

“Tears of Joy”

Third Sermon in the Advent Series: *Proclamation & Promise: The Prophetic Voices of Advent*

Ezra 1:1-4; 3:1-4, 8-13

New Revised Standard Version

**This manuscript is an interpretation of the sermonic moment. Use it as a guide for the sermon direction; because of time, not everything you read printed here is actually included in the spoken sermon.*

Today we continue with the Narrative Lectionary in our series, *Proclamation & Promise: The Prophetic Voices of Advent*. It's our last voice in the Old Testament for a while as we move to the prophetic voice of Zechariah in Luke 1 next week and then onward to Jesus. We've sort of leapfrogged through the time the last few weeks, so just to review:

On the first Sunday of Advent, God spoke to Jeremiah in the midst of an embattled and besieged Jerusalem, giving a word of *hope*, a branch of hope, if you will, that a king would be restored in the line of David.

On the second Sunday of Advent, Jerusalem has fallen, and God spoke through Isaiah to the grieving people who fled or were exiled to Babylon, giving a word of *comfort*:

“*Comfort, comfort ye my people... ” “The Word of the Lord stands forever... ”* The positive tone of Isaiah's words have led some scholars to believe that Isaiah knew or could sense in the political climate an end to the exile and a return home. He may have known this because of the arrival of King Cyrus in Babylon, a person we meet right off the bat in Ezra 1:1.¹

It's 20 years into his almost 30 year reign (559–530 B.C.) of the Persian Empire when King Cyrus sends a decree that the exiled Jews can return to Judah.

King Cyrus has a very different concept of empire than his conquering predecessors. While the Babylonians dominated through violence and exile, Cyrus and the Persians conquered, but then

¹ Rachel Wrenn, “Commentary on Ezra 1:1-4; 3:1-4, 10-13,” *Working Preacher* (Dec. 15, 2019), accessed on Dec. 15, 2019 at

https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4221.

gave freedom to the people, wanting them to live their lives “normally” as much as possible. (Fun fact: Cyrus is the only foreigner in all of Scripture to be called “Messiah, Anointed One” by God [Isaiah 45:1].)²

Cyrus’ policies were welcomed by the exiled Judeans. Their lives had been upside down and inside out for a long time; they needed a fresh start.

If you’ve ever had something in your life knocked down or destroyed or dismantled or evaporated - either by natural disaster or theft or vandalism...if you’ve ever had the rug pulled out from under you in your job with an unexpected situation...if you’ve ever had an injury or accident or illness that stopped you in your tracks and made you come up with a ‘new normal’...if you’ve ever lost someone near and dear to you and wondered how you could ever live without them...if you’ve ever had to uproot yourself, move and try to establish a new route to the grocery store and find new

doctors, let alone new community and friendships...if you’ve ever had to reveal something about yourself to loved ones that you had kept private for a long time wondering when the right time was to share your truth...if you’ve ever had *any situation* in life where you’ve had to rebuild and restore and begin again...then Ezra is *your* Advent text.

As the wisdom writer of Ecclesiastes says, “*For everything there is a season: ...a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to break down, and a time to build up...* (Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, selected verses).

And so, for the people of God, ‘twas the season to pluck up from where they’d been in exile and root down into their homeland again, after a time of being “broken down” by their oppressors, the time had come for the people of God to “build up.” The proclamation of Cyrus - inviting the people of God to return home, to return to Jerusalem in Judah, to rebuild the house of God (aka: the

² Wrenn, *ibid.*

temple) - was music to their ears. Their time had come. There was a light at the end of the tunnel. Could this really be true?

As we are in the season of Advent, a season of waiting and longing, it is almost jarring to read of a promise actually being fulfilled, but that's exactly what we read in Ezra 1:1: "*In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, in order that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, the Lord stirred up the spirit of King Cyrus of Persia...* "

A few things to note here: it is *the Lord* who stirs the spirit of Cyrus, not just his notions of good will.³ And, Cyrus is a foreigner, so it is even more profound that A) God can stir up and move the spirits of people who are different than us - who look different, believe different, and live in different places and B) that God can fulfill prophecies and promises using outsiders ...and not just the folks we are familiar with. This, alone, should cause us to

seek out different voices to hear what promises of fulfillment we might be missing out on by only listening to our "go to" voices (and we all know who our own "go to" voices are!)

