

## The Good Hand of our God

Ezra 8:1-20

So, what's with all these names? Well, as we saw back in chapter 2, such a list is a reassuring reminder that when we open the Book of Ezra, we are dealing with history. Ezra and all the rest of these names belonged to real people, living in a real place over a real span of time. And they all packed up and took a real journey to another real place that our real God wanted them to go.

Why is that important? Because it shows that the Bible isn't a book of fairy tales. It isn't a jumble of ancient myths and legends. It isn't just a collection of ancient men's ramblings about what they thought God must be like. No, it's a record of what the True God said to real people and what the True God did for and with real people, people just like us. It is at least in part because of such things like this list of names that we can believe in a God Who is still active in history, almost 2500 years after these people travelled to Jerusalem.

But even if we believe that God is real, and even if we believe that God still works through people to accomplish His will, it's so easy for us to imagine that He either can't or won't use us, right? I mean, look at how few we are in this congregation. Look at how few churches we have scattered around our Presbytery – what could we possibly do to make a difference in the Kingdom of God?

Well, believe it or not, that's another reason that this list of names can be helpful. For if we compare this list to the one found in chapter two, the most obvious difference is its length. If you crunch the numbers, and assume that there were lots of women and children not expressly mentioned, chapter two tells us that a little over 40,000 people returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple – oh, and they brought along some 7,000 servants as well. That all happened 80 years before the events of today's passage.

In contrast, this group, the one Ezra assembled was much smaller. If you add up all the names in today's passage, you still only get to about 5,000, and that's only if you again add lots of women and children who aren't mentioned. That's not many people – even Claiborne County has a greater population than that. But it was these few folks who helped jumpstart the great revival we'll read about in the next few chapters.

And that should be good news for us today, for the fact is that God doesn't need large numbers of people to accomplish His will. Our church planters may be working in big cities, but they all started with groups small enough to fit in their living rooms – Christian Cryder's group in Austin is still that size. And God has often chosen to start revivals with just a few people. One of the sparks that set the Second Great Awakening ablaze was kindled by four college students praying for their classmates in a dorm room. The great revivals of the 1850's and 1860's began with six people at a prayer meeting in New York City – oh, and in each case there weren't any preachers involved, at least at first. So, this list of names reminds us that God can do great things with just a few people, if they'll trust Him and step out in faith.

Ah, but that's just the problem, isn't it? It's easy to trust God in the abstract. It's easy to trust God in here on a Sunday morning, surrounded by people who agree with us. But what about out there, in the everyday world? After all, whenever we look at the news, the world is a scary place. We see lots of Americans who scoff at the notion that God created the world, lots of people who laugh at the very

idea that a man who lived some 2000 years ago could possibly be God. And they certainly don't think that Jesus, or any other white male dead or living for that matter, should have anything to say about how anyone should conduct our lives in this multicultural, technological, oh-so-sophisticated world. How can we possibly reach people like these?

And look at the folks living around us here in Southwest Mississippi. They might embrace traditional morality in theory, but so many reject it in fact. How can we help people who think personal pleasure is much more important than God, who find every excuse under the sun to avoid public worship, or private prayer for that matter? What can any of us do to break into the generations-long cycle of ignorance, vice, and poverty? How can we possibly help those who are only looking for handouts so they can buy booze or street drugs?

Sure, there are the bold pioneers who bring the gospel to the unchurched or de-churched like Christian Cryder is doing in Austin or Ben and Jenny Cunningham are doing in New Orleans. There are the church planters who parachute into an area and start building a church from scratch like Brett Becker is doing in New Braunfels, Texas. There are folks who choose to leave comfortable homes and careers to travel to Lebanon and minister to Syrian refugees.

It was the same sort of brave people who had struck out for Jerusalem 80 years before the events of today's passage, bold messengers carrying the gospel into a land where the people were outright pagans at worst or heretics at best, people who mixed the worship of the One True God with all sorts of evil, selfish superstitions. It was brave religious pioneers of the previous generation who had journeyed to a city that had been totally destroyed and started to build a place of worship, refusing to compromise their religious convictions.

Well, maybe that's not exactly how you see yourself. Even though you are trusting in Jesus, maybe you're not the bold, trail-blazing type – I know I'm not. Well, if that's the case, today's passage is very good news for you. For remember, Ezra wasn't asking the little group he assembled to be pioneers. He wasn't asking them to build a Temple – that had already been done years before. Moreover, he wasn't even asking them to go to a place where they didn't know anyone – if you compare this list with the one in chapter 2, you find that most of these people already had cousins in Jerusalem.

But if Ezra wasn't asking them to strike off into uncharted territory, he was still asking them to be agents of change, to participate in a spiritual renewal that they all needed. If Ezra wasn't asking his little band to build a Temple, he was asking them to be part of God's plan to purify its worship, and to call people to more consistent repentance, to deeper faith.

And that's the same sort of ministry to which God calls all of us today. You see, God doesn't just need spiritual pioneers – He also needs spiritual homesteaders. God doesn't just need evangelists to blaze trails among unreached people groups – God also needs people who deepen and strengthen the work of evangelists, people who consolidate their spiritual gains.

