From Babylon to Jerusalem

Ezra 2

Okay, sure, it’s great that all these people got to come back from Babylon to Jerusalem, but did the writer of this book really need to go into all this detail? I mean, he doesn’t just list all the family names – he even counts up all the horses, mules, camels and donkeys that carried them. So, wouldn’t it have been sufficient just to include verses 64 and 65, where the total number of the returning exiles is given, and then go on to chapter 3? After all, paper and ink were very expensive in the Ancient world, and books had to be copied by hand. Surely some editor should have stepped in.

Well, perhaps that’s what we impatient, present-and-future-focused Americans might think. But at the very least, the inclusion of all these names and numbers serves to underline the main point of this book – that the people of God really had been carried off into exile in Babylon, and that they really had returned. This was a real historical event that happened to real numbers of real people, whose family names or at least ancestral hometowns are written down for us.

But this list has another key point to make, one that I think members of historic congregations like ours intuitively understand – it is important to remember our ancestors in the faith and to commemorate their achievements. After all, the very first one of the Ten Commandments that deal with how we are to treat other human beings is this: honor your father and mother. By including so many details about their journey, the writer of this book was giving due respect to those exiles who returned.

And come to think of it, by going to Jerusalem these who were returning from exile were doing something very similar to what our ancestors in the faith did when the first Presbyterian congregations were established in Southwest Mississippi – they left comfort and civilization, along with many of their family and friends, and struck out into a place none of them had ever been before, a place where life would be hard and primitive and dangerous. But they trusted God, and they were determined to worship Him in their new home, no matter what.

I think about John Bolls, one of the first ruling elders in this territory, who continued to hold Protestant prayer meetings in defiance of Spanish threats. Or what about those first three Presbyterian missionaries who came to the Natchez District – James Hall, James Bowman, and William Montgomery? They left their own congregations in the Carolinas, and traveled on horseback down the Natchez Trace, to what was then a drought-stricken wilderness, to spend a year riding a circuit and gathering the faithful. And then there was the Rev. Joseph Bullen who moved to Jefferson County, organizing the very first Presbyterian congregation in the Southwest in 1804. He later organized the Bayou Pierre Presbyterian Church out at Point Lookout around 1807.

And what about Rev. Zebulon Butler, scion of a prominent Pennsylvania family, graduate of Princeton college and Princeton seminary? His father was wealthy and his grandfather had been a Colonel in General Washington’s army. He left the comfort and ease of civilization to come to Vicksburg and then to Port Gibson to preach the gospel. And there was Elder H.N. Spencer, who oversaw the construction of this building and gave so generously to make it possible. Shouldn’t we remember their names and tell their stories?

Or course we should, but there’s a lot more we can learn from today’s passage. For did you notice the order in which all these people are listed? The first part of the passage, verses 3 through 25, tells us about those whom we would call the laity, the folks who would live throughout the Judean countryside and engage in primarily agricultural pursuits. It’s not until all those folks are listed and counted that our chronicler gets to the priests and the Levites and the rest of those who would serve in the Temple. In other words, it’s the laity, not the clergy, that come first.

And again, I think we Evangelical Presbyterians understand this. One of the things I like best about the structure and government of our denomination is that we invite two ruling elders to Presbytery and General Assembly for every teaching elder who can come. And this extends to most of our committees and commissions as well. In fact, this afternoon, I’m travelling to Wiggins to serve on an installation commission, and a ruling elder is going to give the charge to the pastor!

But aside from our polity, both ruling and teaching elders need to take this point to heart – the church isn’t for the leaders. Instead, the leaders are for the church. Now, in the Old Testament times this was obvious, for as we can see from today’s passage, the primary job of religious leaders was to make sure that all the Temple rituals were done properly. The priests, of course, were responsible for offering the animal sacrifices so that the sins of the people might be forgiven. But the Levites and the singers and the porters and the Nethinim and the servants of Solomon all had their various parts to play, either assisting with the Temple ritual, or guarding the gates or keeping things clean and in good repair. All these people were doubtless looking forward to the Temple being rebuilt so that they could resume the duties that their ancestors had performed so many years earlier.

