

“We’re Here”

A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau

for Edgewood Presbyterian Church

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

October 31, 2021 - Reformation Sunday - Return to the Sanctuary

If you really want to simplify things, there are two main events for the people of God in the books of the Hebrew Scriptures. There is the Exodus, in which God provides liberation, a way out of Egypt, and the Israelites become a nation in their wandering in the wilderness on the way to a home.

And there is the Exile, in which the people long to return home and to rebuild the temple so that they may worship in the house of God again.

So much of scripture is devoted to the Exile.

You can hear from prophets who watched the Northern Kingdom of Israel crushed by the Assyrian empire and who feared the same fate would befall the Southern Kingdom of Judah.

You can hear from later prophets who proclaimed hope even as Jerusalem was indeed being sacked by the Babylonians and Judah’s most useful-to-the-empire citizens were being taken to Babylon.

You can hear from prophets who saw the end of the road for those Babylonians in the form of a new king, Cyrus the Great, of Persia, whom they believed would come to end this exile.

Our third reading drops us somewhere in the second-half of the 400s BCE, and Cyrus has allowed the people to return and to worship their God and to rebuild their temple. That’s what we hear about in the book of Ezra, along with a healthy dose of xenophobia brought on by trauma.

Cyrus the Great 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 from Ezra 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.

5...4...3...2...1...Happy New Year!

We raise a glass and hug our friends and maybe share a kiss.

And the music swells and we sing that song - whether we’re in Times Square or watching that Moon Pie drop in Mobile — that song that ushers in the New Year.

We usually know most of the first verse and the chorus:

*Should old acquaintance be forgot,
and never brought to mind?
Should old acquaintance be forgot,
and auld lang syne?*

*For auld lang syne, my dear,
for auld lang syne,
we’ll take a cup of kindness yet,
for auld lang syne.*

Will you sing it with me?

Some version of that first verse goes back about four hundred years. The current verses come to us from the late 18th Century and that great Scottish poet Robert Burns.

The phrase “auld lang syne” means something like “for old times’ sake” and I think it says something about us that seconds after a brand new year begins we’re already reminiscing. We look back as we look ahead. We get wistful at the moment we are most audaciously hopeful about what’s in store. We can’t even conceive of a future not shaped by our past.

Most of us don’t know the other verses. The fourth verse is the one that makes me think the most of y’all over these past nineteen months. It’s printed in your worship folder under the sermon title, but I’m not going to ask you

to sing it:

*We two have paddled in the stream,
from morning sun till dine;
But seas between us broad have roared
since auld lang syne.*

I've seen almost all of you in person since March 8, 2020. And many of you have seen each other. We worked our tails off here at the church to provide some sort of worship gathering each week. We had lots and lots of Zoom meetings. Y'all, if I had said "Zoom meeting" at our last Sunday service in this space, very few worshipers would have had any idea what I was talking about.

I will put this congregation's effort to balance staying connected and keeping one another safe up against any church, small, medium, large, or super-sized.

But seas between us broad have roared
since auld lang syne.

Since we gathered in this place to give glory to God on a Sunday morning...
We have seen illness and death. We have moved. We have had to lean on immense grace and incomprehensible love and unexpected generosity as we have grieved jobs and traditions and relationships lost.
We have been through so very much.
We've been through it together.
But not together.
We did exceedingly well.
This was miserable.

I feel so much joy today. But it's this strange joy - the joy of relief. It's not the joy of making a new friend. It's the joy of seeing someone you love that you feared you might never see again.

I don't ever want to lead worship sitting in front of my laptop again — though I'm certain some ice storm in February will send us scurrying to Zoom for one Sunday. But I'm also strangely missing Zoom church.

Maybe you remember those first few weeks out of the sanctuary when we hadn't quite mastered Zoom worship yet and we were still so stunned that it had come to this. It felt really good that we were able to gather. It felt clunky. And now I know some of you struggled to figure out how to make your way here this morning - what to wear, how to get out the door on time, how to get through a worship service without being able to turn off your camera. And I know there are some who are joining by Zoom today who are grieving the way we had been gathering.

