

“New Beginnings”

Ezra 3

¹⁰ And when the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord, the priests in their vestments came forward with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, to praise the Lord, according to the directions of David king of Israel. ¹¹ And they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the Lord,

*“For he is good,
for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel.”*

And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid. ¹² But many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers' houses, old men who had seen the first house, wept with a loud voice when they saw the foundation of this house being laid, though many shouted aloud for joy, ¹³ so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people's weeping, for the people shouted with a great shout, and the sound was heard far away.

Have you ever said “It’s not like the ‘good ‘ol’ days!” ???

How about “They sure don’t make ‘em like they used to!” ???

Do you have a sense that things are not as good as they once were? Is there some disappointment there?

....furniture...particle board???

What about car bumpers...anyone remember chrome metal???

Or maybe its even something more personal; my past devotional life in college and writing songs all day...

Our passage today captures a very unique snapshot of time in the history of God’s people, and it resonates with this same sense of disappointment; this feeling that things were better back in the day, and they will never be quite as good. This passage highlights a real sense of grief in some, and it’s a kind of grief that keeps them from experiencing God’s new work – it blinds them to the good thing God is doing right in front of them.

Grief is something we can all relate to, and our passage in Ezra today frames it in a unique way...

I’m grateful for our Memorial Day highlight of our chaplain ministry, because chaplains model so well what it means to come alongside and help those who are grieving. So many of us run from grief; we burry it in ourselves, and we deflect it when we see it in others - we say the wrong things when we’re trying to help. Chaplains serve in such a needed, profound way.

As we've been going through the whole Bible as a church this year, it's been interesting following the twists and turns, all the places and characters, and marveling at the mystery of God still being in control of all things.

***** You know, it seems that God often uses the "old" to create the "new", and because He is good and His love is forever, we can embrace the future, even when we sometimes mourn the past.**

We're going to see that played out, here in Ezra 3, in the way God brings a new beginning, for His people in worship, and how even though new beginnings bring goodbyes and some experience this with grief, God's new beginnings ultimately bring hope.

I invite you to open your Bibles or pull up your Bible app and follow along today in Ezra 3, verses 10-13.

Let me set up the context and background of this scene, so that we can better understand what's going on: The Hebrew people have been conquered for many years at this point in the story – they've been exiled in some places, and subservient to their captives in other places. The amazing, extravagant temple that Solomon built, which we've been hearing and reading about the last several weeks, has been totally looted, destroyed, and there is no longer a central, holy temple for the people to worship God in. They're scattered and all seems lost. For you Star Wars fans...

(and speaking of movies that weren't as good as they used to be???)

; the "evil empire" seems to be winning at this point, while the "rebels" try to hang on to hope. But a "new hope" is coming! And here's how it comes...

1. God Brings New Beginnings

Through God's incredible, mysterious power and sovereignty, He "stirs up the spirit" of King Cyrus of Persia (or "moved his heart" NLT) to make a proclamation; to declare a new rule, and this King has up until this point been notoriously against the Hebrews and their God – he's the one that had so much to do with their exile and oppression. But here's his speech under the influence of God...in Ezra 1:

² "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. ³ 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."

What??? He didn't even believe in God?

So, the king has this huge change of heart under the influence and direction of God, and many of the previously exiled, oppressed people get to go back to Jerusalem and start rebuilding the famous temple and restoring their culture and ability to worship God there. It's a momentous turn of events, and there is a lot to be excited about! It'd be like Kim Jong Un declaring an end to the North/South Korean border, tearing down the wall and personally inviting missionaries to come and build churches!

So, the people are excited – for good reason! They re-establish their towns and organize themselves in communities, and begin to offer the traditional sacrifices of worship to God, pretty much like in the old days. They begin to lay the foundation down for what would become the new temple building, and they hold a huge worship celebration, using the written instructions of King David as an order for their service.

Here how it describes it in verses 10 & 11:

¹⁰ And when the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord, the priests in their vestments came forward with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, to praise the Lord, according to the directions of David king of Israel. ¹¹ And they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the Lord,

**“For he is good,
for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel.”**

Even though this is a new thing, the people are confident that it's from God and they respond accordingly.

Some of us are “early adopters” – we love change! We're ready to jump onto the next thing when it comes around. Others here are more traditionalists, and we need both kinds of people in our communities. Even though this is a new thing, the people are confident that it's from God because of His divine intervention to bring it about and because God's laws and general worship directions are preserved. You might remember, God has been very specific about how He is to be worshipped throughout the Old Testament as we've been reading, with priests even dying because of infractions that might seem trivial to you and me, and yet here, in this new worship scene, the temple structure is a bit different, some worship details have changed, and yet God allows this new work, He even blesses it. His sees the heart.

