

10.17.21

Rebuilding the House of the Lord

Ezra 3.8-13

Douglas Scalise, Brewster Baptist Church

Today is a significant day in the life of Brewster Baptist Church. It was 20 years ago this week, that we moved into the expanded facilities that we've been enjoying and utilizing for the last two decades. For those of you who have come to BBC since then, all you have known is our current facility. Those of us who have been here for more than 20 years, can remember the work, prayer, sacrifice, generous giving, and dedication that made it possible for us to undertake the largest project in the almost 200-year history of the church. When I preached at the dedication of our expanded church building on October 21, 2001, my scripture was from Ezra chapter 3. Interestingly, as we are on our 66-week journey through the Bible, the book of the Bible we're in this week is also Ezra and I'm going to preach on the same passage I did then, but, of course, the message is different.

In Ezra 3 the exiles who had been living as captives in Babylon for years have finally been given permission to return to the land of Judah and to Jerusalem to begin the work of rebuilding their faith community and the house of the Lord - the altar and the temple, as well as the walls of Jerusalem. Listen to **Ezra 3.8-13**.

8 In the second year after their arrival at the house of God at Jerusalem, in the second month, Zerubbabel zuhr-ruhb'uh-bl) son of Shealtiel (shee-al'tee-el) and Jeshua (jesh'oō-uh) son of Jozadak (joh'zuh-dak) **made a beginning**, together with the rest of their people, the priests and the Levites and **all who had come to Jerusalem from the captivity**. They appointed the Levites, from twenty years old and upward, to have the oversight of the work on **the house of the LORD**. **9** And Jeshua with his sons and his kin, and Kadmiel (kad'mee-el) and his sons, Binnui (bin'nōō-ī) and Hodaviah (hahd-uh-vī'uh) along with the sons of Henadad (hen'uh-dad), the Levites, their sons and kin, together took charge of the workers in **the house of God**.

10 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; **11 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**. **12 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, 13 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.”**

I think this is one of the more poignant and emotional scenes in the entire Bible. Imagine being one of those individuals who had experienced your country being invaded and your city being under siege. Suffering from a lack of food, seeing many people you knew die or killed, and being taken away as a captive to a foreign land, your faith shaken to the core because the place you believed God lived and dwelt on earth that was at the center of your community’s religious and spiritual life had been ransacked and then destroyed. This is what led the psalmist to ask in **Psalm 137:4-6**, *“How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land? If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither! Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy.”*

Now you and the rest of the survivors are being allowed to return home to what remains of your former community. There is much rebuilding that needs to be done as there always is in the aftermath of war and violence. Have you ever been part of a rebuilding or renovation project on a house or other structure? If so, what was that process like for you? How would you describe it? Some of us have done projects like these at our own home or the home of a family member or friend, or as a part of our work, on mission work trips, or even at 1076 Millstone Road where the Greemore family lives. It is hard work rebuilding and it takes **patience, perseverance, teamwork, and a vision** of what you it will look like when the rebuilding work is completed.

All these qualities would be needed by the people who returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the house of the Lord in the face of opposition and obstacles - **patience, perseverance, teamwork, and a vision of a renewed community of faith** with a new

temple at the center. **We need these same qualities to rebuild the house of the Lord that is BBC in the years to come.**

In Ezra 3, there are two distinct groups and two very different responses to rebuilding the house of the Lord. The younger people who had never lived there and had just heard stories from their elders are totally psyched that they will have a place and a community with which to worship and they're shouting and praising the Lord with all their might and there are all kinds of brass instruments playing including trumpets and cymbals – it is rocking! ***“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,”*** The elders among the people who could remember what Solomon's temple looked like in all its glory, looked at the smaller less impressive structure that would be the Second Temple and they wept thinking about how wonderful the Temple had been and all the people who had been there that they had worshiped with who were now gone, and they were weeping as the others were shouting with praise and it was hard to distinguish one from the other.

I confess to you, that since the winter of 2020 I have often felt like those priests and older people in Ezra. Like them, we have experienced many losses, changes, and the disruption of routines and life as we knew it. I found myself looking back fairly often and reminiscing about many wonderful people, dozens and dozens, indeed hundreds of them, that I knew at BBC who are no longer here. With the changes brought about by the pandemic, I have also missed seeing people in person for months at a time in 2020 and 2021. I've thought about the people who are homebound and alone and who miss seeing and being with others here at church and who at times may feel isolated from the larger church. I have shared with Joe and Shelby Greemore that I regretted that since they came during a pandemic that they didn't get to see BBC when we were rolling, and the church was full, and we had ministries and groups going almost seven days a week. The pandemic has also been a factor in many people moving away from Cape Cod to be closer to family and that trend is continuing and that is also sad and another loss for me personally and for the church as wonderful people who have made significant contributions depart to continue their lives elsewhere.