For today, we listen to Cyrus' voice...and what a proclamation it is! It's the kind of news that refugees don't even dare dream about: go home. Go home, loaded with blessings - with silver and gold, with goods and animals, and freewill offerings. Go home, loaded with blessings, and *rebuild*. This was not just a proclamation of return, it was a proclamation of generosity and restored justice...even if just partially. And it's not like the people are sent with their Red Cross Emergency Kits to go trekking back toward home. It's more like the people are given a first-class, one-way ticket to their home, with care packages in hand, their FEMA "rebuilding" check in hand, some Bed, Bath, and Beyond and Home Depot gift cards in their purses, and their nearest and dearest by their sides - including their beloved pets! Truly a Christmas image, right?

³ Michael J. Chan, "Commentary on Ezra 1:1-4; 3:1-4, 10-13," *Working Preacher* (Dec. 13, 2015), accessed on Dec. 15, 2019 at

https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2570.

A promise fulfilled. A hope realized. A grey and dull present turned into a future in full color. We're not in Kansas anymore! Right Dorothy? At least their yellow brick road home was as glittery and promising as it was long and winding.

The people did in fact, return home, and they no doubt experienced great joy and relief. But like any change in our reality - whether positive or negative or neutral - it is change...and change is hard. If one person experiences change, it comes with a whole range of emotions. So you can imagine what happens when a whole community experiences change...it's complicated.

You see, when the Jews return to Jerusalem, they are ready to reconstitute the nation and reclaim God's promise to Abraham and their ancestors.⁴

Just as the Southern Kingdom's kings made the restoration of proper worship the priority of their reforms during the monarchy, the reconstruction of

the altar is the first order of business when the Jews return to Jerusalem. But they don't want to be overzealous in their rebuilding. The few Israelites who have remained in the land while most of the population was exiled revere the site of the destroyed temple as holy. To immediately build a temple on the old foundations could be considered disrespectful, so the people proceed in their reforms with caution. They don't want to incur the wrath of their new neighbors.⁵ As you can imagine, tensions are probably high with an influx of people coming in again and you never know what straw will break the camel's back.

But, nevertheless, it was important to rebuild the temple because the temple was the place where God promises to be present to God's people. It's not that God is confined to the temple, even in King Solomon's long prayer of dedication of the temple in 1 Kings, he makes sure to say that God is not confined in the temple. But it *is* the place where God promises to meet

⁴ Commentary from *The Voice Bible* Copyright © 2012 Thomas Nelson, Inc. Accessed on Dec. 15, 2019 at <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=eza+3&version=VOICE>.

⁵ The Voice, *ibid*.

the people...you might even think of it as a foretaste of the incarnation...it's a physical place where people can meet God."⁶ Before we ever get to the birth of Jesus - the physical person where we can meet God.

And so, rebuilding the temple is the first thing the people do once they return home because it shows that God is at the center of their lives, and at the center of their liberation. And not just the liberation of the elite and "in charge", but the liberation of *all* people.

We read in Ezra 3:1 that "*the entire people assembled as one in Jerusalem.*" In the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, the priestly office begins to stretch out to include the people, such that the congregation takes on a greater and more significant role in the worship of God. That's not to say they were already enlightened Baptists back then, we're still a long way from Martin Luther's concept of the "priesthood of all believers."

⁶ Rolf Jacobson, Craig R. Koester, and Kathryn M. Schifferdecker, "#385 - Rebuilding the Temple," *I Love to Tell the Story Podcast* (Dec. 7, 2019), accessed on Dec. 15, 2019 at

But there was a distinct shift in the role of the people that starts to happen in books like Ezra and Nehemiah. We will hear echoes of this shift in next week's text from Luke: As the priest Zechariah goes inside the holy sanctuary to offer the incense offering to God, it says that "the whole assembly of the people was praying outside" (Luke 1:10).⁷ It's a kind of "cloud of witnesses" image, isn't it?

After deciding that upon returning, the first thing to do was to build the altar, so that proper worship of God could begin as soon as possible with the people...the *second* move of the leaders was to appoint Levites to supervise the building of the House of God, a task described beautifully in the NRSV as "making a beginning" in Ezra 3:8: "*In the second year after their arrival at the house of God at Jerusalem, in the second month, Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and Jeshua son of Jozadak made a beginning, together, with the rest of the people.*"

https://www.workingpreacher.org/narrative_podcast.aspx?podcast_id=1203.

⁷ Wrenn, *ibid.*

Isn't that beautiful? This was not a beginning to be forged alone, but together. I could preach a whole separate sermon on what it means to "make a beginning together"...but for today, I'll just emphasize that for the people of God, this moment was about rebuilding a temple from their past, but it was also a moment of orienting themselves toward their future. And they didn't want to leave anyone behind.

And it is this unique vantage point, of the people standing in one place together, a holy and sacred place of their past, while pivoting their labor and energy into rebuilding together toward their future, that creates such a joyous *and* grief-filled moment. They have much to be thankful for; and indeed gratitude is the foundation of both of the emotions expressed that day.

