

## **The Clash of Age with Youth**

**“And all the people shouted with a great shout. But many who had seen the former temple, wept with a loud voice, so that the sound of the joyful shout could not be distinguished from the sound of the people weeping.” (Ezra 3)**

**Rev. Richard M. Cromie  
Bethpage Presbyterian Church  
Kannapolis NC  
January 21, 20**

**“The Clash of Age with Youth.” First, let me tell you a story from an out of the way place in the Old Testament; then I will ask you what you think it means to us in these early days of 2007. The story comes from the Book of Ezra, Chapter 3, not a normal resting place for most of us, and surely not a beloved Biblical hitching post for preachers and their weekly sermons through the years. In my own case, after forty five years of preaching (I admit that is a lot of sermons) I turned to Ezra no more than a literal couple of times. Here is the story:**

**It happened in the ancient City of Jerusalem, about 400 or so years before the birth of Jesus Christ, just after the exiled people of God have returned to the Promised Land. While they were away in captivity they pined for home, or most of them did; others became acclimated to the lifestyle in Babylon. But the faithful hung their harps on the willow trees and waited. They went about their daily chores, and many of them succeeded famously, but for most of them, always, always, their hearts and minds yearned for the day when they could go home, much like our soldiers in every generation and like it is in Iraq these days. There captivity lasted for sixty, seventy years.**

**In time though, a new King came to rule the land. Cranky old King Nebuchadnezzar was gone. King Cyrus of Persia was in command. One day he decided to release God’s people. “Why” is not exactly clear in the Bible. It simply says that “The Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus, King of Persia,”**

and nudged him to send the chosen people back to Jerusalem, mainly so that they could rebuild the Temple for the Lord. Cyrus not only released them, he gave them provisions for the journey, and he even returned the sacred temple vessels which Nebuchadnezzar had stolen from their former Temple of Solomon.

Since they were little boys, these now growing older heads of families had been told not to give up: one day God would return them to Jerusalem. So they waited singing sad songs down by the River Chebar, and reassuring that the promise would come true. “Let my right hand wither and let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth, if I forget thee O Jerusalem.” Oh happy day; they could now go home!

But when they finally got there, there was a problem, several of them. There was no city left, no walls, no streets, and surely no Temple. When the Babylonians laid siege to Jerusalem in 586 BC, they pillaged the whole town, killed everyone they wanted, and carted off the strong young men and the desirable women and children to Babylon. There was not one stone left upon another. Oh dear, like coming back to uptown Charlotte and all the buildings and all the Churches gone.

I visited Jerusalem some years ago. The Dome of the Rock, where their temple stood dominates the city. It now is occupied by El Aksa, a Muslim Mosque. Everywhere you go around the town; you can look up and see the Temple. But when they went back, there was no temple there at all. I can hear the people grumbling, as they did in the desert to Moses, “What are we

**doing here? It wasn't all that bad in Babylon. Why did we come back to this God-forsaken place of rubble?"**

**Sixty six years is a long long time. Where were you 66 years ago? Well, I was a little child of four in Pittsburgh PA. Most of you were not even on the face of the earth. Most of those who returned had never been there; they were born in Babylon. So you have to give them credit. Some left, but most stayed on, and the first thing they did was begin to work on the Temple. Did you hear that? They set aside their own ambitions and went to work for the Lord? The Prophet Haggai later condemned them because he said they were spending more time and money working on their own homes than on the Temple. (What else is new?) One day Haggai shouted: "Is it fair for you to dwell in your beautiful paneled houses, while God's house lies in ruins?" It must have hurt them, or at least it must have made them angry.**

**But, the point of the story is that the young people cared about their faith of their fathers, only they cared in a different way than their parents and grandparents. Their Elders were harkening back to the days of yore, to the ancient well-trod paths, while the young people were looking ahead to the time of their grandchildren and a pathway to the future. I call it "The Clash of Age with Youth."**

**But, we are getting ahead of the story. It took a lot of time and tons of energy to rebuild that Temple, and it took all of the money they could muster. But next they realized that there was no wall around the city, and they were constantly under attack from their neighbors, especially a Satrap named Sanballat, a Syrian General who was intent on taking over**

**Jerusalem for himself. It got so bad they had to interrupt the re-construction of the Temple; and to protect themselves; they re-built the walls around the city.**

**Nehemiah tells us in his companion Old Testament Book how they did it. The attacks on their freedom were so worrisome and fierce, that Nehemiah had to set all the Chosen people to work on the wall, women and children too. He assigned the able bodied men to be the warriors against the enemy, and issued sword and armor to them. Then it says, “With one hand they worked on the building of the wall, and with the other hand they fought off the enemy”.**

**It was a tough time for the young people readjusting to the new land and dividing their time and families between building up their own homes, The Temple, and the Wall around the Holy City. Somehow they did it.**

