

“Muddled”

A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church

Ezra 1:1-4; 3:1-4, 10-13

December 15, 2019 - Third Sunday of Advent

Ah, the book of Ezra. It's a weird collection of chapters wrapped in historical confusion and a bit of post-exile xenophobia.

We have been laser-focused on exile for weeks now. We have heard from prophets who watched the Northern Kingdom of Israel fall to the Assyrians and who feared the same fate would befall the Southern Kingdom of Judah. We have heard from later prophets who proclaimed hope even as Jerusalem was indeed being sacked by the Babylonians and Judah's most useful people were being taken to Babylon. We have heard from prophets who saw the end of the road for the Babylonians in the form of a new king, Cyrus the Great of Persia, whom they believed would come to end this exile.

And here we are, somewhere in the second-half of the 400s BCE, and Cyrus has allowed the people to return to Judah to worship their God and to rebuild their temple, and that's what we hear about in the book of Ezra. Cyrus had a very different style from the Babylonians, believing in carrots rather than sticks to secure fidelity across his empire. But the people see the hand of their God in all of this.

Listen as we read some selected verses that tell of return, and restoration, and rebuilding:

In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, in order that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, the LORD stirred up the spirit of King Cyrus of Persia so that he sent a herald throughout all his kingdom, and also in a written edict declared:

“Thus says King Cyrus of Persia: The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem in Judah. Any of those among you who are of his people—may their God be with them! —are now permitted to go up to Jerusalem in Judah, and rebuild the house of the Lord, the God of Israel—he is the God who is in Jerusalem; and let all survivors, in whatever place they reside, be assisted by the people of their place with silver and gold, with goods and with animals, besides freewill offerings for the house of God in Jerusalem.”

When the seventh month came, and the Israelites were in the towns, the people gathered together in Jerusalem. Then Jeshua son of Jozadak, with his fellow priests, and Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel with his kin set out to build the altar of the God of Israel, to offer burnt offerings on it, as prescribed in the law of Moses the man of God. They set up the altar on its foundation, because they were in dread of the neighboring peoples, and they offered burnt offerings upon it to the LORD, morning and evening. And they kept the festival of booths, as prescribed, and offered the daily burnt offerings by number according to the ordinance, as required for each day,

When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests in their vestments were stationed to praise the LORD with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, according

to the directions of King David of Israel; and they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the Lord, “For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel.”

And all the people responded with a great shout when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid. 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 house, 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, for the people shouted so loudly that the sound was heard far away.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

A few miles from here, down just past Vulcan in a cottage in South Side, Hugh Martin was spending his vacation in 1943 working on lyrics for an upcoming MGM film starring Judy Garland called “Meet Me in St. Louis.”

Even if you haven’t seen the movie, you’ve heard one of the songs Hugh Martin wrote in Birmingham that year. It was sung by Judy Garland’s character, Esther, just after midnight as Christmas Eve turned to Christmas. Esther’s father has recently announced that he had been promoted and so the whole family would be moving from St. Louis to — of all places! — New York City. His four daughters are devastated. They will have to abandon the only life they’ve known, and all their friends, and budding romances, and their dreams, and their excitement at attending the upcoming 1904 World’s Fair.

(The film doesn’t mention it, but the family will be missing out on seeing Birmingham’s contribution to that Fair: a prize-winning cast iron statue of the Roman god Vulcan!)

Returning home from a Christmas Eve ball, Esther finds her six-year-old sister Tootie very upset about the upcoming move and as they look out the window at a snow family they had built, Esther tries to soothe Tootie with an encouraging song. It doesn’t really work. Tootie embraces her anger and runs out into the cold and demolishes the snow family.

The whole scene is sad and a bit traumatic. The song you have heard on the radio — willingly or not — in the past few weeks. But you likely didn’t hear Hugh Martin’s original lyrics:

Have yourself a merry little Christmas
It may be your last
Next year we may all be living in the past
Have yourself a merry little Christmas
Pop that champagne cork
Next year we may all be living in New York
No good times like the olden days
Happy golden days of yore
Faithful friends who were dear to us
Will be near to us no more

But at least we all will be together
If the Lord allows
From now on, we'll have to muddle through somehow
So have yourself a merry little Christmas now.

Presented with those lyrics, Judy Garland, her co-star Tom Drake, and the film's director (later Garland's husband) Vincent Minelli told Hugh Martin that they were too depressing. They begged for a rewrite. Garland complained that if she sang those words to a little girl, people would call her a monster.

Martin resisted at first, but in the end that whole "It may be your last..." bit became "Let your heart be light. Next year all our troubles will be out of sight." And other changes were made to change the tone of the song from "try to enjoy Christmas, 'cause the future is grim, kiddo" to one of melancholy longing for a hopeful future that is nearly within our grasp. The revised song made less sense for the movie, but it was a hit, especially among American troops serving in World War II.

