

THE SECOND TEMPLE

One of the things some people love most about the Christian Faith is the offer of Second Chances. This seems incredible and wonderful to those of us who make mistakes – and can admit them. Second Chances have no meaning to those who have no notion of doing anything differently. Without repentance, a Second Chance is just more of the same, and the results will be more of the same. But if we are suddenly aware of God’s presence in new ways, and in that presence see new light and hope, then Second Chances are dramatic and dynamic beyond description. We use words like transformation, conversion, revival, born anew. It is the power behind the Reformation, behind the Puritans, behind every reconciliation. We hope and believe that it will be a major theme in the Life To Come.

I am endlessly fascinated by stories of Second Chances. They are all around us. When we are part of them, age and depression and discouragement flee, and we are alive again in ways both wonderful and miraculous. If you look at the stories of the encounters people had with Jesus, there is always this theme of Second Chances. Whether it is Mary Magdalene, or Nicodemus; whether it is a leper, a blind beggar, or a man paralyzed; whether it is Zacchaeus or Peter or a Gerasene demoniac – always there is the offer of a Second Chance. In a few cases, the offer is rejected, as with the rich young ruler, or as was ultimately true of the leadership of the nation. But you cannot show me a single story of an encounter with Jesus – your own, or anybody else’s – in which Jesus is not offering Second Chances. And not just little ones, but transformational, change-your-whole-life kinds of chances.

As usual, Jesus does not invent the theme; He brings it to apex. One of the most dramatic stories about a Second Chance is buried in what I call the “No-Man’s Land of Scripture.” There are several, to be sure: Most people get pretty vague between the death of Moses and the coming of King David. I suppose they don’t like that “Joshua Judges Ruth.” (A great album by Lyle Lovett, by the way.) But far more people begin to fade out in the Divided Monarchy after Solomon. If you remind them, they know a bit about Elijah, and they know the names of great prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, and maybe even Amos. But after the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. – the Babylonian Captivity – the fade-out is almost complete for most people until the coming of Jesus.

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Over the next four Sundays, I want to tell you the story of a Second Chance. It should be a famous story, but the material is difficult, and four Sundays will be woefully inadequate in terms of time. But you will be delighted with the principles revealed, and once known, you will never forget this story.

As I mentioned, Jerusalem was destroyed in 587 B.C. Actually, its destruction began with a series of disasters. The Northern Kingdom had fallen to Assyria in 722 B.C., 135 years earlier. The Southern Kingdom of Judah had experienced a miraculous, last-minute deliverance. And the people had been hanging on, hopeful that the miracle meant God would not let them be destroyed. But despite Jeremiah's warnings and King Josiah's reforms, many thought cockiness, rather than repentance, was a proper response to the miracle. 587 B.C. was only the end of the disasters, and only the end because there was nothing left – no Jerusalem, no temple; just a pile of rubble, and all but a handful of citizens (the least-desirable) carried off to Babylon. As you have gathered, by this time Babylon had defeated and superseded Assyria as the major empire in the world.

Have you ever felt that your life – and all your dreams – was over? Forgive me, but what if it had not been four terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, but dozens – until all our major cities were in ruins, our economy was gone without hope of recovery, and you had lost your homes, your jobs, and eighty percent of your friends and relatives – and your only hope of survival was to become a useful servant to vengeful conquerors with different values, language, and religion? America and all its churches and hopes and dreams in ashes. Would that be a faith crisis? Would you wonder: Where is God? Is faith all just “made up” – a false chimera of human contrivance and wishful thinking? Most of the time you would be busy just trying to survive, of course, but when you had brief chances to be with others who used to be part of a nation and a culture that no longer existed, would you still feel a bond with them? Would you still wonder, despite all evidence to the contrary, if maybe somehow, someday, there would be a way to rebuild what was lost? And would it cross the minds of a few of you that, while we were asking and wondering where God was, maybe a high percentage of us hadn't been paying very much attention to God, to what God wanted, or to what we had all promised God, back when we had the chance and things were going well?

Well, that was precisely the situation for the Jews during the Babylonian Captivity. Many of them lost their faith forever. And who could blame them? The miracle was that a significant number of them became more religious, more faithful, more prayerful, more thoughtful, and more devoted to God than ever before. They didn't know if there would ever be a Second Chance – for them, for their children, or for their children's children. But they worked hard and did well in Babylon. And they gathered together whenever they got the chance. They studied and prayed together far more than they ever had in former times, when it would have been easy to do so. They taught their children the ways of their religion, their traditions, their holy writings. And without any seeable hope, they lived in hope anyway.

However, nothing on earth stays the same. Babylon looked invincible but lasted a very short time. In 539 B.C., forty-eight years after the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, Cyrus conquered Babylon. So what? So the Persian Empire was on the rise, and the Babylonians, together with their Jewish hostages, were swallowed up into the new empire. Only, Cyrus was a different breed of conqueror. The Assyrians had believed that if they were mean, ugly, and cruel enough, nobody would ever dare oppose or attack them. A familiar stance. Cyrus thought it would be a better idea to have all the gods on his side, and to have all the peoples in his empire grateful to him and wishing him well – even praying for him and offering sacrifices for him – instead of hating him.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, came something nobody had imagined: Only a year after he had secured his rule, Cyrus issued a decree that all the Jews who wished to could return to Palestine, and there rebuild their temple. Not only that, but all the gold and silver vessels that Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the temple would be returned with the exiles as they marched home.

Are you tracking? Out of nowhere, with no explanation, God has suddenly influenced the heart of the King of Persia to allow the Jewish exiles to go back home and rebuild their temple. Is God real after all?! Are the temple and Judaism important after all? Even if *they* no longer believe it, the King of Persia – who isn't even Jewish – *does* believe it. So the Covenant is not over; the promises are not dead and gone; their way of life is not a thing of the past, a figment of imagination to be swept from the earth. How incredible! And of course, with this great joy and hope comes an enormous weight of responsibility: If there is a God – and if God is delivering us – then the Babylonian Captivity was no

accident. We were being punished. We were being taught a lesson. We were destroyed because we were not being faithful, were not keeping the Covenant, were not paying any attention to the ways and will of God. If you posit God, then there is meaning and purpose. There are reasons for what happens. And if there is a reason for deliverance, then there was also a reason for the destruction. In any case, it seems very clear to those Israelites that “We are GETTING A SECOND CHANCE, and this time we better do it right!” I am not asking if you believe this; I am telling you that you can be very sure *they* believed it.

