

December 11, 2016  
Third Sunday of Advent  
Ezra 1:1-4, 3:10-13  
The Rev. Lynn P. Lampman

### **Background Information**

The southern kingdom of Judah refuses to abandon their idols and worship God, thus they are taken away into captivity by the Babylonians. Their king Nebuchadnezzar completely destroyed Jerusalem, the temple and some of its furnishing, and then carried off some of the treasures of the temple.

For the next 70 years Israel lived in captivity without a temple and without the feasts, sacrifices and rituals prescribed by the Law.

Cyrus the Persian king overthrew the Babylonians in 539 B.C. and in 538 B.C gave permission for the Jews to return to their homeland. About 50,000 Jews left Babylon and returned to Palestine. Three years later, in 535 B.C, they laid the foundation for a new Temple, thus ending the 70 years of their captivity.

The Book of Ezra falls into two sections: Chapters 1-6 deals with the initial return of a remnant from Babylon under the leadership of Zerubbabel in 538 B.C., with the aim of restoring the Temple. The project began in 536 B.C., but opposition quickly arose, leading to the abandonment of the project for 16 years. Through the ministries of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah (5:1-2), the construction was renewed, coming to completion in 515 B.C.

### **Sermon Summary**

Cyrus the Persian (“pagan”) king after taking over Babylon, invites the Jews exiled there to return to Jerusalem their homeland.

In our text for this morning, we see the return of about 50,000 people to Jerusalem, where they begin laying a foundation for the new temple.

This was met with both great shouts of joy and loud weeping. Why is one group sad and the other joyful?

Some remembered the grandeur, gold, and glory of the first temple – a wonder of the ancient world. The temple that housed the Ark of the Covenant (containing Moses tablets of the 10 commandments and Aaron's rod) and the mercy seat. They remembered the Shechinah glory cloud, the glory of the Lord that filled the first temple. They understood the new temple would never be the same. They could see that it would be smaller. There were not the resources now to build the current like the former. They realized that all the things that made the first temple precious, the Ark and its contents, the mercy seat, the glory crowd, etc. were forever gone. Thus, they wept bitterly.

And then there were those who did not remember the first temple/Solomon's temple. For all they remembered was a life of captivity and bondage in a foreign land. Many had been born while in captivity. These younger folks could not remember the old days, but they could see that a new day of opportunity had dawned for them and they embraced it wholeheartedly! For they were excited what God was doing in their day.

### **Sermon Application**

The first thing to notice is who God chose to use to bring about a **return to something important, yet with a new twist**, a bent that fit with the times they were in now – for 70 years had passed since! It all came to be through **King Cyrus** himself – a pagan. No, not a long-standing member of the temple. He wasn't even

Jewish for God sake! No, he wasn't a Christian either. It's amazing whom God will choose, right!

**God is in the habit of bringing new beginnings, newcomers, and new ways**, so that what God has planned can and will be accomplished. The old temple had served its purpose. Now, it was time for something new. Yes, it was still going to be a temple, but not so much like the previous temple.

**We are not what we were even seven years ago**, our church is different now – this is **not the same temple so to speak**. God's will has been for us to have some **new beginnings – Dorcas, Prison Ministry**, and our **newcomers have significantly impacted** how we do some of **already existing ministries – the Food Pantry for example**, and God has asked us to **do some things in a new way – shopping for Christmas food** for our food pantry families, and **instead of Consistory buying Christmas gifts for each other** for the December party each year, this year we all bought gifts for our food pantry families.

Let's not be fooled – for **the later can be just as grand, if not grander than the former.**

When traditions are passed on to new generations, they can never be the same. **Tradition involves a “handing on” and that implies letting go in order to make room for the new.**

There is a story about a man who is working up on the roof and he **started sliding off the roof of the house** and fortunately he was able grab a hold of the gutter and so he is hanging there holding on to the gutter of this two story home and so he looks up toward heaven and says, **“God help me.”** And a voice from heaven said okay, **“turn loose and I will catch you.”** There was a long pause

and then he said, **is anybody else up there.**

Is there not something about us sometimes that wants to **hand on** and yet continue to **hold on**. We don't want to take the risk of turning loose of something that we're holding on to even if what we are holding on to is false security. So, the first thing to do is not just hold on, but also **let go!**

The second thing to do is to not be fooled by what can happen when you **downsize**. Let's talk about as a congregation some of our experiences with downsizing.

*(What did you downsize and what were some of the benefits that were experienced?)*

Here are the ways downsizing helps us:

- We have **additional resources of time and money** to spend on other important things.
- We are **less distracted by all the trimmings**, and tend to get back to the reason why we are doing what we are doing.
- **More energy** to do what is essential and necessary.

Our church is not what it once was! **We are smaller, yet the glory of God still shines here.** We have **less people, but more mission and outreach**. We are **not as wealthy as we once were**, but we consider ourselves to be one of, if not **the richest church in town** (and I ain't talking in the green cash way).

Maybe your **retired now**, and have **less income** than you once did – but also **less stress**, more time to have **fun**, and a day to call **your own** with **only God as a boss!**

**Both individually and collectively the later is grander than the former.**

**God sent** Noah, then Moses, then the judges, then the kings and then the prophets. **Each appeared as if the later was greater than the former.**

Then, God did something new. God came again, but not like before. It was smaller this time, and in no way was it fancy, downright plain to tell you the truth. **God came as a baby**, to a **simple couple, Mary and Joseph**, to a **stable, to be born among us, to live with us** – and in so doing, we were to discover in this new beginning that the later was so much greater than the former.

Matter of fact, **it was more than enough.** God built us a **new temple, in the person of Jesus**, and God continues that tradition of temple building, for **we too are now God's temple**, where God has chosen for the Holy Spirit to dwell – for it is there, inside us that the glory of God can be seen, and heard, and experienced.

**And be assured, the later is once again and forever greater than the former.**