Even that wasn't enough for Frank Sinatra. When he recorded the song for his Christmas album in 1957, he was stuck on "From now on, we'll have to muddle through somehow" and asked Hugh Martin, "Do you think you could jolly up that line for me?" And that's how we got "Hang a shining star upon the highest bough."

"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 house, 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,"

I am on record in this pulpit as being incredibly nostalgic at times and also believing that nostalgia can have highly toxic side effects. It is important to remember the past, and to learn from it, and to enjoy the good memories, as long as we don't make an idol of olden days, remembering that it wasn't all happy golden days, and that the good times weren't good for everyone.

In Ezra we find older Judeans who remembered Solomon's Temple weeping for *what was* as they look at what is just a foundation of what will be, for a few hundred years, merely a whisper of the grand temple they knew. There are a whole lot of Christians today weeping for *what was*. And that is understandable when the "Mainline Protestant Church" no longer has the influence on American culture it had in the middle of the last century.

But that first temple to the God of liberation from Egypt was built by slaves. This new temple is being built by contracting with a variety of peoples who live in the area. The church that wielded so much clout told a whole lot of people that they weren't welcome. The churches in our tradition that are thriving and making a difference in the world are more open and justice-oriented. What is lost may have been sacred and breathtaking. The foundation being laid may be closer to the Word of God.

I want to move past my inherent skepticism of nostalgia, though, and scoot onto the piano bench with Hugh Martin and make room for a sad song that can mingle — a tolling iron knell amid the festive jingle bells.

We'll hold our Service of the Longest Night here on Saturday at 6 p.m. The first year we had that service here, two people showed up. I bragged to the Session the next year when we saw a 150% increase in attendance. We had enough for a basketball team. By last year we had between fifteen and twenty. That's still a lot of time and energy dedicated to a fairly small group of worshipers, many of whom aren't connected to EPC. It's not particularly efficient.

Our culture has an inclination toward denying death, toward sweeping hard feelings under the rug, toward “jollyng up” the lyrics. And that inclination goes wild in December. We are so often expected to smile, to produce a perfect Christmas for our families, to grin and bear whatever non-sparkly crud we're dealing with. But at the laying of the foundation of the second temple, the worshipers who were tasting freedom again, as their ancestors had, made space for tears of lament.

And so we make space. We know that in our midst are people who have lost someone they love. Some have spent part or all of this year in what seems like a hell built just for them. People that we share pews and chancels with have seen dreams dashed and relationships broken and what was known and trusted turn to dust.

Even if we've had a pretty good year ourselves, we've likely absorbed the heaviness of the news cycle, with attacks and shootings and disasters and political upheaval and corruption happening in broad daylight. As we hang lights and wrap gifts, migrant children remain in detention centers in our nation.

It's crucial not to paper over all that stuff. Grief needs a voice. Lamentation aches to echo. Our wounds need to breathe. There is health in spending time in sacred darkness.

This is not a sales pitch for our Longest Night service — but it's not *not* a sales pitch either. Let it never be said that crying out, that weeping, that taking time to acknowledge the burdens we carry is not a valid and sacred way to spend a holy night.

The Longest Night service changes every year, but one piece has remained constant. At some point we light candles to honor a memory, or to try to burn one up, or to cast just a bit more light into a sanctuary filled with shadows. And that little congregation is told that their candles will be lit again on Christmas Eve and placed somewhere beautifully inconspicuous so that, with all the deep joy present here, we will make space for the part of the community that is muddling through, somehow.

The voices of lament will be mixed and muddled with the voices of the joyful — sometimes within the same vocal cords! — so that we will not be able to distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people's weeping.

And that is true joy, because Jesus does not enter a perfect world and he does not leave it a perfect world. Joy that denies the shadows may be jolly, but it's not very bright. In the Gospel of Luke, when Mary and Joseph take baby Jesus to the temple, this righteous old man named Simeon approaches them and rejoices. He says, "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation..." and Mary is amazed at the things he tells them, but at the end he tells Mary, "a sword will pierce your own soul too."

Y'all, take care of yourselves in this last week and a half of Advent. You cannot make Christmas more perfect. You cannot, by sheer will, force yourself or someone else to be jolly. But you can bring joy, through deep breaths and moments spent in silence admiring a Christmas tree or reading or sleeping an extra fifteen minutes. You can bring joy by listening to or spending time with a loved one who is muddling through or paying attention to your own need to cry out. You can bring joy by letting your voice of wonder or weeping mingle with the voices around you, trusting that a joy deeper than the midnight sky will come to a world that is groaning.

Hydrate. Wash your hands.

Listen for peace.

Listen for hope.

And do not fear, for there is good news of great joy ahead.

Amen.