jerusalem in those days? How much human suffering could have been eliminated had the Democrats and Republicans of recent decades been committed to governing together for the good of all rather than wiping each other from the electoral map? In 1979, the Southern Baptist Convention committed to a “Bold Mission Thrust,” with the goal of reaching every human being on the planet with the Good News of Jesus Christ. Instead, the convention spent the 80s and 90s tearing itself apart in the name of theological purity. How many people could have been attracted to the Way of Jesus if the “Bold Mission Thrust” of the SBC not given way to theological warfare? Sadly, we’ll never be able to answer those questions. But we can answer for our own conduct toward our siblings who are, in some way, not like us. We can be instruments of peace and beacons of hope in this world.

Today is being celebrated in churches all over the world as World Communion Sunday. In a moment, in commemoration of that celebration, we will sing “One Bread, One Body.” Our prayer on this first Sunday should be that the words of that hymn are not just a plea but a prediction, that we, the Body of Christ, will increasingly be one for all. Let us resolve today, my friends, to be not bridge burners but bridge builders. Perhaps more than anything, that is what our world needs from us. Thanks be to God! Amen.