

Third Sunday of Advent

December 13, 2015

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown MD

Readings: Luke 2: 25-28a; Ezra 1: 1-4;3:1-4, 10-13

"Rebuilding from Rubble"

Grace to you and peace from God — Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Amen

We've seen the pictures on the news — people returning to homes that had been flooded, flattened by wind, or burnt beyond recognition. It's hard to watch because you put yourself in their place and wonder, "Where do you begin?" After the initial shock and pain, people are often heard to say things like, "They're only things" or "At least we're all safe." Still, where do you start, once it's even safe to return to what use to be your home? I would guess you begin by sifting through the remains, looking for anything that's salvageable, hoping to find important documents, precious photos and cherished mementoes. Life as you knew it doesn't exist anymore. Where do you begin?

I hope you've never experienced that type of devastation but I would guess each and every person here who has lived two or more decades have known a time when they could say, "The world isn't the same. I am not the same." Last Sunday we lit candles and brought our sorrows and worries to the altar, many of them earth shaking. Where do you begin to get your footing when your health is precarious, you've loss four close friends in four months, grandsons and sons are being deployed to the Middle East, your spouse or parent is no longer here, your son or daughter seems a stranger, your job or finances are uncertain? Where do you begin? How do you recover when the world that was so familiar now seems like a foreign country where you don't speak the language or understand the customs? Do you know what I'm talking about?

If your personal life is too tender to touch, isn't "lost" the way we often describe our experience as a church? "Where is everybody?" we ask. Why isn't worship or Sunday School as full as we remember? We try what use to work and it doesn't. We try new things and get positive but minimal response. It's as if we don't speak the same language or understand the customs of those we live among. Where do we begin?

After about fifty (to seventy years) in exile, the Hebrew people are allowed to return to the homeland they had lost to the Babylonians. Persia had become the latest world dominator and their king, Cyrus, had a different idea of how to keep conquered people in line — You allow them to live in their homelands and practice the religion and traditions of their ancestors, *as long as* they also follow the rules of the empire. So Cyrus allows the Hebrews to return to Jerusalem. He tells them to rebuild the Temple and he'll even kick in some money for the project. One of the early waves of returning exiles is led by Ezra, a

religious leader and scribe who has Cyrus' blessing. They would travel for four months from the banks of Euphrates to Jerusalem. Many had been born during Babylonian captivity and had only heard about Jerusalem. A few were old enough to remember their former lives there. To combat any weariness or doubts during this long journey, they would remind each other that they were going back to the promised land, the home of their ancestors, just as God, through the prophets, had promised.

When they finally arrived, they found the city and Temple much as the Babylonians had left it ---- in ruins and rubble. Did they rejoice to be on this holy ground? Did they despair? Where to begin? Here is where the books of Ezra and Nehemiah tell us they began. They stood surveying the ruins, breathed in God's promise and grabbed hold of what they knew was more solid and more sure than the devastation or their feelings — they grabbed hold of the goodness, power and faithfulness of God even in adverse circumstances. Ezra read them God's Word. They restored the altar on the exact spot it had always been, so they could again practice the traditions of sacrifice for thanksgiving and forgiveness. They cleared away the charred debris and began rebuilding the Temple one huge stone at a time. Where do you begin to rebuild life? You make God your home, You trust God's love and promises to carry and lead you as you put one foot before the other, pick up one building block at a time. And you celebrate each tiny or large step toward new life.

That's what the Jewish people were doing when the foundation of the Temple was complete. Just an altar and the foundation — but that was enough to celebrate for the time. It was movement toward reclaiming their Jewish faith, practices and identity in a new time and situation. They sang and shouted in great joy. "For the Lord is good, God's steadfast love endures forever toward Israel" But also there were those who wept. Does that surprise you? Those who had been alive to see the first Temple in all its glory cried. They remembered what use to be — the Temple's former grandeur and beauty and Israel's independence. They remembered and wept for what had been lost. The book of Ezra acknowledges that whenever we move toward what will be, there is this mixture of sadness for what will no longer be *right next to* the hope for what life God can forge out of our experiences. It is the dual nature of living faithfully into God's future,

Living forward in faith doesn't mean you forget what was. Moving forward doesn't mean you discount, devalue or betray the past. It's true about living forward after a loved one has left us. It's true about living forward as God's church in a time that seems foreign, hostile or indifferent to Jesus. The exiles who returned to Jerusalem did not come empty handed. They brought back with them God's Word, meaningful faith practices and valuable

memories, traditions and lessons. They then would build their new life on the old, sorting through what “was---- Choosing to carry forward what was still useful and deciding what needed to be packed away or left behind to make room for building life “now.” None of them could likely imagine what Jerusalem would finally look like. But this they did know — they would live life close to God, follow the Lord’s ways and trust God’s promises of eternal love and redeeming grace. **That’s** where you begin — after an earthquake, terrorist attack, cancer diagnosis, death of a loved one, or loss of the church as it use to be. As we try “to determine what it means to live into a new future that God is creating in our midst,”¹ we listen, seek, praise our Lord . . . we wonder, dare, sometimes still weep and most of all believe in the faithfulness of God, who holds together the past, present and future and each of us and the church as we begin again. Thanks be to God.

Linda M Alessandri 12/11/15

1. Michael J. Chan, “Commentary on Ezra 1: 1-4; 3:1-4,10-13” as posted on workingpreacher.org