Zechariah 4:10 says “Do not despise these small beginnings, for the Lord rejoices to see the work begin...”

The people are grateful to God for all the good they're experiencing, and they respond with authentic, heartfelt worship and obedience, the best they know how.

What a great challenge and model for us; as God sets up moments for US to worship, to be grateful, do we lean in? When He intervenes miraculously in our lives, can we notice the good things God does and respond appropriately? When God reveals Himself in big and small ways, how do you recognize Him - taking the time to give credit where credit is due?

2. New Beginnings Bring Goodbyes

Now, as God provides this new opportunity to worship, not ALL the people are 100% excited about the situation, and here's where the worship celebration takes on some layers and complications, and points us to a deeper drama going on:

Verses 11 & 12, say “And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid. ¹² But many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers' houses, old men who had seen the first house, wept with a loud voice when they saw the foundation of this house being laid,”

It'd been about 50 years since the first, original, extravagant temple was destroyed, so only those along in years a bit would have seen it. This new, smaller building didn't compare to the old, original, previous one – it truly wasn't as good as 'back in the day'. It didn't have all the ornate wealth displayed like in Solomon's day, the Ark of the Covenant was gone, and God's presence wasn't dwelling in it the same way as before, like in the 'old days'. The “Glory Days” were truly in the past. These seasoned saints had a grief that was real, justified and understandable. They had been torn from their previous worship experience, and wandered in exile and oppression for 50 years, and now they've been drug all the way back to Jerusalem...for *THIS???*

Maybe you can relate. In our worship and church experiences, there can be reasons to mourn.

Maybe the church you came from was bigger, or better. Maybe you had a friend group that was really special and important to you at a season in your life. Maybe you miss a pastor from the old days and long for things to be like they were in certain ways. Your grief in that is real, and we hear you.

In this corporate sense, as a community, some of us mourn the past in some ways, and yet we've got to find ways to look forward to the future - together. In worship styles, there is a difference between preference and conviction. Although your specific preference may not always be presented, you can have confidence that our convictions as a church will never change; we are committed to worshipping God authentically, humbling ourselves in confession, thanking and praising God for His mercy and grace, orienting around the Gospel, and hearing and responding to God's Word. These are core convictions that rise above all matters of style or preference. In this passage, the congregation worshipped in a heartfelt way, with what they had, and although there were some differences of style, size, and scope, God honored their efforts.

For us, mourning and sorrow can be felt in all sorts of places...

We can mourn the past in community, but we also often mourn the past in our families and personal lives. Family life has so many seasons, and we have a ton of opportunities, as times change, to look back, maybe with fondness or even a longing to what was...and yet we must embrace the future. I remember when my kids were little, and we would spend hours and hours at our neighborhood community pool....(story...)

Maybe your grief around family is centered around *not* having children, the sorrow of infertility, or the loss of the loved one – their death has left an empty hole, or experiencing divorce, the breakdown of relationship.

Not saying 'goodbye', not grieving these kinds of things appropriately can blind us to what's ahead. I think that's a bit of what the elders in our passage are experiencing; they are missing out on the new thing God is doing right in front of them because they are stuck in the past, unable to embrace the future – their tears literally blinding them to the new worship experience God is orchestrating in their midst.

Charles Dickens' classic novel *Great Expectations* tells a tragic story of a woman, Miss Havisham who was jilted on her wedding day, and unable to move on from that event, she spends the rest of her life enclosed in her house, wearing her wedding dress, stopping all clocks at twenty to 9 (the moment she got that fateful rejection letter from the groom), and leaving the wedding cake and all the feast, untouched on the table, slowly to rot through the years. This is vivid picture of what our souls can be like when we hold too tightly to the past.

It's hard to lose these things in life. But, we need to learn to grieve well, to accept the necessary goodbyes. If you'd like someone to walk alongside you in this process of grief, our Stephen Ministry is a valuable resource. Also, our Day Away Retreat next Saturday is an opportunity to spend some quality, alone time with God, away from the noise and busyness of our lives - to invite Him into our situations in a deeper way than just a quick prayer here or there and to receive His encouragement, and His care.

Though secure in God, we all long for our true home. We endure these days with a holy discontentment. We know deep down that things are not as they should be. And yet, God invites us to embrace the future – to trust Him with what's to come ...and how can we do that? – because He is GOOD, He is faithful, and He loves us. And this is where HOPE comes from:

3. New Beginnings Bring Hope

Let's look at this last part together:

So, even though some were grieving

“... many shouted aloud for joy, ¹³ so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people's weeping, for the people shouted with a great shout, and the sound was heard far away.”

This verse describes the dynamic where a few elders are weeping in disappointment, but the majority of the congregation is filled with joy, hope, and anticipation for the building of the new temple.

