

After Exile: A Future with Hope (Ezra & Nehemiah)  
First Presbyterian Church of Salt Lake City  
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This morning we wrap up our short series on exile and return, by talking about what it might look like to walk into the future with hope. This line, *a future with hope*, comes from the prophet Jeremiah, who writes to encourage the people of God, who have been living in exile. He says this, **“For surely, I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.” -Jer 29:11** But like Pastor Joe reminded us a couple weeks ago, this promise for a “future with hope” is so meaningful, because it’s given to people who are far from home, who are in exile. People who watched their city and temple be destroyed. People who had to completely start over and rebuild their whole life in a new place. These are people that need the promise of a “future with hope.”

Maybe that’s you today, longing for God to bring you hope. You might be in exile today yourself. Now, whether that is a literal “far away from your actual home” sort of exile... or a more metaphorical exile, it doesn’t really matter. Maybe you technically haven’t gone anywhere, but you feel distant, and maybe even homesick, for how things used to be, or even for who you used to be. Either way, I’m sure there are plenty folks here today that need to hear this promise from Jeremiah. The promise that declares that God has not left you. The promise that God, no matter your exile, is at work for your good. The promise that this new life, and even this new home, though it might not be what you expected, is still filled to the brim with hope. This is a promise for us too.

But what about our Israelites, does it all turn out okay for them? Do the promises of Jeremiah ever come true? Do they find that future filled with hope? For that answer we’ll have to turn to the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. These books appear in your bibles as two separate books, but they are actually one book, written by the same author, who tells the long history, over two centuries, of the Israelites return from exile. Many of Israelites eventually do head home, but they return in three different waves over quite a long span of time. This is how that first wave of return begins. Hear the Word of the Lord from Ezra 1:

**“In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, the Lord fulfilled the prophecy he had given through Jeremiah. He stirred the heart of Cyrus to put this proclamation in writing and to send it throughout his kingdom: “This is what King Cyrus of Persia says: “The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth. He has appointed me to build him a Temple at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Any of you who are his people may go to Jerusalem in Judah to rebuild this Temple of the Lord, the God of Israel, who lives in Jerusalem. And may**

**your God be with you! Wherever this Jewish remnant is found, let their neighbors contribute toward their expenses by giving them silver and gold, supplies for the journey, and livestock, as well as a voluntary offering for the Temple of God in Jerusalem.”- Ezra 1:1-4 (NLT)**

Jeremiah’s promise comes true alright, and in an incredible way! It’s the kind of promise that most refugees don’t ever dare dream of: go home, the king says. Even more, he tells them, “Go home, loaded with blessings. Go home, loaded with blessings, and rebuild your temple.” And about 50,000 of them do indeed travel home. After they return, Ezra tells us that the first thing they do is rebuild the altar, so that the proper worship of God can begin as soon as possible.

Now you’ll want to know that the restoration of this altar reaches back in history, not only to when the law was first given to Moses at Mount Sinai, but also to the first temple, when Solomon dedicated the altar in Jerusalem. In fact, the words of praise voiced in Ezra 3—“For the Lord is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel”—are the exact same words voiced almost a century beforehand at the dedication of Solomon’s temple in 2 Chronicles 5:13. It’s quite a beautiful way for these exiled folks to establish a line of continuity between their experience of return and their ancestors.

After rebuilding the altar, these exiles begin to supervise the rebuilding of the temple, beginning of course, with laying the foundation. Ezra 3:10-13 are some of the most poignant in all of Scripture, as they describe what it was like for the exiles to mark such an important moment. **“When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord, the priests in their vestments and with trumpets, and the Levites with cymbals, took their places to praise the Lord, as prescribed by David, king of Israel. With praise and thanksgiving, they sang to the Lord: “He is good; his love toward Israel endures forever.” And all the people gave a great shout of praise to the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid. But many of the older priests and Levites and family heads, who had seen the former temple, wept aloud when they saw the foundation of this temple being laid, while many others shouted for joy. No one could distinguish the sound of the shouts of joy from the sound of weeping, because the people made so much noise.”**

We see here a glittering festival, held among the ruins of the First Temple... with the priests arrayed in their vestments, trumpets and cymbals joyfully sounding, and as the builders lay the foundation, scores of people lift up songs of praise to God. Finally, finally their dream had come true; finally, their hopes were realized; finally, the promises that God made to them in the times of Jeremiah were being fulfilled.

But notice, that along with this rejoicing we hear another cry: a mournful cry from those who had been around long enough to have seen the First Temple. These folks were weeping for

the lostness of what once was, a grief for the pain of what life used to be like. In a moment of sheer humanity that cuts to the core of what it is to live in a world mixed with both joy and sorrow, Scripture records that the sound of the joyful shout *could not even be distinguished* from the sound of the people's weeping.

Ultimately, this IS a story of hopeful redemption, but it's a complicated redemption. It IS a story of return from exile, but it's a return marked with grief for some. It IS a story of rejoicing, but it's about a joy that is inextricably tied up with all the losses that came before.

But isn't it the same in our lives too? Making a new home, or returning to our former home, is always complicated by the reality that we are changing, and that life is changing all around us all the time. Think of the college student, who returns to their childhood home after living on their own all year long. The kid has grown up and so the rules have to change... the curfew they had back in high school no longer makes any sense, for example. It can feel disorienting to return home, because so much is different now.

We'll always be connected to where we used to call home, and to who we used to be... but we are also becoming, growing, and changing... and even more, we're integrating what we have been through into the narrative of our lives. This often produces a truly ambiguous sort of joy as we try and make sense of how to be present to our new life, often a life that we couldn't have imagined.