So let’s make sure we are all clear: They are going back to Jerusalem, to build the Second Temple. They have been given a Second Chance. Their leader is Zerubbabel, commissioned by Cyrus to lead the group and see to the construction of the Second Temple. He is a second Moses, leading the Children of Israel out of the land of bondage back to the Promised Land. It will be necessary to reestablish the Covenant, just as the first Moses had to establish the Covenant once they were out of Egypt. There is no point or purpose without the Covenant between God and God’s people. Without that, why bother!

Who is Zerubbabel? He is the grandson of Jehoiachin, the last reigning king in David’s line when Jerusalem was destroyed. So they are going back to Jerusalem for a Second Chance under the leadership of a king in David’s line. In a way, Zerubbabel is a traditional Messiah. Out of disaster, he is God’s agent to bring Israel back into the plan and destiny God has for them. And that is exactly how the people see it. They are understandably elated that out of such a bleak and hopeless night, suddenly they are back in God’s plan, and it is daylight again.

Jeremiah 22:24-27 is one of Jeremiah’s most scathing prophecies, pronouncing God’s judgment on King Jehoiachin (Zerubbabel’s grandfather), saying that God had torn the signet ring off his own right hand and flung it into exile. It was tantamount to saying that David’s line was at an end – that David’s line could no longer be God’s emissaries or rulers, despite all promises to the contrary. They had been too faithless, too many times, for too long. But now Haggai (2:23) proclaims that Zerubbabel, Jehoiachin’s grandson, is being made the Lord’s signet ring again – we are back in business! God holds his Davidic king dear, and is now restoring the Davidic line in Zerubbabel. (Haggai is one of the minor prophets, who are “minor” not because they are unimportant, but because they wrote shorter books.)

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Of course, this also means that Zerubbabel is the great, great (etc.) grandfather of Jesus. This is clearly stated in Matthew 1:12-13 and Luke 3:27. Maybe you have to become a grandfather before you pay significant attention to such things. In any case, no Zerubbabel – no Jesus.

But back in 538 B.C., Zerubbabel is marching to Jerusalem with a band of stalwart pilgrims – and with clear credentials from Cyrus, King of Persia – carrying the sacred vessels of the First Temple with them so they can resume traditional sacrifices as soon as they rebuild the temple. Over the next few weeks, I will tell you about some of the adventures they had, some of the trials and struggles they encountered, and some of the additional labors of the faithful people under Ezra and Nehemiah.

Today I want to leave you thinking of and pondering Second Chances. Is there any power under Heaven that can give you authentic Second Chances? They only come from God. We cannot design them, manufacture them, time them, or bring them to fruition. We can only be watchful, stay alert, and be ready when they are offered.

However, there are no Second Chances without repentance, without a change of heart – without a willingness to renew commitment, and to do things in ways both new and more faithful than we ever did them in the past.

Finally, this comment from Paul, in First Corinthians (3:16):
“Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?”

There is more than one form of “temple.” Have you ever needed a Second Chance, ever needed to build a Second Temple? Have you been in exile? Has the temple been torn down? Is it time to rebuild the temple, purify it, put it back in business? God in Christ Jesus can arrange such an invitation, and provide the power to make it possible. But we have to want it – be eager for it – and be ready to leave Babylon and head for home when the opportunity is offered.

Is it time for a Second Temple ... for you?

CONTENTION AND OPPOSITION

We are into the story of the Second Temple. The Babylonian Captivity was the utter destruction not only of Jerusalem and the temple built by Solomon, but also of the hopes and dreams and promises for which the Children of Israel had lived for over fifteen hundred years. Then, seemingly “out of nowhere” – with the support and blessing of Cyrus, King of Persia – Zerubbabel led a band of Israelites out of Babylon, back to Jerusalem, to rebuild the temple. It was like a second Moses, leading the Israelites out of bondage, back to the Promised Land, to rebuild the temple and their Way of Life.

I would love to tell you this story calmly and in a clear and orderly manner. But I only have four Sundays. The story covers one hundred and six years. During this period, there were five major rulers of the Persian Empire: Cyrus, Cambyses, Darius, Xerxes (Ahasuerus of the Book of Esther), and Artaxerxes I. Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes all maintained a consistent and surprising favor and support toward the Jewish people, encouraging them to rebuild their homeland, their temple, and their Way of Life. If you were a Christian King, is that how you would feel toward Jews, Buddhists, Muslims, Indians, or whomever?

There are many players in the story, and the records are spotty and sometimes confusing and inconsistent. That’s why I told you it was something of a “no-man’s land” of Scripture, and why I suspect that such an incredible story is seldom told in our churches.

Therefore, I must stick with a few major themes, and skip over details and scholarly controversies that some of you would love to know more about. Today, for instance, I read a tiny portion of the Scripture which tells about rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. This happened near the end of the story, but it illustrates the contention and opposition that occurred throughout the entire Second Temple period.

Sometimes for clarity we need to oversimplify. Link in your minds Zerubbabel with rebuilding the temple, Ezra with reestablishing the Covenant, and Nehemiah with rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. Zerubbabel – temple. Ezra – Covenant. Nehemiah – walls. If you lock onto that, I won’t be able to confuse you too badly. ZERUBBABEL, who was a King in David’s line and direct ancestor of Jesus, went from

Babylon to rebuild the temple. EZRA, who was a priest who could trace his lineage back to Aaron (Moses' brother and the first High Priest of Israel), was sent by the King of Persia (Artaxerxes) to teach and reestablish the Covenant. No use rebuilding anything if the plan and purpose of God are not at the center – that is, are not the real reason for all of it. NEHEMIAH, who was cupbearer to King Artaxerxes, heard that things were in great disarray in Jerusalem. Artaxerxes appointed him Governor of the province and sent him off to Jerusalem. But he had to promise to return when things were straightened out. Later Artaxerxes would send Nehemiah back for a second term as Governor. It was Nehemiah who finally reestablished Jerusalem as the major city in the region.

Zerubbabel – temple. Ezra – Covenant. Nehemiah – walls.

Back to Zerubbabel for a bit. In 538 B.C., Zerubbabel and Jeshua the priest headed for Jerusalem with the Jewish exiles who wanted to return. The majority of the exiles, of course, stayed in Babylon. It was much more comfortable in Babylon than it had ever been in Israel. And now there wasn't much to return to except a lot of hard work – and an ancient dream about a Covenant with the Lord God. The journey between Babylon and Jerusalem took about five months, and who knew how many dangers were along the way?

After reaching Jerusalem, it took a little while to get organized. The people had to build or rebuild houses to live in, take care of the animals they brought with them, and start growing food. Then they had to start clearing the rubble at the temple, sort through what was there, and gather supplies for the building. Two years and two months later, they started laying the foundations for the Second Temple.