But in order to participate in such a ministry of refreshing and renewal, we first need to take a look in the mirror, don't we? For if we find great comfort in today's passage, we also find some challenges, challenges that come even from Ezra's small band of timid souls.

For we can't help but notice all the names of men on Ezra's list – why no women? You see, in those days, men were considered the heads of their households. By listing the men's names, Ezra was

thus really listing family groups – that’s why we can assume that there were lots of women and children who came along with them.

Now, looking at such a selective list it would be easy to pity these ancient folks, or even condemn them for their sexist, patriarchal ways. But instead, let’s look again at the obvious fact found in this list: Ezra had lots of men who were interested in following the Lord’s leading. And these men were willing to lead their families in doing the Lord’s work.

And that forms quite a contrast to most churches today, doesn’t it? Here are the facts: in the typical American congregation, regardless of race or denomination, about 60% of the worshippers on any given Sunday will be women. And this problem is nothing new. When this Sanctuary was built in 1860, of the 100 white members of the church, only 20 were men. And even earlier than that, when the Presbyterian church was being built in Rodney in 1830, a man joked that having a church there would be a good thing, because it would give the women and children something to do while the men were at the racetrack. And the man who made that crack was the son of a Presbyterian ruling elder!

So, yes, it’s easy for us to blast the wider world for its increasingly strange ideas about sexuality and gender roles. But if our congregation isn’t having the impact in the world that we would like for it to have, if we aren’t growing in grace, deepening our knowledge of the Scriptures and spending more time in prayer, maybe it’s us men who need to take stock of our own spiritual leadership. If we want our families, our congregation, and our community to receive more of God’s blessings, maybe some of us men need to step out in faith and take the lead. Maybe we need to call our families to prayer and to the reading of Scripture in the home. Maybe we need to set an example in public worship and in service outside the home. God chose to use the faithful men whose names are listed in today’s passage to bring revival among His people – could He choose to use us as well?

But there’s one more challenge we find in today’s passage, and this one applies to the women as well as the men. For did you notice that Ezra had a much harder time attracting the Levites and the Nethinim to his group than he did attracting priestly families? Priests, after all, got to do the most important things in the Temple – they were the ones who offered the sacrifices and who prayed for the people. On the contrary, the Levites were strictly supporting actors, assigned to such duties as guarding the gates and singing in the Temple choir. And we’re not exactly sure what the Nethinim did – they acted as some sort of servants in the Temple, apparently working under the direction of the Levites.

In other words, it was a whole lot easier for Ezra to round up those who considered themselves leaders than those who would end up being followers. It was a whole lot easier to cast the starring roles in the religious drama of the Temple than to assemble the supporting players and those who would work behind the scenes.

Does any of that sound familiar? Sure, everyone likes to stand in the limelight, to get the credit for the good things we do. But are we equally interested in furthering other people’s plans so that God can get the glory? – that is, after all, what worship is supposed to be all about, glorifying God.

Yes, we all love to lead, to have others adopt our ideas. But how many of us are happy to let others lead, to spend just as much energy helping others with their projects, their ministries? That’s one of the most obvious ways we can express our love for others, after all.

In short, are we willing to play supporting roles? Or, in contrast, do we ever catch ourselves begrudging the leadership of others, withholding our support from them? Do we withdraw our help from those who don't do things the way we think they should? And if so, are we independent-minded Americans letting our desire for status get in the way of our service to God and to others? Are we giving ourselves over to what amounts to the sin of pride? And if we are, can we really follow the One Who came not to be served, but to serve, giving His life a ransom for us?

For it is that great work, the ministry of God, that is the best news in this passage, and really its main point. Now, we've already seen that God can use us, no matter how few we are, and no matter how timid our hearts may be. But this passage also reminds us once again that God is the One Who gathers His people, even hesitant, imperfect people like us, for service and worship. In the last verse of chapter 7, Ezra gives all the credit to the Lord His God Whose hand was upon him for being able to gather the group that would travel to Jerusalem. And in chapter 8 verse 18 he says the same thing – the Levites and Nethinim also came along because “the good hand of our God” was upon them.

So yes, we know we need to get busy in order for the Church to grow. We know we need to jettison our pride and work together to encourage more people to worship God and to glorify Christ. But the good news is that Christ is even more active in gathering His people than we are. The good news is that Jesus didn't just die for us and then leave us to do all the work of evangelism ourselves. No, He has sent His Holy Spirit to work within our hearts, motivating even timid, hesitant souls like us for mission. And He has sent that same Spirit to bring conviction and repentance not only to proud people like us, but to those who need to repent for the first time, to encourage all of us to turn from our sin and trust Jesus to be both our Lord and their Savior.

So let us pray that the good hand of our God would be upon us as well. Let us pray that God would remove any pride that prevents us from working together. And then, no matter how few, no matter how timid, no matter how hesitant we may be, let us pursue the ministry to which Christ has called us, relying on the power of His Spirit.