

**"The Clash of Old and New..."**

**Text: "But many of the priests and Levites and heads of families, old people who had seen the first house on its foundations, wept with a loud voice when they saw this new temple, so that the sound of the joyful shout could not be distinguished from the sound of the people's weeping..."**

**Ezra 3:12-13**

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**I have three objectives in this sermon: First, I want to share with you this poignant and powerful story from an out of the way place in the Old Testament.**

**Then, I will ask you to think about what the story means in your life and home, in your church and community, and in our denomination and our nation.**

**Finally, I will close with a hopeful reminder from Vladimir Solovyov, a little known Russian philosopher whose life was spent trying to reconcile the hostile and divergent views in the world. He died over a century ago. Let's be about it:**

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**First the story, as told in the Book of Ezra. Admittedly, Ezra is not a familiar homiletical hitching post for most preachers. In my nearly 50 years in the pulpit, I have turned there for a sermon no more than half a dozen times. But it is good and fertile soil to help the people of God grow morally and spiritually.**

**At the time, 400 to 500 years before the birth of Jesus Christ, the people of God had been living as captives in the Babylonian Exile for three generations. All that time they pined for home, or at least most of them did. Some assimilated themselves and got rich merchandizing in that foreign land. But the faithful hung their harps on the willow trees in Babylon, down in the luscious Mesopotamian Plain between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, in present day Iraq, about 75 miles south of Baghdad, where Psalm 137 reports they sang sad songs in a foreign land, like: "If I forget thee O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither; and let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth."**

**If you have ever been homesick in a foreign country, away at school or in the military service, you will know how they felt. They did their daily chores, but every now and then they would stretch up on their tip toes to look over top of the gate which led out of town to the south. Much like our soldiers returning home from Iraq these days, they kept on doing their best, but they yearned for the day when Jimmy could go to sleep in his own little bed again.**

**But as we arrive at the Book of Ezra, the time had come for them to go home. A new King was on the throne. Cranky old Nebuchadnezzar, who had thrown**

**Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego into the fiery furnace, was long gone. Cyrus, King of Persia, led a spectacular invasion during which he diverted the Euphrates River and with the water down to a trickle, he marched his troops under the famous wall and gates on the river bed in the famed Battle of Opis in 539 BCE. The Persian Cyrus and his descendents ruled Babylon all the way up until Alexander the Great conquered them near the end of the Fourth Century B.C.**

**Anyway, it does not tell us why, but one day the Lord God spoke to Cyrus, and told him to release his people. The King issued a proclamation that the Israelites were free to go back home to Jerusalem and rebuild the great Temple of Solomon. He gave them ample provisions for the journey. And he even returned their sacred temple vessels: 5400 gold and silver bowls and goblets and sacred basins. That's a lot of gold and silver, not @ 1200 dollars an ounce, but quite a treasure, even in ancient shekels.**

**And, what a crowd! Ezra says there were 42,360 Israelites, plus 7,337 servants, 200 male and female singers, to entertain them on the journey I presume. They also had 736 horses, 720 donkeys; someone must have counted them, as well as 200 mules and 400 camels. That vast conglomeration of people and animals set out to cross the Arabia Desert to go back to Jerusalem.**

**Now the awkward problem, as some of you remember, was that there was no Jerusalem to go back to. The Babylonians had demolished the Holy City 70 years earlier, so completely that the Bible says solemnly: "There was not one stone left upon another." Most all of the leaders and citizens had been mercilessly executed. The strongest of the young men were carted off to be slaves, and the beautiful young women were escorted back to the Babylonian Military base. After three generations the jackals and hyenas loped about on the old Temple grounds. Weeds and snakes and bugs were everywhere.**

**Try to imagine going away for 70 years and coming back to Charlotte to find that everything was gone, not one building standing: the University, the hospitals, the houses and all the churches crushed to the earth, just like the neighborhood community in San Bruno, California, a suburb of San Francisco, which was blown**