With the foundations laid, they took time out for a great celebration – a worship service with chanting and singing, with trumpets and cymbals, with prayers and praises and rejoicing that God was so gracious and was restoring them to their former destiny and purpose. Some were shouting, and some were weeping. Some say the older folk among them wept because, even with just the foundations laid, the Second Temple seemed paltry in comparison to the First. Or perhaps they wept because it was a forceful reminder that the First Temple had been destroyed. I think they wept mostly for joy, because they were rebuilding what they had long believed was lost forever.

What happened next was predictable, but it still surprises many people who hear of it. Those who had been there all along did not like these newcomers from Babylon coming in to reestablish the former ways and worship. Who did they think they were?! What right did they have to think they were so superior, or so religious?! And who told them God wanted the temple rebuilt anyway? It was a new time – a new day – and the way they had learned to do things in the meantime was just fine, thank you very much. Who needed a religious reform, or a renewal of the Covenant, or a Second Temple?

When Assyria had conquered the Northern Kingdom back in 722 B.C., all the useful citizens had been carried north into Nineveh, leaving the so-called “dregs of society” in the land of Israel. To make matters worse, Nineveh then shipped down all *its* undesirable citizens, to get rid of them, thus leaving Israel to sink or swim the best it could – the poor and unwanted of Israel, with the poor and criminal of Assyria – a kind of early Botany Bay. So the old Northern Kingdom of Israel was now the dregs of Assyria mingled with the dregs of Israel. But of course new children were born, and they eventually began to form a society of their own, mixing not only bloodlines but Assyrian ways and worship with what was remembered of Jewish ways and worship, becoming what in Jesus’ time were called “Samaritans” – half-breeds, and unclean. You know that the animosity between Jews and Samaritans was still huge in Jesus’ time.

A piece of the history of that rift between Jew and Samaritan was seen in Zerubbabel’s time. The Samaritans were hostile to the returning exiles from Babylon. (Nehemiah 4:1) Seeing the foundations of the temple actually laid and the great celebration that followed, they came to Zerubbabel and Jeshua saying, “Let us build with you.” But Zerubbabel and the other leaders saw through the ruse and rejected the offer.

Of course, today you will hear that the Samaritans should have been welcomed with open arms, and that a united people could then have worked together and rebuilt everything better and faster. Then there never would have been this unfortunate division between Jew and Samaritan. Possibly. Possibly Zerubbabel was an idiot and Jeshua was a jerk, and there are no real issues worth fighting over, and the world would be a peaceful place without sin or evil if we would only all cooperate.

On the other hand, the Samaritans had done nothing over all the years thus far to rebuild the temple, to restore the worship of Yahweh, or to reenact the Covenant Way of Life. Zerubbabel knew that if they joined the work, it would be to corrupt it or stop it. Ezra 6:21 gives us reason to believe that any who were serious about the work and its purpose, and who wanted earnestly to purify themselves and become part of God's new people, would be welcome. The exiles from Babylon were, in fact, not self-righteous. They believed that they and their forebears had lost Jerusalem because they had not kept the Covenant. They returned a chastised and repentant people. And since they had already been destroyed once for neglecting and ignoring the Covenant, they were not about to be half-hearted, compromising, and lackadaisical about it again. The Samaritans, from everything they could see, were not repentant – and *were* half-hearted, compromising, and lackadaisical about the Covenant.

In any case, the work came to a standstill. The threats and the anger from the Samaritans became so great that the returning exiles lost heart (Ezra 4:4-5) and were afraid to go on with the work. Meanwhile, the Samaritans began writing letters to the Persian court, making all sorts of accusations and charges against the Jews. Cyrus was off fighting nomads east of the Caspian Sea, where he was eventually killed. His son, Cambyses, did not care or was too busy to figure it out. Darius came to the throne in 522 B.C., and two years later the prophet Haggai (seconded by the prophet Zechariah) started screaming: "Build the temple! What are you waiting for? It is the work of God – the will of God! You were sent to do it, and you sit around feeding your faces and living in your *own* houses, but God's house is abandoned with only the foundations laid. Move your lazy ..." I have no way to adequately portray the Hebrew message of Haggai and Zechariah. Of course, Haggai also believed that Zerubbabel was God's chosen instrument – God's signet ring – and that this great work was Zerubbabel's life purpose, and a sign that God was restoring the destiny and purpose of Israel.

So Zerubbabel and his people went back to work and finished rebuilding the temple in just four years. Incredible! The Second Temple was finished and dedicated in 516 B.C. Meanwhile, of course, the opposition continued to threaten, accuse, and rant and rave. They tried to discredit the Jews in the eyes of the King. But Darius, as you heard last Sunday, had his scribes search the archives and they found the edict of Cyrus supporting the return and the rebuilding of the temple.

Then Darius issued a decree that fully supported the Jewish labors, including the command to defray all expenses from the King's revenue, and an order to execute anybody who tried to get in the way of the work. It's nice to have friends in high places. God also has some friends in high places, something we frequently forget.

But the moment Darius died, the opposition was at it again. (Do you hear that? It's never over, is it?) During the twenty-year reign of Xerxes, things fell into a shambles in Jerusalem. The temple was built, but very soon people did not honor it. The priesthood was in total disarray. They could not have offered proper sacrifices even if they had wanted to. The holy days and festivals were not observed. The people would not provide wood, animals, or tithes to maintain the temple or its religious functions. The Torah was not known, read, or studied enough for people to obey it even if they had wanted to. Jerusalem itself was still mostly a destroyed city, the walls breached in many places since the siege of Nebuchadnezzar, and none of them repaired. So there was no safety or order within the city.

It looked as if the labors of Zerubbabel and the first wave of pilgrims from Babylon had been for nothing. Life was a mess again. The light was going out again, having barely flared up for a brief time in a handful of exiles coming out of Babylon. Does it remind you of anything in our time? In any case, Nehemiah lived in Babylon's capital city of Susa, where he was cupbearer to the King, and this was the news Nehemiah received from his brother Hanani, who lived in Jerusalem.

Eventually Nehemiah received permission from King Artaxerxes to go to Jerusalem and see if he could bring order out of chaos. Artaxerxes appointed him the Governor. Nehemiah gathered a second wave of pilgrims, close to 50,000 people, to go to Jerusalem with him. Well, if you really want to know: close to 50,000 people, 6,700 donkeys, 435 camels, 736 horses, and 245 mules. After reaching Jerusalem and getting organized and set up, Nehemiah secretly looked over the situation and then established work parties, each to rebuild the city walls nearest to their own houses. (Nothing wrong with a little self-interest.)