Now, I know. We don’t have a Temple anymore. But the example of all these priests, Levites, and others who worked there so long ago should help us remember that the essence of Christian leadership is service. Like them, our highest priority must be the building up of the Temple, which is no longer a building, but today is made up of the people of God, all those who love and trust Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Just as the lay people come first in today’s passage, so it is the needs of the people that must come first in the minds of our Teaching Elders, our Ruling Elders, and our Deacons. We must be busy, as Paul says in Ephesians 4, about equipping the saints for the work of ministry – that’s how the leaders of the Church help build up the body of Christ today.

And that’s the next thing we can learn from this passage – for if the lay people come first on God’s list, it’s also true that they have lots of important work to do. The returning exiles didn’t sit back and expect the priests to do all the work of rebuilding the Temple – no, they were prepared to roll up their sleeves and get involved. And since the first part of any building project is arranging the financing, that was the first thing they did, giving a tremendous amount of gold and silver, even by today’s standards: the money listed in verse 69 comes to around 14,300 ounces of gold and 80,000 ounces of silver. At today’s prices, that’s $17.45 million dollars in gold and $1.4 million dollars in silver. Now, that’s a lot of money, but the most important thing we need to know about these gifts is also found in verse 69 – everyone gave after, which means according to their ability. In other words, they all gave what they could.

And it would be very easy at this point for this sermon to slide into a generic appeal for more financial support for the church and its ministries, for we all do need to consider how we can use the funds God has entrusted to us for His glory and the advancement of His kingdom. But that’s just the problem. The Temple of God isn’t a building anymore – it’s us, the believers, the body of Christ. Thus, the Church doesn’t just need funds in order to keep a building in repair and provide staff and facilities for worship. Since the Church is made up of all of us, the Church needs all the things that we need – encouragement as well as challenge, preparation as well as opportunities for service, comfort and healing, as well as holiness and purity. And let’s face it – meeting most of the needs of the Church will cost us a lot more in time than in money.

In other words, what we give must be determined by what the Church needs. And what the Church needs will in turn depend a lot on what the Church is called to do, where it is called to go. So, that naturally prompts the next question: what is God calling us to do today? Well, the people of God had no confusion about that in Ezra chapter 2, did they? The people of God had been carried off into Babylon, and in this chapter, they were returning to Jerusalem. So much is clear, but what does that mean for us? How does their calling make ours more clear?

Well, think about what it meant for them to leave Babylon. In those days, Babylon wasn’t just the capital city of the empire that had conquered the Jews. Under Nebuchadnezzar, it was the center of world civilization, of learning, of sophistication, of wealth, of power. Babylon, in short, represented everything that this world values, so I suppose it shouldn’t be so strange that many of God’s people chose to remain there instead of making the long, hard trip back to Jerusalem.

For what would the people of God find upon their return to Judea? Nothing that the world cared about at all. They would find no power, and not even any security – the walls of Jerusalem would remain in ruins for years, providing no protection from bandits or marauders. How about wealth? Well, there was some good farmland and pastureland in the surrounding areas, but it would take years of hard work to redevelop – it certainly wouldn’t be an easy life. What about sophistication? Gimme a break – even before Jerusalem was destroyed, most of the people in the great empires of the world – the Hittities to the north, the Egyptians to the south, and the Assyrians, Babylonians and Persians to the east, considered the Jews to be strictly hicks from the sticks.

So, why would any of the people named in this passage want to go back to Jerusalem? It wasn’t for worldly gain – it was because God had told their ancestors that was the place He would dwell with His people. That was the place He wanted His Temple to be built. That was the place He wanted to be worshipped. So, even though there wasn’t really very much in it for themselves, they stepped out on faith, seeking to do what God wanted them to do, whether it made much sense in the eyes of the world or not.

In that way, all these people named and counted in Ezra chapter 2 belong in that great company of the faithful that is described in Hebrews chapter 11, part of which we read responsively this morning. These who returned from exile were also strangers and pilgrims on the earth. They knew they were just beginning a project that would take years, perhaps even generations to complete. But they weren’t in it for the short run, for the easy profits. They stepped out on faith, trusting God to take care of the results.

And that’s the choice, that’s the challenge for each of us today, isn’t it? Oh, we can stay in Babylon. We can insist on doing what makes sense according to the world. We can focus our lives on gaining wealth and power, comfort and control.

Or will we set out for Jerusalem? Will we devote ourselves to the building of the Temple? Will the leaders of the Church give of ourselves, all that we are, and all that we have, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry? Will all of us devote all that we are and all that we have for glory of God and the expansion of His Kingdom? Will we leave this world and head for higher ground?