**to smithereens in a gas explosion this week. Or far more devastating, like the Ground Zero area and the Twin Towers which were crushed and crumbled to the ground in New York City nine years ago yesterday. We pray today for the families of the 3000 who perished there and in Pennsylvania and at the Pentagon on that awful day.**

**No wonder some of the returning Israelites wept and complained: "Oh dear, Ezra why on earth did you bring us here? Let's grab the first caravan back over to Babylon!" And, some of them left.**

**Most of them had no memories of Jerusalem. Born and reared in Babylon, they had to rely on legendary stories of their parents and grand-parents. And nostalgia always carries with it an exaggerated notion of the good old days. But, there they were. They believed that God had sent them back, so what to do and where to start?**

**It says that the first thing they did was to establish a "Rebuild the Temple" campaign. The Bible says: "The heads of the families made free will offerings for the house of God to be erected on its site. And, according to their resources, they gave to the building fund 61,000 darics of gold, five thousand minas of silver, and one hundred priestly robes," presumably, preserved for 75 years from the former Temple. (Ezra 2:68.)**

**My dear old Dad used to say that if a preacher couldn't think of anything else to do, he took up an offering. Money was tight, the market was poor; they had other things on their minds. They were without houses or shops, no schools or parks or play-grounds for the children, no bike trails, not even a sports stadium to watch football and (Are you listening?) there they were taking up an offering to build a new temple.**

**To complicate matters, we learn over in the book of Nehemiah that because the Wall around the City was also gone, they couldn't work on the temple without some Arab marauders sneaking in from the east to harass them. Sanballet and his thugs came by night to steal their materials, just like copper is being stolen by**

night all around our city. Nehemiah had to divide the people up in such a way that half of them worked on the wall and the other half took up weapons to guard and defend the workers. With one hand they labored on the wall, and in the other they held a weapon. "Each of the builders had his sword strapped at his side." (Nehemiah 4:18). It was tough going, all day-all night.

The older heads of families provided most of the means, and the younger ones did most of the work. It took both. The young people were not perfect. Some of them played proverbial games. Over in Haggai, the Prophet complained that they were spending too much time working on their own homes, and Haggai chided them: "Is it fair for you to dwell in your paneled houses, while God's house lies in ruins?" (Haggai 1:4) I am sure it hurt them. I guess it even made them angry. But they kept at it and finally finished the job.

The point is that both the old and the new cared about the faith. Only they showed their concern in different ways. The Elders were harkening back to the days of yore, to the splendor of Solomon's Temple. The new generation was looking ahead to the time when they could have a new temple, fit for the new world around them. Both generations loved their children, and they wanted them to have a deep abiding faith. It always happens. And it always hurts.

Well, anyway, they finally finished the Wall and the Temple. It was time for the dedicatory service. The priests all ran home to get their vestments out of storage; the choir sneaked off to get their robes and comb their hair. The sons of Jubal carried in their cymbals and pipes and trumpets. Everybody got all dolled up in their Sabbath-go-to-meeting best. They were going to have a celebration, just like the Meetings here today at Rocky River. Everybody was excited. They were running around the lot smiling and hugging each other, slapping high and low fives all over the place. It was a great happy day for the Lord God and his faithful People.

But then, doggone it all, Ezra noticed that not everybody was clapping for joy. There were a couple in the hallway, a couple in the choir, a couple of elders, and a

**couple in the back pew who were not smiling. They were grumbling. They were experts in what we call “creative foot-dragging.”**

**It got so bad and their tears and grumbling were so loud that everybody could hear them. There is nothing quite like a disgruntled old Elder. They missed the gold covered altar and the fine tapestries. They missed the imported marble and granite. And, the Ark of the Covenant was gone: “How can you have a Temple without a holy of holies?” Of course it had been lost; but I guess they forgot. You know what I mean?**

**I remember the day I went to visit one of the grand old women of the congregation to which I had been recently called. We moved slowly but some changes were necessary. Someone told me she was hurt and angry. So I went over to see her. I told her we were trying to make progress in changing some of the time honored ways of doing things. She smiled nicely, but then she said, “Oh Reverend, you don’t need to worry about me. I’m in favor of progress. It’s all these changes I can’t stand!” Touché.**