Of course, if the walls were ever rebuilt, it would be possible to set up a government with some security, and bring law and order back to Jerusalem. So first, the opposition tried to make Nehemiah look stupid. "This is ludicrous – nobody can accomplish such a huge and difficult task." But the work continued. Then they tried to threaten

him. But the work continued. Then they tried to bribe him. But the work continued. They tried to discredit him with the King, but he was too close to the King, having been his cupbearer. Then they set up a plot to assassinate him. From which comes one of the memorable lines from Nehemiah, which a few of you may remember: “*I am doing a great work, and I cannot come down.*” (6:3) Nehemiah did not find it necessary to play any of their games. He simply went on about his true business: rebuilding the walls. As you remember from the reading, the workers carried tools in one hand and weapons in the other. They did not want to fight; they only wanted to rebuild. But fight or not, they would rebuild.

Meanwhile Nehemiah, together with Ezra, was working not only to rebuild the walls, but to rebuild the moral and religious fiber of all Jerusalem.

Last week we talked about getting a Second Chance. God does keep offering us Second Chances. God in Christ Jesus surrounds us with grace and mercy – forgiveness and new chances. That is wondrous to know, and even more wondrous to experience. Sometimes we need to be reminded so that we will watch for the Second Chances, and lest we cut ourselves out of these very opportunities because we ourselves have decided we do not deserve them. *Of course* we do not deserve them. Mercy that is deserved is not mercy. Grace that is deserved is not grace. Forgiveness that is deserved is not forgiveness. If you can put it all together on your own, you do not need God, and you certainly do not need a Savior.

Today’s message is not as warm and wonderful as last week’s, but it is no less necessary. Just deciding you want a Second Chance, even when it is offered, doesn’t cut very much ice. All Second Chances are followed by the hard work and difficult programs that make them real. There is a lot of confusion about such principles in our time. If we know the Gospel, we know we cannot work our way into Heaven. We cannot *deserve* God’s love. There is no way to be righteous enough that we can walk into God’s presence and demand the keys to the Kingdom. Only the love of God – and only the goodness of God – holds out any hope at all for our final destiny.

Therefore, many are saying today: “Stop trying. Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we will be saved no matter what we do.” That is an increasingly familiar response to the incredible, undeserved, unearnable grace and mercy of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The problem is: If I am forgiven and stay the same, the forgiveness does me no good. Forgiveness by itself is of no value, except that it gives me time – a new chance to learn and grow. If I steal from you and you forgive me and I steal again, the forgiveness has done me no good. If I steal from you and you forgive me and the forgiveness awakens me – that is, I amend my life, stop stealing, and even move Heaven and earth to pay you back – then the forgiveness saves me. Then I am back on the Path, and LIFE can open up for me again. But if forgiveness leaves me a thief, no good has come from it.

The trouble with sin is that it is horrible, dark, ugly, and wrong. It destroys, and it especially destroys the sinner. Grace, mercy, and forgiveness do not mean that it's okay to stay a sinner. They are to awaken us, that we may return to Life. Jesus does not save us by forgiving us. That only buys us more time. Jesus saves us by forgiveness and grace that also fill us with a new light and a hope that cause us to want to move toward His WAY of Life. We no longer want the old ways – we no longer want to be the same. In fact, with increasing ardor, we want to be children of light, and true followers.

Forgiveness is not the end result. Forgiveness only buys us time. Sanctification is the goal: a good life; the “abundant life” Jesus says He came to bring us. “The Good News of the Gospel is that Jesus died so we don't have to be good anymore.” Is that what we have turned it into? Is that what we think and believe and tell others, by our words or by our actions? Does that make sense? What if we *want* to be good? What if we *want* to be right with God? What if we *want* to be loving and productive and creative? And what if we *want* to come into the fullness of who God created us to be? Then forgiveness is only help along the WAY, not the goal or purpose. Jesus died to save us from sin, not to leave us stuck in it.

I'm sure this is all totally obvious to you. But I know people who have been in churches for years and this is not what they are hearing, saying, or believing. To them, the Cross is just a ticket into Paradise. But the Cross is not a ticket into Paradise. The Cross is what we did to a man (and more than a man) who was inviting us into a New Life and offering to lead us there, while showing us how far away from that New Life our present lives really are.

Maybe some people are still convinced that we can “get there” through drugs, sex, money, fame, or scientific progress. But that is not the Christian WAY – and that is not supposed to be the message of the church, or the conviction or the hope of its people.

Back to the point. Every Second Chance is followed by the hard work and arduous program that make it real. All genuine forgiveness means that you change your way of life. All true acceptance makes us *want* to become more acceptable. All authentic love hopes for and seeks the response of a returning love.

So may I quietly and gently suggest: If you have been given a Second Chance (in any of the ways I hope you have been pondering since last Sunday), *then you also* will have to rebuild the temple, renew the Covenant, and repair the walls. That is never easy. It is so much hard work, in fact, that without God’s help, we simply cannot manage it. That’s second-layer grace, by the way – we get help from God for appropriate and holy tasks.

And now you can feel what’s coming, the thing most people don’t want to face today: If you are rebuilding the temple, renewing the Covenant, and repairing the walls, *you will run into opposition*. It should never surprise you, no matter where it comes from, and no matter how severe and serious it becomes. Some of you hate that I keep mentioning this. You want me to tell you that there is no Satan, that we live in a perfect world, that there is no evil ... and therefore that there is always a peaceful solution. Many are peddling this very message today. They think it is saintly, but they pay no attention to the lives of the saints.

Let us awaken! We are given Second Chances. Together we are given Second Chances to become a truer and truer faith family. Yet none of it will become real if we do not change our lives and enter into the new ways of discipline and effort that match our purpose and faith. And we have opposition, and we will continue to run into opposition. It is as certain as the sunrise.

And so is God’s presence ... and help.

Nehemiah 8:2-3
Ezra 9; Ezra 10:7-17, 44

THE PURITY SOLUTION

We are in the third sermon of a series, trying to tell the story of the Second Temple, or at least bits and pieces of it. The Babylonian Captivity was the utter destruction not only of Jerusalem and the temple built by Solomon, but also of the hopes and dreams and promises for which the Children of Israel had lived for over fifteen hundred years. Then, seemingly “out of nowhere” – with the support and blessing of Cyrus, King of Persia – Zerubbabel led a band of Israelites out of Babylon, back to Jerusalem, to rebuild the temple. It was like a second Moses, leading the Israelites out of bondage, back to the Promised Land, to rebuild the temple and their Way of Life.

So in time, they rebuilt the temple, reestablished the Covenant, and repaired the walls of Jerusalem. Zerubbabel – temple. Ezra – Covenant. Nehemiah – walls. And all through their story, for over a hundred years, they ran into fierce opposition: jealousy, threats, the efforts of the Samaritans (the people of the land) to shut them down and stop them from rebuilding anything or returning to a faithful Way of Life.