In Ezra 3:10-13, the verse in the middle, "*For God is good; his steadfast love endures forever*" locates gratitude right smack in the middle between joy and grief. Before that verse, verse 11, you get all of the joy of the musicians and priests

(aka: worship leaders) and the fanfare of praise: "they describe a glittering festival, held in the ruins of the First Temple: priests are in their fancy vestments, trumpets are proudly blasting, the Levites are clanging their cymbals, and people are lifting up songs of praise in celebration. As builders laid the foundation, the people raised a great and joyful shout. Finally, their dream had come true; finally, their hopes were realized; finally, the promises of God made in the times of Jeremiah and Isaiah were fulfilled."⁸

And then after verse 11, "*For God is good, his steadfast love ensures forever...*" we get a glimpse into the congregation, which is really intriguing. When we look past the worship leaders and into the hearts of the people, we see that there are some who are carried away by the celebration and there are some who can remember what it was like in the old days and it's not the same.

Just as there are people at Calvary who can remember

⁸ Wrenn, *ibid.*

when Calvary was located at 16th and Downing, or when Hampden and Monaco were dirt roads or when the sanctuary had red carpet or when the chapel had pews, there would have been some people there that day who could remember Solomon's temple in say 597, before it was stripped of all its gold and silver and before it was completely destroyed in 587.⁹ And so with that memory etched in their minds and hearts forever, when they see the foundation of the new temple laid...they cry. Not because they do not want to rebuild, and not even because they know this new temple will never be as pretty or as expensive or as grand as Solomon's, but because they are remembering what was...they are remembering all that was lost...and all that they have been through...and all that has led them to this day.

Joy and Grief coexist in this moment, just as they co-exist in just about any transformational or transitional season in our lives. To make room for something new is to let go of something old, or at least, to

allow it to have a different place in our lives now.

As builders laid the foundation of the temple, the people raised a great and joyful shout. Finally, their dream had come true; finally, their hopes were realized; finally, the promises of God made in the times of Jeremiah and Isaiah were fulfilled. AND as Ezra reports, along with this rejoicing sounded another cry: a mournful cry from those who had seen the First Temple on its foundations. They wept...for what once was....they wept for the pain of what had been."¹⁰

Sometimes this text gets interpreted as one group of people ready for change, celebrating the rebuilding, and another group of people resisting the change, mourning for what once was and is no longer. But I don't read these verses that way at all. The story casts no judgment on those who mourn. In fact, as one scholar wrote, "*in a moment of sheer humanity that cuts to the core of what it is to live on this side of the eschaton, Scripture records that the sound of the*

⁹ Jacobson, Koester, & Schifferdecker, *ibid.*

¹⁰ Wrenn, *ibid.*

joyful shout could not be distinguished from the sound of the people's weeping."¹¹

Have you ever laughed so hard you cried? Or cried so hard and so long that eventually your tears of mourning turned to telling stories and eventually laughter? I think that's because both emotions - joy and grief - come from the same place, Love.

Today, on this Advent Sunday of Joy, as we await the fulfillment of the Messiah, the Anointed One, as we sing the carols and deck the halls and bake the cookies and wrap the gifts...we are, many of us, painfully aware of what has been lost in our lives up to this point. You may have personal losses, of loved ones who will not be sitting at your Christmas dinner table this year, who will not be sending you a Christmas card, or walking with you into the Christmas Eve service this year. Then there are emotional losses, beyond grief, that come with divorce and depression, illness, or with estrangement and addiction. You may have incurred financial losses,

because of job transitions or family changes.

And we have collective losses that we mourn as well - the loss of honesty and decency in debate and party cooperation and compromise in our government. The loss of lives and the separation of families at the border. The loss of lives from a plethora of hate crimes, made in the name of religion, race, or creed. The loss of lives of police officers and first responders and military women and men. The loss of lives of civilians - of children, youth, and adults to gun violence. The loss of species and air quality and glaciers and any number of things because of climate change. Collectively, the grief can feel quite heavy. The losses can feel mounting and suffocating. The task can feel overwhelming. It can feel like we are standing in the temple ruins...wondering, "*where is God?*" We can stand there remembering the "good 'ole days" saying, "remembering when things were different?"

¹¹ Wrenn, *ibid.*

But are there really any “good ‘ole days?” OR do all days have the potential to be good?

There is a time and a place for standing in the ruins and wondering “where is God?” And, there is a time for acknowledging what has been and looking forward together in hope...a time for rebuilding. A time to move past complaining and deconstructing, and a time to move forward by celebrating and reconstructing.