**Finally, the new Temple was completed. Oh Happy Day: God now had his house again up on Temple Mount. The foundation was laid and the cornerstone was set; I suppose they even filled a time capsule with the news of the day and hopes for tomorrow. The priest all ran home and got their finest vestments; the Choir went and got their robes; the sons of Jubal brought their cymbals and trumpets and pipes. Everybody got all dressed up. They were ready to have at it, to celebrate; to dedicate the new Temple to the Glory of God. Have you ever been at the dedication of a new Church, or a new Christian Education Building? I have. It is festive; it is fun; it is holy; it is happy. Praise the Lord !**

Now we come to the scene I want you to focus on. Ezra says that everyone around was clapping and shouting for joy. Everyone, he writes, except a couple here and there: a couple of Elders, a couple in the Choir, a couple in the transept, a couple of Levites, a couple upstairs in the balcony, a couple in the back pews, a couple of women and a couple of men. It all added up

Ezra was astute enough to notice that they were not clapping, they were grumbling. They were had honed their abilities in what we used to call “creative foot-dragging”. It got so bad that their complaining and their weeping grew very loud. You see, they didn’t like the New Temple. They remembered the old one, the way it used to be. And, make no doubts about it, the old Temple has been a archeological gem and a place of lavish beauty for the Lord.

They yearned for the gold covered cedar altar which Solomon had built for his temple. All the new temple had was a local stone altar. And they missed the elaborate embellishments, the gargoyles around the frieze of the old temple, and the marble and granite and the stained glass windows which had beautiful scenes of the Prophets and Patriarchs. And, The Ark of the Covenant, where was it? The inner sanctum, the Holy of Holies would be empty. They knew where it was; it had been destroyed during the siege of the City; but I guess they forgot and now, they still wanted it back.

It is like the little lady said to me a long time ago when our church was expanding; new members were everywhere and we had to enlarge the Sanctuary and then add a Christian Education building and new offices and a basketball court. When I tried patiently to explain to her that it was

**progress: that God’s people were on the move, she replied: “Oh, Reverend, I am in favor of progress; it is all these changes I can’t stand.” I am in favor of progress; it’s all these changes I can’t stand. Touché!**

**The elders, the ones who had seen or at least heard first hand about the old temple were so upset they began to weep and shout and gnash their teeth: “This is not our temple any longer; this is not what we think a temple should be; this will never do. Why can’t we have our old temple back?”**

**It got so bad that Ezra finally says, “The sound of the joyful shouts could not be distinguished from the sound of the people weeping.” A few old grouches can make an awful lot of noise. And the young people were incredulous. They had done their best with what was available, and the Elders did not appreciate it, at all.**

**&&&&&&&&&&**

**Now, my friends, I ask you to tear off their desert robes, the elders and the young, and ask them to come and sit down beside you in the pew. Chat quietly with them in the privacy of your soul, and see if you recognize yourself or anyone you know in them. See if their story depicts anything familiar in our culture and in the churches of the land.**

**If you do, where do you see yourself? Are you one who digs in holds the line, protecting the past? That’s not all bad; don’t let me mislead you. The world has gone haywire. Jeremiah warned that we all need to stand by the**

**ancient paths once in a while to see where we have seen and where we want to go. A lot of the past is worthy of continuing.**

**I mean that is a problem, isn't it? In the past generation or two in our nation and in our communities we have allowed a lot of things to slip away which were sacred to previous generations. We didn't plan it that way; it just happened, and before we realized it. In matters of morals and customs and values and kindness and courtesy and religion, we have allowed some of the most sacred to drift away and we had all better go back and find them again. The passage in Ezra understands that the elders had a point. They are not condemned. It makes me weep when I think of how far we have strayed from the truth. Confucius advised that we should keep an open mind, but don't let your brains fall out.**

**It's good to honor your father and mother and their way of life. Young and old alike have to share in reconstructing a new and better life. And work to find the best of what we have lost, and resurrecting it and refusing to pine for the days of yore, taking it all forward. But the passage also states clearly that the new ways are not all bad either. We need a balance.**

**I do not have to come here as a guest in Kannapolis to tell you that we live in a time of change. You already know all about that. Change is the only constant we can see. It is true in North Carolina, it is true in the south and out west and up east; and it is true all around the world. Rapid change is everywhere.**

**I grew up and spent the first twenty years of my pastorates in Pittsburgh Pa, where I watched the iron and steel industries disappear before our very eyes. There was a lot of tumult and shouting in the meantime.**

**Globally in the past 66 years, to equate it with the time God's people were in Babylon; we have seen the rise and fall of communism in Russia and Eastern Europe. We endured the Cold War, only to have new wars heating up all over the place. I don't know what you think about the war in Iraq, but there is an enemy out there somewhere, an amorphous, but ubiquitous enemy who is intent on stomping out the United States of America and our way of life.**

**We cannot just ignore it. We were ushered out of Eden and the flaming cherubim guard the way back. The Garden is gone and heaven is not yet here. In the meantime we have to find the best possible course.**

**I like Nehemiah's solution. He assigned half of his men to defend the other half. The rest he put to work erecting the wall around the city to defend themselves, and while they worked with one hand on the wall, in the other they held the sword. And, all the while, they devoted themselves to the reconstruction of the Temple.**