The sheer fact is that Judaism – the religion of the Covenant between Yahweh and his people – would have died if its people had not in some way returned to faithfulness, worship, and obedience to their God. This is not to say that they did it in the only right way or the only possible way. All through the Second Temple period, they were right on the verge of losing it all again. Politically speaking, Judaism would barely limp along until shortly after the time of Jesus – just long enough for the New Covenant in Christ to be born. Religiously speaking, it’s as if this period was preparing Judaism for a far longer “captivity” – that is, a two-thousand-year captivity, as opposed to the seventy-year one they had just come through. Clearly that’s a bigger story than we can handle. Nevertheless, Judaism as we know it reemerged out of the Second Temple period in Jerusalem, not out of the remnant that was content to remain in Babylon.

So we pick up our story today with the coming of Ezra the Priest – a descendent of Aaron, the brother of Moses and first High Priest of Israel. Fifty-eight years have passed since the dedication of the Second Temple. Ezra is sent to Jerusalem in 458 B.C. by Artaxerxes, King of Persia, for the express purpose of teaching the Law to the people of

Jerusalem. Again we are surprised. Why is a Zoroastrian monarch concerned about reestablishing Jewish ways in Jerusalem? Why is a teacher of the Law of Moses granted such authority by a pagan king? Nevertheless, Ezra is sent for the express purpose of teaching the Law in Jerusalem. Perhaps Artaxerxes doesn't realize that this means reestablishing the Covenant between Yahweh and Yahweh's people. More probably it means that Israel, despite the rebuilding of the temple, is in terrible conflict and disarray. (We get some picture of this period between Zerubbabel and Ezra from Third Isaiah (chapters fifty-six through sixty-six) and Malachi.) We suspect that Artaxerxes may be hoping to bring order out of chaos by calling people back to their own Law and their own religion, rather than by trying to impose his own.

As an aside, some of you have asked me if Judaism honored and appreciated these Persian kings who showed such surprising support and concern for the Jews. Indeed yes! There was especially honor and appreciation for Cyrus, who set the trend in motion. Perhaps partly because the Persian kings were so supportive, Judaism ingested considerable influence from Persian culture and religion. It's a whole other subject, to be sure, but concepts of Satan, Hell, the fight between the forces of light and the forces of darkness – all strong tenets of Zoroastrianism – if they existed in Judaism before, they were certainly muted until after the Babylonian Captivity. Zoroastrianism is a nearly complete duality – that is, you cannot tell whether the good god (Ahura Mazda) or the bad god (Ahriman) is going to win, so you better throw all your weight and influence on the side of the good god and help him win, or everyone is going to end up in Hell. Judaism has never thought that Satan is as strong as Yahweh. Yahweh is the Creator; Satan can only corrupt what is created. Nevertheless, Satan and the battle between Satan and God became much more prominent in Judaism after its contact with Zoroastrianism.

And as most of you remember, while Hebrew was the official language of Judaism, the language of the marketplace and the street in Jesus' time was Aramaic. As near as we can tell, Jesus spoke and taught in Aramaic most of the time, though He certainly could speak and read Hebrew and probably knew Greek. Why Aramaic? Aramaic was the official language of the Persian Empire. In Jesus' time, Alexander the Great had come and gone, and the Romans were in power. But Palestine still spoke Aramaic, the language of Cyrus.

Back to Ezra. You heard in today's Scripture reading from Nehemiah how hungry the people are to hear the reading of the Word. They are tired of the confusion, chaos, and jumble of unfounded opinions. But nobody has a Bible at home. There are no synagogues yet, and no public libraries. The only chance they have to hear the Word is at a public gathering where someone reads to them. You might find it hard to imagine at first, but they are eager and excited that Ezra has come. He is an expert in the Law, and the foremost teacher/priest of their time. So they gather eagerly on the Sabbath. Ezra reads to them for hours at a time. Then they break up into more manageable groups, and priests that Ezra has trained lead discussions and answer questions.

Ezra, I am convinced, does not know the maelstrom he is about to stir up. He is just trying to read and teach the Bible (as they know it). It's possible that you cannot identify with that as easily as I can. Ezra did not write the Torah; he is simply reading it. The community is listening with eager interest, and they *want* their Second Chance – they *want* to be faithful again. And the Torah has grown dim and vague because they have been living off of generalized memories of it. Now they are hearing it again as it was actually written. And as they listen, they are both excited and appalled. As the reading unfolds and the discussions proceed, they realize that they are not living by the Covenant in many, many ways.

It is important to realize that Ezra is no tyrant. He is not trying to judge the people with his own agenda or for his own purposes. Ezra does not come to the people demanding that they amend their ways. He reads and teaches and the people come to *him*, struggling and concerned by the discrepancies they are discovering between the way they live and what the Covenant requires. Remember that Judaism is a two-way Covenant: God's promises and purposes on the one side; the people's promise to obey the precepts of the Covenant on the other side. The two sides depend upon each other, and neither can be fulfilled without the other. Not only that, there is the perceived belief that the Babylonian Captivity – the destruction of Judah and Jerusalem – was a direct result of failing to keep the Covenant. In that regard, you might remember that “the punishment” was not regarded by everyone as the active anger of God. God simply withdrew the mantle of special protection. The Chosen People received special protection and a special destiny as long as they kept the Covenant. That was the deal. But if they did not keep the Covenant, then why should God treat them any differently from

anybody else? So the special “force field” of God’s protection was withdrawn, and they were exposed to the ebb and flow of life on earth just like everybody else. Nothing lasts here for very long; empires, companies, organizations, religions, individuals come and go at a great rate. That’s nothing new. No special punishment – just the loss of special protection.

So the people come to Ezra with many concerns. But the one that gets our particular attention – and it got theirs too – is the problem of intermarriage. For quite a few years (sixty to seventy), the returning exiles have been marrying the women of the land – the Samaritan women, and others. Reading the Torah has reminded everybody that this is supposed to be a holy nation, and that one of the great dangers is to dilute the Covenant Way with influences that have no intention of keeping the Covenant. One of the classic ways to do that is to marry women who have no intention of keeping the Covenant, and another way is to give your daughters in marriage to men who have no intention of keeping the Covenant.

When the elders of the people come to Ezra and tell him that intermarriage is widespread throughout the whole community, Ezra is stunned. From priests and Levites to the most common laborer, many men have married foreign wives. Ezra has no idea what to do. It was not his intention to bring up this problem. Reading the Torah aloud brought it to light. Ezra goes into prayer and fasting – sackcloth and ashes – waiting for some light to break. “Now what do we do? Oy veh!” Do you know the feeling?