**But back to Ezra: the tumult and the shouting got so bad that “could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people’s weeping...” (Ezra 3: 12-13)**

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**II. Now, secondly, I invite you to take a little stroll down your own memory lane. Chat quietly with yourself. See if you can fathom what the story is saying to us in our homes, our churches, and in our nation.**

**For example, some of you might want to carry it home with you this afternoon, or to your neighborhood, and apply it to the eternal clash of age with youth. I told my Dad once that it was difficult to be a good parent when our children were growing up, as if it wasn’t in his. I was bothered because one of our daughters seemed to be doing what she chose and not what I wanted her to do. You can attend any and all of those seminars on how to be an understanding parent, but most fathers still like to be in charge. My Dad reassured me and told me not to worry about it. He said, “No matter what you do Richie, they will grow up**

anyway.” Time has a way of changing family confrontations. They have grown up into three marvelous and successful daughters.

Or, you might want to attach it to your marriage and the changing demands of your days and decades together. I have spoken with hundreds of couples through the years and it always amazes me how they see things differently, and how they draw contrary conclusions from the same event. One says he did and said this or that; she says he didn't. You know what I mean? I advise you husbands never to get in an argument with your wife about what happened: you will lose it every time. She really remembers. “Yeah, one husband told me, I spoke out of turn once 30 years ago and she has never forgotten or forgiven me!”

Or, you might want to test it out in our Presbyterian Church. I have spent a lot of time and energy at Continuing Education Conferences. One I remember we arranged for pastors, young and old, male and female to get together to look at the future of the Church. What a wonderful time. We were in Orlando, Florida - in the wintertime, of course. I enjoyed it, but I came away flabbergasted at how each generation defined the role of their ministries and how they tried to solve the problems. Both loved the Lord, but they insisted on showing it in different ways.

I met a friend for lunch just this past week. I had missed him in my months of recuperation. But the first thing he greeted me with was, “Richard, tell me why I should stay in the Presbyterian Church. They are upsetting the basket on everything I have cherished for 60 years. I have loved this church for all that time, now I am growing to hate it. You could probably recite the litany of faults and failures he went on to name. He hardly missed a one.

I told him that the opposite of Love is not Hate; it is fear. He was/is afraid, afraid that the unique witness to Christ and the Scriptures is being watered down by our determination to accommodate and compromise with anyone and everyone, and all the while, it is not working. The Church nationally is limping and dwindling along from decade to decade. He was afraid we were going to lose our way of life.

**Which leads me to ask you to look at the Ezra story against the background of the changing climate of our nation? There can be little doubt that the world is going haywire. No one planned it that way; at least I hope not. But in matters of morals and customs and values and kindness and courtesy and religion and family and friendship, we have allowed a barrel full of irreplaceable things to slide out of our grasp. In our attempt to honor individuality and to please everybody, we took the easy way. And, we had better turn it around, the sooner the better.**

**Notice that Ezra does not condemn the older generation for their tears. He understood. They wept because it was not the way it should have been. The new times demanded new responses. But Ezra was also weeping, because he thought they had missed how devoted the coming generation was and would be in defending the faith of their fathers and mothers.**

**Globally in the past 75 years we have experienced a multitude of major upheavals: the emergence of China and India, Libya, Venezuela, Iran and North Korea. We survived the Cold War with Russia, only to see wars cropping up all over the globe. International terrorism is a real and dangerous threat each and every day. A variety of old and new religions are moving to center stage, and it feels like we are being left behind. As one of our early Presidents warned: "If failure be out lot, we ourselves will be its authors and its finishers: the most dangerous destruction always comes from within.**

**But there is something even more important. There is an enemy out there, an amorphous but ubiquitous enemy who is intent on stomping out the American way of life. There is a battle going on in the world today. The future of our way of life is at stake. We cannot ignore it. We need to do the work on the wall with one hand; and with the other we need to follow and defend the life we share in Jesus Christ. But we cannot do it on our own.**

