

Honoring the Past

sermon digest

November 20, 2011

Ezra 3:10-13

carolyn dipboye

Today is a significant moment in the life of our church. After more than seven years of being “tabernacled,” as we say each Sunday on the front of our order of worship, at 100 Adams Lane, today we move to a new tabernacle; and I must admit that I do so with mixed emotions. If you recall, even at the moment when we resoundingly agreed in Congregational Meeting to make this move, Dean Eyman choked up as he tried to say that he thought Ed Woy and Grant Stradley pronounced their blessings upon our decision. This morning as we gather at Trinity, we can’t help but remember those who began the journey with us, who did not live to make this move. I recall how, early on, even before we had moved to Adams Lane, we experienced the death of our good and long time friend, Bob Neal; and even before that, just before we came together to be Grace Covenant Church, the death of Stan Benson. I remember how we reeled on receiving Bob Kelly’s devastating diagnosis and the joy with which we celebrated Charles and Anna Kate’s marriage and our sadness when Charles died five years later. I recall the number of times we have walked together through diagnoses and deaths of beloved members of our extended family and how we have stepped up alongside one another to try to help shoulder what has sometimes seemed to be unbearable tragedy and loss.

The walls of 100 Adams Lane surrounded and enfolded us as we were staggered by grief. The walls of 100 Adams Lane participated as well in our moments of sheer ecstasy and celebration. Those walls knew shouts of laughter, songs of joy, the quiet strengthening of faith and the growing endurance of deep, deep friendship. Often times when I stopped by there during the week on an errand of some sort, I would pause in the quiet stillness of the place and absorb its peace. Our experience there bore witness to the truth that church is more than steeples and organs, appearances and numbers. It is shared faith. It is living together day in and day out, growing together in understanding and seeking to embody what it means to be the living Body of Christ in our relationship with one another and in the world that God loves.

If you look closely at the story we read from Ezra this morning, you will see something of our mixed emotions reflected there. Ezra is hardly one of those books to which we often turn—and for good reason. It reflects serious divisions, growing enmity within the house of Israel. Returning exiles, who had maintained the faith by sharpening their appreciation for the law of Moses, resented and came up against the bitter resentment of those who had remained behind in the land. Each reviled and tried to excommunicate the other. Ezra’s counsel on what to do with foreigners in the land is hardly anything we would want to preach in the rich diversity of cultures we enjoy today.

Our focus this morning, however, is on an overriding theme that we should not miss. Ezra puts worship at front and center. Although other accounts indicate that the process did not unfold quite so seamlessly or quickly as Ezra’s memoir seems to recall, what we see here are important beginnings. Less than a year after returning to Jerusalem and in the midst of overwhelming hostility from neighboring peoples and fractures within, the returning exiles rebuild the altar of sacrifice upon the foundation of the previous altar. Five months later the exiles come in one accord to lay a foundation to rebuild the temple, conscientiously utilizing at least one stone from the original temple. The cacophony of emotions Ezra describes is almost breathtaking. The priests and Levites sang responsively, and the people responded with a great shout of joy. “But,” Ezra says, “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 . . . though many shouted aloud for joy, so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people’s weeping” (3:12-13). Why this mix of tears and joy? Was it because those old enough to remember the original temple remembered something more grand? Did the tears spring from deep memories of the great suffering and losses of the intervening years that still so deeply pained those who had lived them?

Like the exiles, our own worship and movement into the future is accompanied by shouts of joy and deep grief. We may find ourselves tempted to dwell in the past rather than facing the uncertainty and pain of moving forward. Doing so, however, means that not only do we turn aside from following the God who beckons us into the future. We turn aside as well from the heritage of faithfulness we so value. Let us be clear. As we make our move today, we move forward not in disregard of the faithful

friends who birthed Grace Covenant Church with us. As we make our move today, we carry with us stones, gracious remembrances from the past. We carry them with us not that we might turn them into idols of an idealized, unreal past. We carry them with us as reminders of a God who was faithful then and who will be faithful in the future. We carry them with us not to mark the point at which we will stop, but as foundations upon which we in faithfulness will build the future.

Going Forward

larry dipboye

The original Jewish center of worship was a tabernacle, a portable structure like a tent that was carried from place to place in the desert of wandering during the Exodus. In the settlement of the land of promise, the Tabernacle was replaced by Solomon's Temple constructed on the Temple mount in Jerusalem in the tenth century before Christ. It stood for more than four centuries before it was leveled by the Babylonians in 586 BCE. Ezra falls in the period of reconstruction when the Exiles were allowed to return to their homeland. The Jews were faced with two major tasks of reconstruction, to rebuild the protective wall around the city of Jerusalem and to reconstruct the Temple. Construction addressed two basic necessities of life for the Jews in that era: they needed military fortification to protect them against invading armies, and they needed a worship center to fortify their faith. The second Temple was completed about 516 BCE.

About a decade before the birth of Christ, Herod the Great started the massive project of rebuilding the Temple for the third time. Herod's Temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE. After the Roman invasion, the foundations of Herod's expanded wall around the Temple, the Western Wall remained; and some believe that some of the stones date to the time of Solomon. This is the famous "The Wailing Wall," where Jews still return to pray to the God of hope as they remember the way things were.

Life is full of Wailing Walls, places to remember and to grieve over the way things were, but Christ calls us forward to build anew. Last evening I encountered two ladies in the Chapel who had been longtime members of the Trinity Methodist Church responsible for constructing this temple of worship. One commented with a tinge of pain in her voice that being there last night was like visiting one's former residence. If you have ever tried to go back home again, you know exactly what she meant.

Nostalgia is a significant part of life. The word means homesickness. To treasure the past is some indication of something good that was there. Nostalgia is a perfectly natural inclination to people who harbor memories, especially identified with senior adults. It seems that the more you have to remember, the more time you spend remembering. While there is nothing wrong with honoring the past, where we have been, our lives do not consist of memories alone. We worship the God of Hope, Who ever moves us forward into the mystery and adventure of promise.

In Luke 10 contains random statements on the life of discipleship. One man said, "I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home." and Jesus replied, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." Do not let the past rob us of the joyful reality of the future which is open before us. Let us vow never to forget who we are. Let also vow never to sacrifice the hope of the future on the altars of the past.

The seniors who remember have a wealth of experience with which to enrich the lives of the young, and the spirited hope of youth reminds us that God is not finished with His people. Old men dream dreams, but also young women. Young men see visions, but also old women. The mission of the church is poorly represented in a multitude of solos. Jesus called us to be a choir—not only a variety of vocal tenor but a rich diversity of blended tones. Ezra's description a harmonious church, "the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people's weeping."