Eventually they decide to do what most of you would decide to do: Get everybody together and have a big meeting. Attendance is mandatory. If you don’t come, you are no longer part of the community. The problem impacts everyone, and any solution they come up with will also impact everyone. So they don’t fool around: If you are part of us, come to the meeting.

They hold the big meeting, and the first thing is to get a clear picture of the situation. *Who* has married “foreign wives”? Over seventeen thousand of them have married foreign wives. Is that half of them? A third of them? We can guess, but at this point we don’t know the number of those in the community of returned exiles. Nevertheless, it is an easy place to get careless. The text goes into long lists of names and seemingly irrelevant details, so most readers skip over the lists and go on to where the story picks up again. If you read that way, you are left with the

impression that most of the community had married foreign wives. And that all of the foreign wives, with their children, were thrown out on the street to starve.

Actually, we are never told what happened to the women who were divorced or what happened to their children. Women at this time could own property and pass it on to whomever they chose. Did they go back to their families of origin? We don't know. And yes, the picture is very troublesome. But before we talk about the troublesome part, let's make sure we have the story straight.

At the big community meeting, it is clearly stated that this is a difficult problem, and that it will take considerable time to deal with. They set up a commission to look into each individual case. They interview each of the couples, and it takes two months. Now we need to know our traditions, or we cannot know what is really happening; the Book of Ezra is not going to reiterate the entire Torah. *Judaism has never had a problem with interracial marriage.* Joseph married the daughter of an Egyptian priest; Moses married a Cushite woman; Ruth was a Moabite woman. The issue for Judaism was *diluting the Covenant*. If you married somebody who wanted to keep the Covenant – no problem. In short, Judaism had no problem with conversion, only with those who might try to subvert or undo Judaism from within.

So what does the commission conclude? Out of the 4,630 priests and Levites who had married foreign wives, 27 of the marriages were found to be unacceptable. These 27 were not willing to live the Jewish Way. Out of the 12,455 laymen who had married foreign wives, 83 were found unwilling to live the Jewish Way. A total of 110 out of 17,085 marriages were found to be unacceptable. Just over half of one percent. What is the divorce rate in our communities today? Not half of one percent; more like fifty percent. So if you want to be angry at these zealous, unfeeling, compassionless, cruel, and brutal Jews, you might remember that they were still light-years ahead of us! And they may also have had far better reasons for their choices than some of the choices we make today, despite all our talk about “unconditional love.” Our own tiny congregation of 250 people represents more than 110 divorces. How sporting of us to jump all over Ezra's community of probably 60,000 to 70,000 for deciding that 110 of their marriages were not going to work.

But don't let me slough over important issues just because those ancient Jews were doing so much better with marriage than we modern Christians. As one commentary puts it: "How do we maintain the integrity of faith without excluding others?" The bare fact is, we do not. If we are afraid to be exclusive, we cannot maintain the integrity of the faith. How can you maintain the integrity of your love for your wife without excluding others? The truth is, you cannot. Well, all authentic faith is a love affair with God. Having affairs with other gods is called idolatry. To be faithful to your wife – or to be faithful to your God – is by definition exclusive. That is, faithfulness, at the very core of its meaning, is choosing what you will honor, serve, obey, cherish. And the reason faithfulness is so demanding – and rewarding – is because it requires us to unchoose anything and everything that dilutes, competes with, or distracts us from that which we have chosen.

You may suspect that I have forgotten that Jesus Himself did not choose the traditional "Purity Solution." One of the classic religious approaches is to form a select, isolated, private religious community, wall it off from outside influences, make the threshold of admittance high and guard it well, and then try to live a more and more perfect life inside the select community. On occasion, though not often, I am even accused of trying to do that here. But that is a thoughtless charge. We are a long way from a monastic community here, and our Covenant System admits anybody – and on their own terms, not ours.

In any case, there are marks of the traditional Purity Solution in the Pharisee Movement of ancient Judaism that I think grew out of the Babylonian Captivity period. The returning exiles were determined to be purer, more righteous, more obedient to Torah than any Jewish community had ever been before. They had been destroyed for being careless, and they were trying to learn from that. The more serious a community gets about being faithful, the more it tends to exclude those who do not want to be faithful. Some of you have a violent reaction to that; you hate anybody who doesn't love everybody. But I am always impressed by those who take their faith to heart and try to live it with great earnestness and devotion.

Still, I do remember Jesus. In the Judaism of His time, it was assumed that you should only eat with the righteous, and shun sinners until they cleaned up their act and did things correctly. However, Jesus ate with tax collectors, sinners, harlots, and outcasts of every description. But be careful! It was not license to join the sinners in their way of life.

It was a far more difficult WAY: Mingle with everyone, and still stay true to your own Way (His WAY). Do both at the same time. Be engaged – love and care – AND keep on living the New Life and inviting others into it. Could the requirements possibly be more difficult? It takes only a few moments to realize that this is not at all self-righteous – yet it will always be *accused* of being self-righteous.

The self-righteous feel superior; they separate themselves off. Followers of Jesus' WAY just feel grateful that there is a New Life – a better WAY – and that they themselves have been invited into it, however unworthy they are. And so they want it for others also, even if they too are unworthy. Nevertheless, they are conscious of having accepted the invitation – of wanting the New Life for themselves. They have ZERO desire to go back to their former ways! So the careless always mistake their humility and gratitude for self-righteousness. And that just has to be okay. Life is like that.

It seems to me that our best shot with whatever wisdom we can muster today is to stop being afraid of accusations about self-righteousness or exclusivity. They are compliments. In an age that stands for nothing – and wants no one else to stand for anything either – it is a compliment. And then from our side, we need to set things up so that people exclude *themselves* if they don't like the life we try to live. It must never be because of our unwillingness to live the life with anyone who wants it. But we need to keep being as clear as we can about what the Christian Path means, what it is like, and what it requires. We need to be clear about that, whether we are great examples of it or not. After all, we are being drawn into it more and more also. Following Jesus is about following Jesus – not about following us.

Therefore we have no right to change, minimize, or compromise Jesus' Way or Path on purpose. If a person has no real desire or intent to follow this Way, it should become more and more clear to them that they don't belong here or really wish to be involved here. That has nothing to do with how perfect they are on the Path. It has only to do with whether or not they really wish to walk this Way.

Which brings me to one final hint about the impact of Ezra and his story, at least on me. In our time, we are so worried about being accused of not caring, or of hurting somebody who wanted in and claimed they were rejected. Is that really the big issue in our time? I don't see thousands of people clamoring to get in here that we won't let in.