**Our children and grandchildren will be forced to do the same. They will be called to make sacrifices and compromises that my generation never dreamed of. They will face a variety of religious and ethical decisions that were unheard of when I was first ordained to the Christian ministry in 1962.**

**.**

**I remember my own progression. First, if you can believe it, my father was opposed to the Roman Catholics. He told us they would never get to heaven. He was an Orangeman from Northern Ireland. He wore an orange tie on St. Patrick's Day, no green for my dad. When I first took a shine to a Catholic girl, he ordered me to end the relationship; and I did.**

**Black people in our neighborhood lived across the field. I never met a Jew until I went to high school. And, as far as I know, there were no Hispanics in all of Western Pennsylvania. We were taught that our way was the right way. When I was a child I thought like a child. But I grew up pretty quickly.**

**As an adult Christian, I have tried to cross over all of those boundaries, working in ecumenical activities first with the Catholics; then in the 1960 I had to turn my attention to racial relations; then later with The Conference of Christians and Jews, now most recently my children tell me I should learn Spanish and try to understand the Muslims. The choices are legion now.**

**It gets confusing. How you maintain the strength of your own faith, and still reach out to hold hands with everybody else is a chore. How you keep an open mind, and still remained fastened to the Incarnation of Jesus Christ as Lord. I want my children and grandchildren to believe in the Christian faith, but I do not want them to carry on the prejudices we used to have; nor do I want them to think that God cares only for them.**

**And if all that change was true of my generation, mostly unanticipated by the way; what kinds of newness will our young people face? Our young people are challenged to live in a new and coming world. As with Abraham, they are to be sent out in a new direction but not knowing in advance where they will be going. They are charged by God to build a new temple to his name, not out of the adornments we had in the past, but out of what is and will be available to them in the future.**

**Young people need to experiment; they need to sift through all that they have received and determine what will work best for them as the new world unfolds. Young men still dream and old men have their visions. Parents and grandparents should not demand, or even expect their children to be just like them.**

**We are all in this together. It is a new world Christ is calling us to live in. And one thing you can be sure of: He is already there waiting for us to arrive. He wants a temple where people can move in and out, where they can be open to new ideas without abandoning the old, where everyone is welcome. I adore stained glass windows.**

**Some of the houses of worship I love the most are shielded by stained glass. But the problem with stained glass windows is that nobody can see out, and nobody can see in.**

**Christ wants us to be out in his world, sharing the good news with his people who need it most. “Those who are well,” Jesus said, “have no need of a physician.”**

**Soloviev was a widely known Russian novelist at the beginning of the 1900s. Way back then he had one of his characters say that the day would come when there would be only two sides in the world: those who love and honor the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of men and women. He said the day would come when we would all have to hold hands with those who shared our beliefs and march against a common enemy who believed neither of those ideals. I think that day has come.**

**The stakes are higher than ever. I read the other day in the Charlotte Observer that in London, the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists moved their Doomsday Clock two minutes forward. It now is set at 11:55 PM, with Midnight being the end. The proliferation of atomic weapons is the main cause for the alarm. Terrorism is high on the list of worries; but all agreed that the dangers posed by the climate changes on our planet are growing. Stephen Hawking the most renowned cosmologist of all said that Global warming has eclipsed all the other threats we face.**

**H.G. Wells once said that “History is a race between education and catastrophe.” We need to hold hands with all of those who love and Lord and seek the freedom of God’s children throughout the world. We need to leap forward and tackle the major threats to our future. We need to quit bickering over incidental matters. For when it is all over God will the epitaph for most of the things we held so dear. Why did you worry about that? And on a huge banner flying above all the differences we used to quarrel over and gave our lives to get, God will emblazon the words: “SO WHAT !”**

**And yet, you know, I am an optimist. I am excited about the future. Not because I think mankind is clever enough to keep the goodness of the world going on and on until it all will end and Christ will return. Not at all. My optimism arises out of my dependence on and devotion to the God we worship in Jesus Christ, who is ever on the move, who dwells in the future, not in the past, and who is trying to create a new and better world out of the conflicting claims we see around us day by day. And as Maeterlinck once wrote: If we cannot be part of the progress, then the least any of should do, is not to add to the immense dead weight which nature drags along.**

**Meanwhile, think it over before we go. Linger for one last moment on the men and women and children who with one hand worked on building up the temple and the wall. But, all the while they held a literal and proverbial sword in the other hand to fend off the enemies of the Lord.**

**And think one last time about the day when the Elders wept when the new Temple was dedicated. Their eyes were so filled with tears; they could not see what God was doing. It says later on that the Lord God filled that new Temple with splendor. It accomplished the purposes he had in mind. Your ways are not my ways, says the Lord; neither are your thoughts my thoughts.**

**At home, at school, at play, wherever, whenever: here there and everywhere, in your family, in your relationships, in your church, pray God to bless us and our children and grandchildren so they will be ready to face whatever world God Almighty has in mind for them. For now and forever more. Amen.**

