

Celebrating Beginnings

Ezra 3:6-13

The ancient men wept, those who remembered the first Temple. As children they had run their hands over the stone walls, smooth, cool, monolithic. They had marvelled at the huge Bronze pillars soaring skyward. They had been captivated by the aromatic cedar wood and the glints of gold everywhere. It had been so beautiful, so magnificent. And now there was only a foundation where the Temple had once stood. Few as they were, how could they ever hope to build anything like it again?

I think we understand the way they felt. Just think of the wealth, the optimism it took for Port Gibson Presbyterians to construct this Sanctuary back in 1860 – they only had 160 members, and 60 of them were slaves, but they built this room to hold more than twice as many, with the tallest steeple in town, if you count the hand perched proudly on top. Would we even attempt something like this today?

Of course, we know that the Temple of God isn't a building anymore. Now, in the Person of the Holy Spirit, God lives within all those who trust in Him. All of us believers in Christ are the true Temple of God – that's why we can worship Him here in Port Gibson just as well as in Jerusalem or anywhere else in the world.

But our Temple, our congregation isn't what it used to be either, is it? I've seen the pictures of Mr. Lowrance's weekday Bible classes back in the 1950's – he had more kids coming every week than all of us put together on Sunday mornings. In the middle 1960's we had over 200 members – now we don't even have half that number.

And I've seen a lot of this change myself over the almost 20 years I've been here – that's hard to believe. In April of 1997, when I started preaching here, we had 168 members on the roll. Where I live, I was literally surrounded by church members – Miss Dorothy Gordon on one side, Miss Isabelle Person on the other, and Mr. Lindsay Disharoon across the street.

And of course for 17 years, I taught and served as Chaplain at Chamberlain-Hunt. On Sunday mornings the cadets would easily double our attendance, and many faculty families would get involved in the congregation and the community. So much has changed, so much is gone.

Yes, I think we can understand those ancient men who gathered on a bleak hilltop, a little band huddling against the winds that those broken stone walls should have blocked, gazing across the emptiness among the ruins, feeling so exposed, so bereft. We don't have to wonder why they wept.

So, why were so many others shouting with joy? They saw the same things the old men saw, but they were singing songs of praise. In fact, the joyful shouts were just as loud as the wails of lament. But why were some of the people so happy when all of them had such good reason to be sad? Were they in denial? Were they just nuts?

Well, even though they knew all the same history, those who shouted with joy didn't allow it to oppress them or depress them. Instead, they allowed their history to inspire them. Notice in verse 8 that they started their rebuilding project in the second month of the year – that was the same month that King Solomon had begun construction on the First Temple. And they got the wood they would use from Tyre and Sidon – the same place from which Solomon had purchased the wood to build the first

Temple. In other words, they knew that if something could be built, it could be rebuilt. They were not discouraged by the great deeds of the past – instead, they sought to emulate them.

We can learn the same things from our history, for we aren't the only ones who have faced tough times with limited resources. Think about those Presbyterians who took time out from carving a civilization out of the wilderness to build Oakland College. Or think about the next generation, who had been through a terrible war and the poverty and uncertainty of Reconstruction. They even went through a terrible epidemic of Yellow Fever, with over 3,000 people dying throughout the state. But they were determined to start a school for boys in these very buildings, and that's what they did.

So, what are the challenges that we face? What are the problems of the culture around us? Widespread abuse of alcohol and drugs – even prescription medications. Generational poverty. Failing schools – just this week we learned that 65% of all the students at Port Gibson High are reading five grade levels lower than they should.

And how many of these social ills actually stem from moral problems such as the collapse of the family structure that God has ordained? And how many of these social ills would continue at their current rate if more people turned to the Lord and started living according to His Will? And isn't the Church supposed to be in the business of calling people to repentance and faith?

So, I suppose we can do what those ancient men did, and keep on crying that things aren't what they used to be. Or will we be inspired by those who have gone before us and get busy doing what we can to build up the Body of Christ where we are?

So, in the face of so many pressing concerns, what should we do? Well, how did those returning exiles determine their priorities? Their civilization was literally in ruins, and everything was in urgent need of repair and improvement, from the fields and orchards and vineyards, to the houses they lived in, to the city walls that would protect them. Everything needed to be done at once.

But verses 8 and 9 make it clear that they were determined to follow their leaders. Because he was a descendant of the royal line of David, when Zerubbabel talked, people listened. And Jeshua was the High Priest, descended from Aaron, the brother of Moses. If anyone had a right to have influence over the people, these two guys did. And of course, verse 7 reminds us that Cyrus, King of Persia, the real political power in the area at the time, had also given his approval to the rebuilding project, and probably provided some funding as well.

In other words, the people of God didn't just charge off in all sorts of different directions. Instead, they allowed their leaders to determine their priorities. We already saw last week that they put the worship of God first on their agenda, even ahead of the most urgent tasks. In much the same way, in today's passage we see them following their leaders in putting top priority on the rebuilding of the Temple. They let their leaders focus their attention on the most important things.