I see a culture mostly walking by the churches, completely uninterested, and the churches begging them to come in, trying to reassure them that if they do come in, they certainly won't find anything offensive – or meaningful or interesting or challenging – and, most assuredly, they won't find anything life-changing or threatening. The church keeps saying: “All are welcome. You are very, very welcome.” And the reply is: “Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn. At best, you bore me.”

I think that's what happens when people no longer keep their Way – for themselves and each other. Or when they let it be diluted beyond recognition. We have tried to make Christianity “comfortable.” We have tried to turn the whirlwind of God into a soft, summer breeze. The Way is wonderful, but is it easy? Can you get safe, secure, comfortable, unchallenged ... and BE on the Christian Path at the same time? I am not talking about guilt for grave misdoings, though that is certainly an appropriate subject from time to time. I am talking about being unfocused, being otherwise occupied, being serious about other things but not about Christ or His Kingdom – never giving true attention to Jesus, His guidance, His ways, or His purpose or mission here.

Do you think most of the people of the church in our time go to sleep at night wondering what more they might do for Jesus – and awaken in the morning eager to be useful in some way, or at least faithful in whatever situations they find themselves that day?

That is not my impression of the vast majority of churches, or church members. It is surely true of pockets of them here and there, or we would not still be in business. But did Jesus die so we could be inattentive and half-hearted? And if we are excited or enthusiastic, is it about His Kingdom? Or is it about ball games, travels, fashion and fads (and you know the lists as well as I do)? When does Jesus get “our all”? When does Jesus get our full loyalty and support? I'm not talking about perfection, just – what do we call it? Loyalty and love.

I study the story of Ezra and the people around him, in that long-ago, far-off day. And I know it was a difficult, thrilling, frightening time for them, far more than words on a page can ever say. And maybe they were doing lots of things wrong, and certainly I know history well enough to know that what they started was not well-lived or honored by those who came after them. But I am overwhelmed by their intentions, by their passion, by how much they cared.

And I ask myself: How serious are WE?

THE CONCEPT AND THE COST

I am in way over my head now. Those of you who have been following the series on the Second Temple period have probably realized that already. Why did I preach these sermons about a people trying to renew their Covenant with God – and rebuild their temple, the walls of Jerusalem, and their Way of Life – way back in the fifth century (538-432 B.C.)? Why aren't we talking more about our current struggles in places like Afghanistan, Iraq, and Iran? Well, most people are. Books pour off the presses at a great rate. Some of them say everything is our fault. Some of them say everything is their fault. Some of them just want to make money and these are the hot subjects. The best ones warn us that our perspective is too small, that we would have to comprehend the histories of many countries and religious movements – and the interaction of vast tides of cultures, wars, atrocities, hopes, and dreams – to truly understand what's going on.

But how many of our citizens will read day and night for the next ten years before forming opinions? What percentage of our own members have any grasp on the Rise and Fall of the Ottoman Empire? What percentage of our political leaders have any deep comprehension of our own heritage and traditions, never mind those of the Chinese, the Arabs, the Serbs, the Turks, or the endless other players in our complicated and interactive world?

Nonetheless, democracies are influenced by the opinions of their people. Not necessarily right opinions, educated opinions, or prayerful opinions – just opinions. Rule by slogan. Rule by impression. Rule by emotional reaction. Well, we do much better than that – sometimes. In any case, public opinion has a huge impact on what happens in our country, and therefore in the world. If the impact is not always direct, still it is always there, and always a powerful part of the mixture.

The world is too big for us. The time lag between events and our understanding them is always great. Nothing new. It has always been so. That makes it no less troublesome.

I mention these things because it is important for us to remember that we are not in charge of the world, however much we might want to be. Americans love to talk about how we can all make a difference.

And that is true. But that does not put us in charge. There is never a time when things are peaceful everywhere in the world. There is never a time when we have no legitimate reason to be frightened or upset about something. There is never a time when poverty, starvation, and injustice do not stagger and stun us – unless we wear blinders and stick our heads in the sand. The problem with fear is not that it is unreasonable. The problem with fear is that it is totally logical but seldom helpful. If we want any quality of life – that is, any purpose or meaning to life – we have to keep trading fear for faith. And since we are not in charge and the world is too big for us, that faith cannot be in ourselves. If there really is a God, there is hope. If not, there is no hope.

If there is a God, we each have the option to serve, worship, and obey him to the best of our ability. That does not put us in charge either. Quite the opposite. But it also gives us the option – in every circumstance, however dark – to get caught being faithful. I may not succeed. I may not survive. In fact, both conditions are inevitable. But I can get caught being faithful. And it can get much better than that. If possible, I can live in the midst of a people – a faith family – that also wants to get caught being faithful.

But faithful to what? Faithful to God. Faithful to Christ who reveals God and reconciles us to him. But even that can be vague. Faithful to building the Kingdom of God on earth, even though we know it never comes to full completion here. Faithful to building communities that want to know and serve God; communities that know there is the possibility of love and light in the midst of all the chaos and greed; communities that know there is a dimension – deeper, truer, more real – than anything and everything going on at the surface of life.

That is precisely what was happening in the Second Temple period. Zerubbabel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and the returning exiles did not believe primarily in the reality going on around them. They dealt with it; they were not trying to pretend it did not affect them. Sanballet, Tobias, and their quite considerable host of enemies were a serious threat, so they worked with tools in one hand and weapons in the other. They were grateful for the kings of Persia who inexplicably befriended and supported them, but they did not believe primarily in the reality going on around them. If they had, it would have been over. Here was the Persian Empire, the mightiest empire the world had yet known. It stretched from halfway across India to Greece, and all the way down through

Egypt. If that was their reality, they never would have left Babylon to come back to the rubble that was Jerusalem.

What were they doing putting one stone upon another in the shambles that was left of the Jerusalem wall? Jerusalem was nothing. Even in its heyday, Jerusalem was as nothing compared to Susa, Ecbatana, Babylon, and dozens of other cities in the Persian Empire. But the returning exiles were not focused on world events or on what the world looked like on the outside. They knew about it, but they were not focused on it. What they cared about was God, and the Covenant with God. It seemed to them that God was inviting them back into the Covenant. They were glad that Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes kept siding with them at critical moments – kept helping them return and rebuild. Among other things, this actually meant that they were no earthly threat to the kings of Persia. They were an insignificant handful of people who wanted to worship God according to an ancient promise, and be faithful to an ancient Covenant with their God.