"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,"

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.

That first temple to the God of liberation from Egypt was built by enslaved people. This new temple is being built by contracting with a variety of peoples who live in the area. What is lost may have been sacred and breathtaking. The foundation being laid may be closer to the Word of God.

It's Reformation Sunday. On October 31, 1517 Martin Luther sent his Ninety-five theses to the archbishop and might have even nailed them to the doors of the churches of Wittenberg. In retrospect, this challenge to the corruption of the Church is viewed as the kickoff of the Protestant Reformation. Generation to generation, the Reformation continues. New struggles. New witness. New understanding. New revelation from God. And the church is reborn. And some rejoice. And some weep.

We are together in this moment - is it a dawn of something new? A precipice? A homecoming? A chance to be reformed? We know that we are a laughing, sobbing, smiling, weepy mess because of where we have been and what it feels like to be here and our uncertainty about where we are going. We know that. And we know that God is here.

I wish I could tell you that for the folks gathered for the laying of the foundation of the temple, this was the end of struggle, of heartache, of violence to their bodies and their culture and their place of worship. After Cyrus came the Greeks and that eventually meant more severe oppression and then rebellion. And after the Greeks came the Romans and the New Testament picks up the story.

Through it all — and so much more — the people of God have steadfastly believed that feast or famine, war or peace, chutes or ladders, their God was in the joy and the sorrow right there with them. They have a God they can praise and cry out to in despair using the same lips, in the same place, within the same prayer or song.

We assert boldly — knowing how foolish it can sound — we assert that the God of Creation is with us. In water. In bread. In cup. In gratitude given by children. In the exhausted prayers of weathered hearts. In the haunting questions of youth. In the soul-piercing songs of a choir. We know this God through Jesus Christ, who entered into the world of empire and brought healing and teaching that re-formed those with ears to hear and a whole lot of time spent around tables. We know this God through Jesus Christ, who showed us the opening through the close, life through death, joy through heartbreak.

By 1916, World War I had been raging for two years and the unifying enthusiasm of the cause was fading in the trenches of Europe. British soldiers were weary. Exhausted. Devastated by poison gas and No Man's land and the fact that none of it seemed to be headed anywhere. Confused as to what in the world they were doing risking their lives for small chunks of land so far from home.

The story goes that soldiers, with the dry wit that the British have perfected, started singing a familiar tune in the trenches, but with sarcastic lyrics:

We're here, because we're here, because we're here, because we're here.

Author John Green tells of his friend, the writer Amy Krouse Rosenthal who died far too young from cancer at the age of 51. Amy would tell that story to audiences, of the British troops singing out their hopelessness, their sense of oblivion. And then she would ask them to sing it - to re-form it without changing the words, in a brazen declaration of hope found through mere existence. We are. We exist.

I can't quite ask you to do exactly that, as last Sunday's sermon was about the inadequacy of merely existing. Furthermore, we know why we are here, in the broad sense, even amid our confusion and our weariness and our frustration and our anger.

We are here to praise God.

We are here to proclaim God's lovingkindness, God's grace,
God's promise that nothing is beyond redemption.

We are here to witness to God's deep love for us in Christ.

We are here to follow the wily winds of the Holy Spirit in search of gospel work.

We are here to speak God's Word of peace into a world tearing itself apart.

We are here to remind one another of God's forgiveness.

We are here to remind one another of God's yearning for justice to break forth.

We are here to bear one another's burdens and to lift one another up.

We are here to share our burdens and to be lifted up.

We are here to bless and be blessed, and to break bread together.

We know that we don't need this building to do any of that - and if we didn't know, we have learned it.

And yet - we are home. In the place where we have baptized and eulogized. In the place of our Ash Wednesdays and Good Fridays. In the place of our weddings and our ordinations and our Youth Sundays and our Easters and Christmases. In the place we go on Sunday morning.

With the bubbling brew of emotions swirling in the cauldrons of your Reformed, Halloween hearts, will you declare "We're here" with me?

We're here, because we're here, because we're here, because we're here.

We're here, because we're here, because we're here, because we're here.

...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.

Amen.