The celebration of “what can be” does not negate the pain of “what once was.” Yet, we often try to put ourselves on one side of that fault line of emotions, when the truth is, we probably more often than not have one foot on each side. And we can step all the way over into joy when we are able to see all the gifts of God around us, and we can step all the way over into grief when we can’t help but be overwhelmed by the losses. It’s a back and forth, teeter totter. It’s the balance beam of life and of faith.

The seasons of our lives are never cut and dry. We are almost always on a continuum of joy and grief, of comfort and

conflict, of transition and transformation.

It’s not like the griefs and longings that you might feel now in Advent are all the sudden going to be gone at 12:00 a.m. on Christmas morning. But - I’m willing to be you’ll still get up and celebrate the birth of Jesus. Why? Because we believe that *in* our grief, joy can still come and even more, that our grief itself can produce some of the deepest joys and gratitude that we’ve ever known.

Ezra 3, gives us a profoundly spiritual message that the sound of pain and mourning is woven together with the cries of joy and celebration. Perhaps these indistinguishable cries of grief and joy TOGETHER are the sound of FAITH and the sound of HOPE. Perhaps it’s what lighting in the darkness sounds like if light shining in the darkness had a sound. The darkness doesn’t go away; you need the darkness to see the light.

Lebanese-American writer, Khalil Gibran wrote, “*When you are sorrowful look again in your heart, and you shall see*

that in truth you are weeping for that which has been your delight.” Another way to say this, which I’m sure you have heard before, is “the more deeply you love, the more deeply you grieve.” Or as grief recovery specialist Franchesca Cox said it, “Grief only exists where love lived first.”

American author John Green said, *“So often we try to make other people feel better by minimizing their pain, by telling them that it will get better (which it will) or that there are worse things in the world (which there are). But that’s not what I actually needed. What I needed was for someone to tell me that it hurt because it mattered.”*

In her book *Bittersweet: Thoughts on Change, Grace, and Learning the Hard Way*, author Shauna Niequist writes, *“There is a season for wildness and a season for settledness, and this is neither. This season is about becoming...[and it is bittersweet.]... “Bittersweet is the idea that in all things there is both something broken and something beautiful, that there is a sliver of lightness on even the darkest of nights, a shadow*

of hope in every heartbreak, and that rejoicing is no less rich when it contains a splinter of sadness. Bittersweet is the practice of believing that we really do need both the bitter and the sweet, and that a life of nothing but sweetness rots both your teeth and your soul. Bitter is what makes us strong, what forces us to push through, what helps us earn the lines on our faces and the calluses on our hands.”

“When you haven’t yet had your heart really broken, the gospel isn’t about death and rebirth. It’s about life and more life. It’s about hope and possibility and a brighter future. And it is, certainly, about those things. But when you’ve faced some kind of death—the loss of someone you loved dearly, the failure of a dream, the fracture of a relationship—that’s when you start understanding that central metaphor. When your life is easy, a lot of the really crucial parts of Christian doctrine and life are nice theories, but you don’t really need them. When, however, death of any kind is staring you in the face, all of a sudden rebirth and new life are very, very important to you.”

And that's the heart of the gospel.

Returning from exile was bittersweet for the people of God. There were shouts of joy; there were tears of grief. Or maybe it was tears of joy; and shouts of grief. We don't really know, do we? Because the text says the sounds were indistinguishable from one another. But regardless, it was a rebirth for them...and in order for them to create something new and move toward that together, they had to let die what had died.

On this third Sunday of Advent, the Sunday of JOY, know that tears can be both for joy and for grief. The great thing is - you don't have to name them as one or the other. Maybe they are just tears. In the end, it's the depth of emotion with which we live that matters. It speaks to the passion of love and life that is beyond words.

The holidays can bring a belly laugh that makes our eyes water, it can bring a reunion at the airport that makes our eyes glisten with tears, it can bring a lonely moment that catches off guard when the floodgates open

and we just weep because we miss someone, or some place, or some time "before things were different."

What I want to say to you today/tonight, is that on this Sunday of Joy, let the tears flow. In fact, think of your tears as your proclamation. No matter whether they are borne of joy or of grief or a little bit of both...and collectively, our tears will give way to a promise in 10 days, a promise that will bring something new, yet again, into our lives. Not a newness that overrides or overthrows the old, but a newness that harkens us into a bold and hope-filled future together. A newness that doesn't eradicate our pain, but that does, perhaps, fulfill our longing with good news.

And that good news, the good news of the Christ Child - the one who came to earth to be wrapped up and swaddled in all of our "stuff" - the highs and the lows and the in-betweens - might just be worth crying about. Or laughing about. Or both.

Amen.