Hey, here's a trick question: the sermon title today had the name "Ezra" in it, we're in the book of Ezra...so, where's Ezra??? Well, he's in this congregation of worshippers. He's one of the emerging leaders, the next generation. He and his friends have no reference point to what was, they simply embrace the future, and it seems that their shouts of joy carry the day. Ezra will go on to lead his people in continuing the worship at this new temple and in other dynamic ways in the years to come. The worship of God brings hope, and this hope triumphs over sorrow.

But, this sorrow is real for many of us, and God welcomes us to bring Him all of our emotions, all of our heart, in worship – not just the “good” parts. We all have places in our lives where we mourn the past and yet need to embrace the future. The mixture of sorrow and joy here is a representation of this world, isn’t it? How incredible is it when we take those opportunities to celebrate with those how celebrate and mourn with those who mourn.

We all hold both experiences in tension.

Jesus serves as an example of that truth: We see him grieving over a people that reject him as he “weeps over Jerusalem” and says, ““O Jerusalem, ... How often I have wanted to gather your children together as a hen protects her chicks beneath her wings, but you wouldn’t let me.”

Do you hear the longing in his voice?? There’s grief, sorrow, disappointment... and yet he looks toward the future:

Heb. 12:2 “For the joy set before him he endured the cross...” *Huh??*

Jesus holds both these experiences in tension; sorrow AND joy.

And Jesus is the greatest “new beginning” of all. God brought a new beginning in Jesus. God provided a way, a miraculous way, for us to worship Him. He intervened in human history, just as he did at the beginning of our story today, but this time with the sending of His son.

...and some missed it! The Pharisees and religious leaders of the day were not able to accept the “new thing”. Their grief and sorrow that Jesus was not what they expected blinded them to who Jesus was and how God’s plan would unfold. They couldn’t say “goodbye” to their preconceived notions and embrace what God was doing.

The one who truly triumphed over all, who takes our past and redeems it for something new – every time, the one who can carry hope for us all, is Jesus. Jesus is famous for embodying hope and He transcends ALL worship places, ALL worship styles. In fact, speaking about temples being torn down and rebuilt, Jesus takes the whole concept a bit further when he says in John 2 “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up”, which of course utterly confuses the listeners, and so John explains that Jesus was speaking about the “temple of this body.”

Jesus; is the new temple. Jesus; the better temple, one that will never get demolished and need to be rebuilt, a temple that will last forever.

Where can you turn in hope for the future, even when you experience grief over the past? You can turn to Jesus. Our “living hope” as we sing about.

Furthermore, Jesus points us to our eternal hope; heaven.

Rev. 21:

³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ⁴‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” ⁵He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!”

Can you embrace God's "new thing" in your life today?

As the band comes back up, I'd like to give us a chance to bring God our whole selves today. Let's take advantage of this time to respond in worship now.

My heart for you is that you'll turn to Jesus for your hope, in a deeper way than ever before. That you'll own your disappointment and grief, not hide it or pretend it doesn't exist, but bring it out, into the light, into God's hands - that you'll trust him with that.

As a church, we have an invitation to trust God with the new things he is doing in and through us, and around us. We have a choice to celebrate fresh expressions of worship that are God centered and draw people to Jesus.

In fact, we'll have a crop of young, summer interns trying new things as leaders around here, and that's another chance for us to be encouraging, to be open and supportive of the next generation.

Let's turn to Jesus for our hope, together. Let's place our future in His hands.

Prayer:

Lord, may we see with new eyes what You are doing. Give us the courage to face our grief, to own our sorrow and say our goodbyes as we surrender to You, releasing our pain and receiving Your hope. May we receive Your words through the prophet Isaiah:

"Forget the former things;
do not dwell on the past.
¹⁹ See, I am doing a new thing!
Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?
I am making a way in the wilderness
and streams in the wasteland.

May we not be blinded to the new thing you are doing right in front of us, Lord. Make a way for us, lead us to streams of living water and a living hope in You. Amen.

Benediction: (Rev. 7:11)

Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!"

5/26/19 SERMON OUTLINE:

“New Beginnings”

Sermon Text: Ezra 3:10-13

Scripture Reading: Ezra 3:10-13

1. God Brings New Beginnings (v. 10-11)
 - a. Ezra 1:2-3
 - b. Zechariah 4:10
2. New Beginnings Bring Goodbyes (v. 11-12)
3. New Beginnings Bring Hope (v. 13)
 - a. John 2:19-21
 - b. John 4:21-23
 - c. Revelation 21:3-5
 - d. Isaiah 43:18-19

Benediction: (Rev. 7:11)

Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!”

Questions for reflection:

- Lord, how have I naturally responded to new things?
- Lord, how have I responded to worship opportunities You've created for me?
- What do I need to grieve and say goodbye to, Lord?
- What new thing are You doing in my life that I need to embrace?