**St. Paul alerted us back in our New Testament reading from Ephesians 6: "We are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers...against the spiritual hosts of wickedness." The deck is stacked against**

**us. We cannot contend against it by ourselves. We need to take the whole armor of God to withstand it all.” (Eph 6:10-20)**

**And many of our enemies have changed. My father was an Ulsterman who wore orange ties on St. Patrick’s Day. When I brought a Roman Catholic girl home one day to meet my parents, he told me to go and find a good Presbyterian girl. And I did. I found one who is here with me today, 51 years later and we are still happily married.**

**I never met a Jew until I was in high school. I grew up in a mixed neighborhood racially, but they tended to live down the block. As far as I know there were no Hispanics anywhere around. We were taught to be kind to and to help the poor and needy, and to pray for the missionaries all around the world. But our way was the right way.**

**Then as I grew up and old, all my life, I have tried to cross the boundaries I learned as a child. Early on I tried to improve race relations. As pastor I have tried to be ecumenical. I sponsored joint services with the Roman Catholic priests in the 1960s. I worked hard with the Conference of Christian and Jews. But, now they tell me that I should have learned Spanish and tried harder to understand Muslims. The choices are legion.**

**And, it gets confusing: how do you maintain the strength of your own faith and still reach out and hold hands with everyone else? How do you keep an open mind and not let your brains fall out. How can you continue to believe that Jesus Christ is Lord and the Savior of the world, and still hold out your hand to people of different faiths?**

**H.G. Wells once wrote that “History is a race between education and catastrophe.” We need to educate ourselves to face a new a different world. We need to tackle the major threats to Christ and his church. Or we are going to miss it, just as Rip Van Winkle slept through the entire American Revolution. Great battles are raging in the world around us today. We better not miss them. We**

**need to quit bickering over incidental matters. We need to quit dealing trivially with the triumphant themes throughout the Universe.**

**But still, I am an optimist. I am excited about the future. Not because I think you and I are clever and capable enough to manage it all and to keep the purposes of God going strong. No. I look to the One who rides above the storm, in whose Grace we live from day to day to decade. My optimism arises out of my sole dependence on the one Creator God who made the heavens and earth and who also created you and me. He came to be with us in Jesus Christ, his son, our Lord. He is our present, eternal and only hope.**

**To get the closing scene on our story from Ezra, you have to trilly on over to the Prophecy of Haggai who was there on Dedication Day. He comments on the responses to the new Temple: "Take courage, all the people of the land, for I am with you, says the Lord of Hosts. ... In a little while I will shake the heavens and the earth, and (Are you listening?) I will fill this new house of God with splendor...And it shall be greater than the former house, says the Lord of Hosts." (Haggai 2:4-9, selected.) If God has determined that we should all belong together and cross those boundaries, who are we to disagree?**

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**III. Well, that's a lot, and it is time to go. But I promised you a closing story from Solovyov (Soloviev) a Russian philosopher and theologian of one hundred years ago. He said the time would come when we would each and all have to pick a side. There will be only two choices. On the one side will stand all of those who honor the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood and sisterhood of men and women everywhere. And they, each and all will have to hold hands and march along together.**

**For on the other side, he predicted, there will be a huge amalgam of those who do not believe in the God and in his son Jesus Christ our Lord; who will not believe men and women are made in the image of the Creator. 125 years ago Soloviev wrote that they will resort to power, to vicious, inhuman terror to get their own way. They will deny the sanctity of human life. It will be a battle. It will be a**

**fight to the finish, he wrote. The other side is fully armed and have lined up on the field. We had better tend to the preparations on our side too.**

**We need to love and serve together. We need to be in league with those who love the Jesus The Christ and who honor the Lord God Almighty. We cannot continue to bicker among ourselves. We need to see the longer, larger picture. We need to believe in the future. We need to focus on our children and grandchildren and guard their way to freedom. We need to look to the One true God who came to be with us in Jesus the Christ and who has promised to protect and guide and guard and keep us and those we love, for now and forever more. Amen.**