During this very time, two of the greatest battles in ancient history shook the world. From an outer perspective, they changed the world forever. In 490 B.C., Darius landed 50,000 soldiers on the plain of Marathon, north of Athens. It should have been the end of Greece. The Athenians, seeing the hordes coming, sent word to Sparta to come quickly. Actually, they sent a runner (Philippides) who covered the 150 miles in about two days. Sparta replied that she would be right there, as soon as church was over. (That is, right after completing an important religious ceremony.) By the time the Spartan army arrived, it was all over. The Greek hoplites, though greatly outnumbered, fought together in a phalanx formation that Philip of Macedonia and his son, Alexander the Great, would keep improving. The Greek long spear, sword, and armor were also superior to the Persian equipment. They crashed into the traditional jumble of Persian hordes. In the end, 192 Athenian soldiers died, and 6,400 Persian soldiers were killed. The Persian army withdrew. Darius himself died four years later.

According to legend, an Athenian messenger was then sent from Marathon to Athens, about 25 miles, to tell the glad tidings of the Persian defeat. Having delivered his message, he died of exhaustion. Eager to escape this veil of tears, people have been running the marathon ever since. But all this you know.

Xerxes returned in 480 B.C. with a huge fleet of ships and a far larger army. The fleet suffered heavy losses in a gale, and then Themistocles, the Greek commander of the Athenian fleet, lured the Persian ships into shallow waters where they couldn't maneuver as well as his lighter ships; he destroyed half of them, though it had been 700 against 500. Xerxes was still too powerful to stop, but Leonidas, the Spartan king, with 300 of his bodyguards, held the Pass against the Persian hordes long enough for Athens to be evacuated. Xerxes won but couldn't stay there forever, and he had not destroyed the Greek army. Eventually he left and things went right back to what they were before. And oh yes, the Pass was called Thermopylae. But all this you know.

There would be many other battles and no end to "current events," but these were huge happenings. They signaled the end of one empire and the rise of another, and no one alive in what we call "the Western World" would be unaffected. Is it over? Is it ancient history? In 1971, Iran had a huge celebration of the 2,500th anniversary of the founding of the monarchy by Cyrus. Those who took part in that celebration do not think it is over.

Not a whisper or even a hint of these incredible events appears in our Scriptural story. The returning exiles are focused on other things: Build the dinky-dumb little wall, read the Law of Moses, and stop marrying foreign wives unless they want to become Jewish too. And no matter how tiny we are in the vast epic of huge events going on all around us, let us return to being faithful to our God.

Nehemiah, as you heard in today's reading, is very practical about his very spiritual purposes. He does not care what's happening in Thermopylae. But he does care what's happening in Jerusalem, and some people are getting rich off of other people's misfortune. Some are losing land for debts they cannot pay – even losing children, and themselves, into slavery until debts can be paid. Nehemiah is outraged. That is not the Covenant Way! You help each other with the benefit and blessing of the whole community in mind, not just trying to amass your own private riches. The people realize how far from being faithful they have strayed, and they make dramatic changes to reform their ways. Usury – loaning money at interest – is always considered a great evil. But be careful! It's fine to loan money at interest to foreigners. It's also fine to loan money at interest to friends and neighbors who are using it for business purposes – that is, as capital that will help earn

them a profit. But if you are loaning money to help somebody or because they are in trouble, then it must be an interest-free loan. That is the Way of the Covenant. God's Law means we care about each other. God's Law means we want everybody in the community to prosper. The origin of our concept of "redeem" and "redemption" comes from the act of buying off a person's debt so that they can return to productive life in the community.

Nehemiah is a very religious Governor and social reformer. He does not care about everything going on in the whole world. But in Jerusalem, he wants the community to take the shape and form of God's Covenant Law, and this has a very practical and significant impact on the lives of everyone in the community. I have only hinted at a little of it.

All through history, there have been remarkable attempts to build faithful communities that take God's will and WAY with utmost seriousness. Most of us are familiar with some of the more famous stories of these attempts: Abraham started it. It was much clearer in Moses and Joshua. David, Hezekiah, and Josiah were trying hard to make the Covenant Way the WAY of the whole Jewish kingdom. Now we add Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah to the stories. But the list is much longer. The concept – the dream – is behind the Benedictines, the Franciscans, the Jesuits, and every serious Monastic Order. Luther in Wittenberg, Calvin in Geneva, Zwingli in Zurich, and countless lesser-known groups and leaders were living and dying to return to the concept of being a serious community of faithful followers. One of the most serious efforts to do this was played out in New England, both in the Plymouth Colony and in the Boston Bay Colony – having huge influence, as you know, at the very roots of our own country. The parallels between the Second Temple period and the Puritans are amazing, at least to me.

Whenever we have tried to move from the notion of a faithful Christian Community to the idea of a faithful Christian State, things backfire. (Why would God do that to us?! We'll have to ask him when we get to the other side.) The record shows that coercion overcomes faith when we try to turn religion into a political state. The concept of the separation of church and state was born out of the failures and injustices that occur when we try to legislate faith. That in turn dooms us to living in the severe tension between faithful communities – if we can find or build them – and a secular state. The inconsistencies are incredibly troublesome. But up to this point in human history, this is

still our best chance. Freedom of religion AND life in a political state that tries to deal with human problems on a human level.

So why do people keep returning to the dream of being part of a faithful community? They never last. They are never perfect. They are never well executed, at least not across the board or for very long. Why does the dream keep arising: rebuild the temple, return to the Covenant, rebuild the walls? It keeps arising because there is no other hope short of Heaven. It keeps arising because we have souls, and our Creator keeps calling us to Ways higher and better than anything contained within the limitations of this world. We cannot build a Christian state. But we can build, or rebuild, a Christian church. Even that is difficult and rare enough.

Is there any doubt in your mind about whether or not somebody needs to rebuild the temple in our time? Or to be more specific, to build and rebuild faith communities that love, honor, and serve Jesus Christ and His WAY? Can you visit churches today, or drive the coast in summertime between Laguna Beach and Newport Beach, and not wonder about the Babylonian Captivity of the churches in our time? Is it okay to stay in Persia, enjoying the luxuries and benefits of a foreign empire, when Jerusalem and its temple lie in ruins, and most people don't even know the Covenant or the Gospel well enough to know what they are missing, or well enough to be faithful even if they wanted to be?

Is it your intention to rebuild the temple, renew the Covenant, and rebuild the walls here? Maybe you think, as so many did in the long-ago story we have been telling, that God has abandoned us? Or that God doesn't care anymore how we live, what we hope in, or how we use our time and our lives?

Well, I am no Ezra or Nehemiah or even Zerubbabel. And you have problems of your own. So perhaps you cannot hear me calling: Please, come help us rebuild the temple. Come out of Babylon, leave the ways of Persia, return to the Ways of our God – so that whatever happens, we may be caught being faithful.