

“Rebuilding What is Lost”
Rev. Dr. Elizabeth Cunningham
Stouffville United Church
Sunday, June 14, 2020

The Book of Ezra

So, March 8th was the last time we gathered for worship in this place. The pandemic closed the doors of places of worship the next week and the people were ‘sent away’. Three months later, on Monday, June 8, the Government of Ontario announced that places of worship could now open up to welcome congregations back into the buildings for the purpose of worship, with attendance limited to no more than 30% of the building capacity.

These last three months have been a time of great transition in our lives, on so many levels. And I knew there must be some place in my Bible I could turn to that might mirror some of what we’re experiencing, that might offer wisdom and encouragement for our Covid-19 tired souls. And my thoughts brought me to the Book of Ezra in the Old Testament. Considered one of the ‘Writings’ of the Bible, it is ten chapters in length and chronicles the rebuilding of the temple of Jerusalem after it was destroyed in 587 BCE during the invasion by the Babylonian army. The temple had been built by King Solomon.

We read in 2 Kings 25: “Nebuzaradan, the captain of the bodyguard, a servant of the king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem. He burned the house of the Lord, the king’s house, and all the houses of Jerusalem; every great house he burned down. All the army of the Chaldeans who were with the captain of the guard broke down the walls around Jerusalem.” They carried away the bronze pillars to Babylon. They took the pots, the shovels the snuffers, the dishes for incense. What was made of gold, they took. What was made of silver, they took. The nobility, the leadership were taken away as captives, exiled for decades in the Babylonian wilderness. The great prophets Jeremiah and Isaiah spoke amongst these people in their exile.

Forty-nine years later, in the first chapter of Ezra we read: “In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia ... the Lord stirred up the spirit of King Cyrus of Persia so that he sent a herald throughout all his kingdom, and also in a written edict declared: “Thus, says King Cyrus 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 in Judah.” And then in Ezra 7, we read “I decree that any of the people of Israel or their priests or Levites in my kingdom who *freely offers* to go to Jerusalem may go with you.”

Not *everyone* wanted to go back. Some were quite happy staying in the homes they had created during their time of exile. They had no wish to go back to what was.

So, the building work of the temple proceeded, and the eventual grand opening and blessing of the newly restored temple happened, but it wasn't a smooth ride. The neighbours complained: "Then the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah, and made them afraid to build, and they bribed officials to frustrate their plan throughout the reign of King Cyrus of Persia and until the reign of King Darius of Persia. (4:4-5) Then the King put a 'stop work' order on the building project until the issue could be sorted out: "Therefore issue an order that these people be made to cease, and that this city not be rebuilt, until I make a decree." (4:21) It took 22 years before the temple was finally completed. Clearly, rebuilding something is never a quick fix. It is complex, life-changing, and takes a lot more work than you thought it would.

I was intrigued by the fact that not all the exiles returned to Jerusalem. The King made it clear that only the people who 'freely offered' would take the journey with Ezra. Not all of them felt the need to return to what was. The Province announced this week: "All places of worship in Ontario will also be permitted to open with physical distancing in place."¹ And so, who will make the trek back to the sanctuary when the doors open? Some will joyously and probably with some tears return! Some will like it where they are, when they can experience the online worship service any time that suits them, when they can even stay in their pyjamas. Or maybe they like spending Sunday morning in the garden, knowing they can catch church later. Some will come back when we reopen, when ever that happens, but some might stay where they are.

If someone had told me that in 2020, Sunday morning worship at 10:30 am would become a moveable feast, I would not have believed them. Sunday morning worship at 10:30 is sacrosanct – untouchable, never to be changed or tampered with. For most of us, the 10:30 am ritual has anchored our calendars, and for some of us, most of our lives. But we now have people catching worship at all hours of the day throughout the week. The sanctity of Sunday at 10:30 in the morning has shifted from 'untouchable' to 'moveable.'

Something is shifting in the culture that is inviting people to experience worship from the comfort of their homes. While tele-evangelism has been around for decades, this time it's different – its people watching their local church. And more people are watching the worship services than we would get coming to our church on a typical Sunday morning at 10:30 am. The mainstay of our church identity, the 'flagship' of our identity, has always been the worship service. It anchors us. It's the center of our relationship. It's the glue. But now that Sunday morning at 10:30 in the sanctuary is no longer happening, will our Christian identity flourish through other ways of being community? That is not worship-based? That is not Sunday-based?

Alan Roxburgh's writing prompted me to consider what this time of not meeting in the sanctuary possibly means to a Christian community? Is a new identity emerging that is trying to get our attention? He talks about the 'fresh shape of the church': "We have to take our eyes and preoccupation off the church and turn to see the Spirit out ahead of us. This turn is not denying

¹ <https://news.ontario.ca/opo/en/2020/06/ontario-permits-more-businesses-and-services-to-reopen-in-the-coming-days.html>

the importance and the central role of the church in the economy of God. If anything, this is the way we will discover the fresh shape of the church.”²

We will *always* be the church, for that is what we are called to be. Worship is and will *always* be a vital and crucial element of our Christian formation and nurture. But what becomes the center of our work might surprise us. This time away from the building will let these new spaces find definition and shape and context.

We are seeing new life in more people taking advantage of being able to fit worship into their schedule, into their hectic lives. We are seeing people experiencing worship online who would not find attending church in person a comfortable event. But they still are hungry for an experience of God and the online worship service meets their need.

Walter Brueggemann captures God’s spirit in these words, “The power of God is a wild card amid the social schemes we devise, suggesting that newness can come in unexpected ways ... God had a purpose other than our arrangements and an inexplicable capacity to change what cannot be changed.”³

It took Ezra five months to get to Jerusalem: “On the first day of the first month the journey up from Babylon was begun, and on the first day of the fifth month he came to Jerusalem.” (7:9) And he had a big task that lay ahead of him. But he came into Jerusalem, into this seemingly impossible task of rebuilding, with courage. Ezra says, “I took courage, for the hand of the Lord my God was upon me, and I gathered leaders from Israel to go up with me.” (7:28) He did not do the work alone.

In March, 2020, our congregation was exiled from its building. It still continues as church – the church was never closed. Is this time away from the building an opportunity for a new vision to emerge of how we identify as a Christian community? Is the building the church?

This new work of discovering a fresh shape of the church will include, as Sarah Travis suggests, “testing out new themes and metaphors. It also involves “living into” these new plot lines, thus freeing us to think and act in new ways, liberated from the scripts of Christendom.”⁴

So, as Ezra tells us, ‘Take courage. For the hand of the Lord our God’ is upon us as we gather together as community, as we gather together from our respective viewing places, as Stouffville United Church.

God *is* ahead of you,

stirring the waters,

inviting you to see the fresh shape of the church

² Alan J. Roxburgh, *Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the World* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2015), 98-99.

³ Sarah Travis, *Metamorphosis: Preaching After Christendom* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2019), 105.

⁴ Travis, *Metamorphosis*, 87.

that you've just never imagined.

Thanks be to God. Amen.