

Sermon:

- Last week we looked at the story of the returned exiles when the Judeans were released from 70 years of captivity in Babylon to rebuild their lives in Jerusalem and the surrounding communities.
- The books of Ezra, Nehemiah, Zechariah, Haggai and Esther tell of the first hundred years of their return and the challenges they faced.
- When the Judeans returned from exile, they focussed their time, energy and money on three things:
 - ✓ Rebuilding the temple to restore spiritual renewal through worship.
 - ✓ Recommitting themselves to a covenant relationship with God.
 - ✓ Rebuilding the wall around Jerusalem.
- Last week we explored the first 6 chapters of Ezra and we noticed that at first glance, rebuilding the house of God brought grief over the loss and change; yet it also brought joy over the new sense of worship they discovered...grief...joy...
- But on second glance, it wasn't the physical surrounds or aspects of their worship that was important, it was the spiritual renewal they experienced through participating in the festivals, bringing their tithes and offerings and through prayers and praise.
- We also applied these principals to our current context and acknowledged that both grief and joy are valid expressions of our current situation.
- And we noticed that the physical aspects of worship, whether it be in the home or church building, come second to the spiritual renewal we experience by hearing the Word of God through the scriptures and celebrating the sacraments.
- Today we are going to explore chapters 7 -10 of Ezra which focus on the Judeans recommitment to their covenant relationship with God.
- We pick the story up where Ezra the scribe notices that the people of God may have returned to their homeland and resumed worship but had not changed their ways.
- They had married foreign wives, and were worshipping their idols, and following their customs.
- Their physical location had changed but the attitude of their heart hadn't. They still behaved in the same way they had before they went into exile.

- Ezra was grieved to the core, so he fasted and prayed, we'll pick the story up from, Ezra 9:5-7:

"At the evening sacrifice I got up from my fasting, with my garments and my mantle torn, and fell on my knees, spread out my hands to the Lord my God, and said, "O my God, I am too ashamed and embarrassed to lift my face to you, my God, for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has mounted up to the heavens. From the days of our ancestors to this day we have been deep in guilt, and for our iniquities we, our kings, and our priests have been handed over to the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, to plundering, and to utter shame, as is now the case." ... ¹⁰ "And now, our God, what shall we say after this? For we have forsaken your commandments, ¹¹ which you commanded by your servants the prophets." (Ezra 9:5-7; 10)

- Basically, Ezra declared that the people had forsaken God's commandments, and haven't repented. And now the people hear his prayer and join Ezra in repentance: (Ezra 10:1-5)

"While Ezra prayed and made confession, weeping and throwing himself down before the house of God, a very great assembly of men, women, and children gathered to him out of Israel; the people also wept bitterly. Shecaniah son of Jehiel, of the descendants of Elam, addressed Ezra, saying, "We have broken faith with our God and have married foreign women from the peoples of the land, but even now there is hope for Israel in spite of this. So now let us make a covenant with our God to send away all these wives and their children, according to the counsel of my Lord and of those who tremble at the commandment of our God; and let it be done according to the law. Take action, for it is your duty, and we are with you; be strong, and do it." Then Ezra stood up and made the leading priests, the Levites, and all Israel swear that they would do as had been said. So they swore." (Ezra 10:1-5)

- This is a fairly dramatic move – sending away their foreign wives.
- It seems a little harsh and maybe even unfair to send away their wives just because they're foreign.
- I don't believe God is racist, all tribes and nations are created in the images of God to reflect God's glory.
- I think it is more about keeping the people of God safe, and holy.

- I guess if our teenage children had friends who were into the wrong things and were leading them astray, we would tell them to stay away...

Personal example, Amy.

- While sending away their foreign wives seemed like a harsh act, God had warned them not to allow intermarriages, because it contaminated their faith.
- So, this was an act of obedience to God and given to them through the prophets. And if they had of done so earlier, this would not have been necessary.
- While the details of this story may not be relevant for us - we're not being asked to send away our wives... I believe the principle of this story is relevant.
- **Where there's commitment, there's hope!**
- The people asked, is there hope? Look at how far we have strayed from God's commands, is there hope?
- The people called themselves Jews, and they worshiped YHWH, but their commitment to the LORD was shaky.
- The principle of this story applies to every generation seeking to rebuild the people of God → where there's commitment, there's hope.
- So in this season of isolation, where we have been separated from each other for 4 months now, and possibly for several more weeks, or even months, we may start to question how we could possibly be a church again; or even if we want to be a church again.
- Is there hope for us to be a church again?
- Well, according to this story, the answer is yes!
- Where's there's commitment, there's hope!
- Let me ask you a very bold question: how committed are you to God in this season?
- For the Jews, their commitment was somewhat superficial, and that was reflected in their hope for the future of the people of God.
- But the moment they recommitted themselves to God, their hope for their future started to increase.
- One of the prophets who spoke to Judah in their season of exile declared these words from God: (Jeremiah 29:10-14)

“For thus says the Lord: Only when Babylon’s seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. ¹¹ For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. ¹² Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. ¹³ When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, ¹⁴ I will let you find me, says the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.” (Jeremiah 29:10-14)

- Where there is commitment from the people of God, there is hope for the people of God.
- Where there is commitment from the people of God to seek after God, to pray to God to call upon God – there is hope for our rebuilding and our restoration.
- In other words, returning to be a church again isn’t about our personal preferences, it’s not about our personal comfort, it’s not even about our preferred traditions.
- Returning to be a church again is about our commitment to God!
- So, let me ask you this question again: how committed are you to God in this season/moment?
- To help us understand what commitment to God looks like, I want to read a statement from our national Assembly regarding the UCA understanding of our Baptism, because I believe our baptism sums up our call to discipleship perfectly:

UCA doctrine of Baptism: <https://assembly.uca.org.au/unity/dialogues/item/1395-baptism>

Baptism nurtures a life of discipleship which begins in baptism and which continues through the life of the baptised through instruction in all that Christ has commanded his church to teach (Matt. 28:19).

The people of God are motivated and empowered by their baptism to struggle against sin (Rom. 6:1-11), to witness in church and world to Christ’s resurrection, to love God and their neighbour, to serve, help, encourage and comfort all people and to do everything else that the new life in Christ involves. People who have been reborn as God’s sons and daughters are prompted to live righteously (1 John 2:29), and members of Christ’s body are prompted to use their charismatic gifts for the common good and the edification of all other members

of Christ in love (1 Cor. 12-14). As those who have been enlightened, they shine as lights in this dark world to the glory of God, the Lord of their baptism.

- There are two sides to the baptism coin:
 1. One is our commitment to God, which as explained here, is commitment to all that Christ has commanded; to struggle against sin; to witness to Christ's resurrection; to love God and our neighbour; basically, to continue the mission of Christ in the world.
 2. The other side of the baptismal coin is our commitment to the church – and I will talk more about that next week.
- The story of the returned exiles is a movement of the people of God who recommit themselves to God and put hope into action.
- They rekindled their relationship with God, and in doing so they upheld the Shema the most important prayer in their culture:

“Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. ⁵ You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. (Deuteronomy 6:4-5)

- For the returned exiles, this season presented them with an opportunity to recommit themselves to covenant relationship with God.
- For us, this season presents an opportunity to recommit ourselves to God and one way to do that is to remember and recommit to our baptism.
- Next week I will explore this further.
- For now, let us pause and consider, how OUR covenant relationship with God is with all that has happened in the world, in our family, in us.

“Cornerstone”

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“Refresh My Heart”

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