Friends, it's perfectly normal to long for the days before exile, or before the divorce, or the diagnosis, or before the kids left home, or before the faith deconstruction, or before our loved one's death... but here's the truth, no matter how much we might want to, we can't actually go back. We must move forward in hope. And so, when the new altar is built, and the new temple foundation is laid, we make room for both rejoicing and weeping. The sounds and feelings of which, might be indistinguishable in our own hearts and lives.

This is true in our personal lives and in our families, but it is also true for our church community here. We've come into a new season at First Pres after a fairly long exile that included a pastoral retirement, a global pandemic, numerous staff transitions, and an interim season that required this congregation to really think about where God was calling us next. And now that we've metaphorically returned from this exile, it is perfectly normal to feel the tension between what First Pres used to be like and what First Pres is now, to feel both loss for the days gone by and excitement for this new season in our church. But just like the Israelites, we are being called by God to step into our future with hope.

But here's the problem with hope; we misunderstand what it's really about a lot of the time. We tend to use hope and optimism interchangeably, or as synonyms. But this isn't

accurate; they're actually quite different. **Hope (an active virtue) is a conviction, even when life is uncertain, that things can and will be made better through action, while optimism (a passive virtue) is a more about a happy belief that everything will be OK.** Optimism says that things will turn out all right. Hope makes no such assumption but is a conviction that we can act to make things better in some way. It's about "having the will and finding the way." As a Christian virtue, hope requires courage to hold onto, not just a happy prediction. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks helps us get at this difference well, **"Optimism and hope are not the same. Optimism is the belief that the world is changing for the better; hope is the belief that, together, we can make the world better."**

Now as people of faith, we know that it's not just up to our efforts to make this world better. Rather we are to hold onto God's hope, trusting in what God has done and will do, in spite of all the evidence to the contrary that we find in our broken world. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann puts this beautifully: **"Hope in gospel faith is not just a vague feeling that things will work out, for it is evident that things will not just 'work out.' Rather, hope is the conviction, against a great deal of data, that God is tenacious and persistent in overcoming the deathliness of the world, that God intends joy and peace. Christians find compelling evidence, in the story of Jesus, that Jesus, with great persistence and great vulnerability, everywhere he went, turned the enmity of society toward a new possibility, turned the sadness of the world toward joy, introduced a new regime where the dead are raised, the lost are found, and the displaced are brought home again."**

Friends, this is precisely why we can return from 'exile' to a future filled with hope. God is indeed tenacious and persistent in working toward our good. In our church this means, we don't wear the rose-colored glasses of optimism and assume everything is always peachy. No, in this last year alone, we've had some tough moments. People we dearly love have moved away (some have even died), we've had to navigate a number of uncertain transitions, we've said "yes" to new things that have necessitated we said "no" to other things, some hard conversations have been had. I know that there are folks sitting here right now that might very well have a part of them that is grieving the loss of what came before, because, like those older and wiser Israelites, they remember the first temple, they remember 'how it used to be.' And that is okay.

Now, let me offer us a word of caution here. Though feelings of loss are quite normal and need to be processed, friends, we're not to stay in this place for too long or overly-identify with our loss over 'how things used to be.' Because, for one thing, we can't go back, and for another... if we get stuck there too long, we may very well miss out on all the rejoicing that God is inviting us into in this next season.

And here's the thing, there are so many folks here that are rejoicing today, because for them, God has finally fulfilled his promise to bring this church into a new season. Their throats are hoarse from shouting their praises to God... for how far First Pres has come, for the new life and energy in this place, and for the incredible ministry that goes on both inside and outside these beautiful walls. These folks are seeing the new foundation being laid and they are bursting at the seams with joy for all that God is doing here. Hopes are indeed being realized and it is so very good.

So, as we walk into our future with hope, we are being called to come together as a family of faith—leaning into all that joy—to commit to steward our many resources and to work toward this new 'home' that God is calling us to build here as a church. One of the ways we do that is by asking everyone who worships with us to prayerfully consider how they will support the mission and ministry of our church in the coming year. Our annual stewardship update letter will be mailed home this week encouraging you do just that. And that is because, everything we do at First Pres depends on the faithful giving of our congregation. What you put in the offering plate, the time you give volunteering in the nursery or singing in the choir, the commitments you make to serve as leaders... all of it comes together to support the ministry of our church. Just like the Israelites, we gather together, and we pool our resources so that we can figuratively lay the this new foundation and rebuild the house of the Lord here in Salt Lake.

And we do all of this knowing that God's church has for centuries held onto hope and will continue to hold onto hope, long into a future we cannot not see. Father Richard Rohr writes, **"Hope is the patient and trustful willingness to live without full closure, without resolution, and still be content and even happy because our satisfaction is now at another level, and our Source is beyond ourselves. We are able to trust that Christ will come again, just as Christ has come into our past, into our private dilemmas, and into our suffering world. Our Christian past then becomes our Christian prologue, and "Come, Lord Jesus" is not a cry of desperation but an assured shout of cosmic hope."** -Richard Rohr

Friends, whatever sort of exile or complicated return home you might be facing today, God goes with you. God is working for yours and for our collective good. You can trust that. You can hold onto hope. And so, as God's people have declared from the very beginning, we too declare today: the Lord is good, his steadfast love endures forever. Say that with me: **The Lord is good, his steadfast love endures forever.** Amen