This congregation has done much the same thing in recent years. In coming into the EPC you have carefully followed the prescribed procedures of the Presbytery of Mississippi, and the lead of the session. Everything has been done decently and in order.

But making such a change has also made a statement about our priorities. We have made a conscious decision to get back to basics, to take the Westminster Standards more seriously. But the

essence of our new denomination is also Evangelical, which means we are supposed to put evangelism, the proclamation of the gospel first. And as we look around again at the problems in our community, how can we doubt that evangelism does in fact need to be our top priority? Like the people in today's passage, don't we also need to get busy about building the Temple, the Body of Christ?

But how can this congregation spread the gospel in our particular context? Well, how did the people tackle such a huge building project in today's passage? They didn't just allow their leaders to help them focus their priorities. They also allowed their leaders to get them organized – that's what verses 8 and 9 make clear. The Levites followed the direction of their leaders, and in turn led the people working on the building project. In other words, they understood how good organization could make the most of limited resources. What a Presbyterian idea!

Yes, we know how powerful organization can be where it comes to projects around the church. After lots of discussion, planning and fundraising, we've just completed a parking lot project. And just last week, the deacons organized a workday around the church, and a lot of pruning and cleaning got done. Could a similar approach work where it comes to evangelism, to reaching the lost in our community? How might we go about organizing an effective outreach?

But how can we find hope and courage in the face of such a daunting task? Well, in today's passage the people of God didn't just allow their leaders to focus their priorities and to get them organized. They also knew the wisdom of celebrating each step of an admittedly unfinished journey. Verses 10 and 11 describe the celebration, which was rooted in tradition, modelled on the one that had taken place so many years earlier when Solomon's Temple was first completed. And so in today's passage, the trumpets were blown and the songs were sung, just as they as in that earlier celebration so long ago.

But wait – what was there to celebrate in today's passage? Even Solomon hadn't celebrated until his building project was completed, and all they had done was to lay a foundation. So, weren't they jumping the gun? Why take the trouble to celebrate what was just a beginning?

Well, don't we do this all the time in our personal lives? If you set a goal of weight loss, you rejoice every time the scale shows one pound less – and many brag about it on facebook, complete with pictures! If you set a goal of increased strength, you celebrate every extra pound you can lift – and brag about it to your buddies in the gym. If you have been injured or have had surgery or are recovering from a stroke, you celebrate every recovered ability, every inch of additional mobility – and all your friends rejoice with you.

And isn't that just as true of our spiritual lives? We all know that the moment of our conversion is only the beginning of a life-long journey of spiritual growth. But every time we surrender a new part of our lives to God, we should celebrate. Each time we overcome temptation and sin, we should praise the Lord, however inconsistent our efforts toward holiness may be. No, none of us are what we ought to be yet, but shouldn't we praise God that we aren't what we used to be?

And take our current project. We know that our parking lot project is only part of a larger effort to provide access to people with mobility issues. We know that making it possible for everyone to attend functions at our church is an important way of reaching out to the community. We know that

there's still a lot of work to do – not just building the ramp structure, but then in getting more people to come and worship God.

But that doesn't mean we shouldn't celebrate a good beginning. Acknowledging what has already been accomplished is an important way of encouraging ourselves to take the next step. If we don't stop every now and then to take stock of how far we have come in the present, we are likely to remain in the depression of those ancient men, dwelling on the glories of the past, and doubting if they could ever possibly be recreated.

But the most important reason that the people celebrated, even though they had only completed the foundations of the Temple, was because they knew that what they sang about in verse 11 is true: that the Lord is good and merciful. They knew that it was God Who had brought them back from exile in Babylon. They knew it was God Who had appointed their leaders who were pointing them in the right direction and getting them organized to accomplish great things. They knew that it was by God's grace that they had made a good beginning. And so they could celebrate as if the Temple had already been completed, because they were confident that it would be. They were confident that the God who had blessed them up to that point would keep on blessing them in the future.

And you know what? They were right. For God not only worked within His people to overcome all the obstacles in their path, to help them eventually complete that Second Temple. He also made the Second Temple even more glorious than the first, no matter how skeptical those older men may have been at the time. For it was to the Second Temple, not to the first, that the Son of God, the promised Messiah came. It was the Second Temple that ended up witnessing the great historical events to which every part of its architecture, every one of its ceremonies pointed – the perfect sacrifice of Christ that paid the sin debt of all His people, and the resurrection of Christ that opens the door to a new life of perfect fellowship with God.

The God Who accomplished all those things is the same God Who promises to be with us today, the same God Whose plan of salvation we are called to share with the world, the same God Who indwells the true Temple, all those who love and trust in the Lord Jesus. Do we have any less reason for confidence in Him? Do we have any less reason to shout and sing His praise?