Meanwhile there are public health, social, political, economic, justice, and environmental issues that are all incredibly stressful. There is an epidemic of burn out, resignations, anxiety, and stress that is leading to all kinds of mental health issues and challenges. I was getting kind of worn down by all of it as the calendar turned to September and I'm not the only one. One of the top five most read articles in today's Boston Globe is about how impossible it is to find a therapist.

And then Jill's parents came to visit us the last weekend of September, and we went to many places on the mid to outer Cape. One of the places we stopped was Fort Hill in Eastham which has such a beautiful view. Driving toward the parking lot I was struck by what I saw as we approached the last house before the parking lot. As we were leaving, I stopped the car and got out and took a picture. Here it is.



***Fort Hill in Eastham**

Looking at this scene, I had an epiphany. God spoke to me through what I saw. There are three significant things in the photo. What God said to me was, *“You’re spending too much time **looking at the tree that has fallen. Stop looking at it.**”* The tree that has fallen to me is the church and life as we have known it for many years which is now gone. It is people who have died, have moved away, or have left the church. I have been grieving the loss of people and the church that was for many years, just as I’m sure the family grieved the loss of the large, stately tree on their front yard. I also understand that leaders who always want to look back or go back will never move their church or organization forward.

I felt God telling me to *“**Start looking at the other things you see.**”* I saw **the house**, and the house to me represents all I have to be grateful for, just as the family who lives there can be incredibly grateful that when the tree fell it dropped perfectly in their yard and left their home completely intact rather than destroyed. The house to me is everyone who is still a part of BBC, it’s all of you, our people, our spiritual gifts, our resources, our facility – all that God has given us to be a blessing to others. Thank you to all of you who are and continue to be a part of BBC and who love, grow, and share with us and so many others.

The third thing in the photo of course is **the young tree** that has been planted right where the old tree was uprooted. This is a clear and bold statement about the importance of the future and continuing to look ahead and to build both in the present and for the future generations who will follow. The people who will benefit the most from the planting of the new tree, likely haven’t even been born yet.

Seeing this image, truly changed my spirit, perspective, and my attitude. In the weeks since, I feel I’ve taken a more positive, proactive approach and **I’m not focusing so much on what has been lost, but on what is possible and what may be done.** Just like the people of God needed to rebuild the house of the Lord and rebuild their community of faith after a time of great disruption and change, so do we. It will take patience, perseverance, teamwork, and a vision of a renewed community of faith that will require innovation and creativity. I don’t know exactly what it will all look like, but I know we need to be long term thinkers in a short-term world. I know we need to give

more to the world than we take. To focus on what we can control, not on what we can't and on who we have, not who we've lost.

Brian Morykon, Director of Communications, for Renovare, a spiritual formation ministry wrote recently, *“As with any time of cultural shaking and shifting, there will be losses to grieve, old ways of doing things that we miss. **There is also the potential to recenter, rebuild, and refocus on what matters most—on loving Jesus and each other well.** May it be so with us in this time.”*

Loving Jesus and each other well is what BBC and being a Christian is all about. I shared the following story on Facebook this weekend, so some of you have already heard it. This past Friday I was driving home from church around 2:20 pm on Route 137. As I neared where Tubman Road comes into 137 from the right, I saw a school bus approach the intersection and I hoped the driver in front of me would move a little faster so we wouldn't get stuck behind the bus, but the driver seemed to slow a bit and the bus pulled out in front of us. I expressed my frustration out loud in my car because I knew I'd be stopping all the time for the next two miles. I put on Ocean 104.7 just as Dave Read was mentioning that Rod Stewart was 76 years old. I smiled thinking how popular he was when I was a senior in high school and recalled one classmate in Mr. Young's English class who loved Rod Stewart. I'm sorry her name escapes me now.

The Rod Stewart song that started playing was his rendition of Van Morrison's song, *“Have I Told You Lately that I Love You?”* Originally written as a prayer, the lyrics say in part, “Have I told you lately that I love you
Have I told you there's no one else above you
You fill my heart with gladness
Take away all my sadness
Ease my troubles, that's what you do
For the morning sun and all it's glory
Greets the day with hope and comfort, too
You fill my life with laughter
And somehow, you make it better
Ease my troubles, that's what you do
There's a love that's divine

And it's yours and it's mine
 Like the sun
 And at the end of the day
 We should give thanks and pray
 To the one, to the one."

As I was listening to these words, I was watching children from one of Brewster's elementary schools, run off the bus when it reached their stop. Some stops had just one child, others had a small group with multiple parents. My emotions swung from frustration at being "stuck behind the bus," to tears welling up in my eyes watching all these **reunions of love** every time the bus stopped. Two in particular moved me. There was a mom and a younger boy, apparently not yet in school, standing with a dog. As soon as the bus stopped, the dog started wagging its tail. As a boy in a Red Sox hat, a red shirt and blue jeans emerged from the bus the dog started jumping up on its hind legs and wagging its tail with even greater excitement and the boy was enveloped with love as soon as he got close enough. Then there was a stop where only two girls got off. Their skin colors were of different hues. They got off the bus and were talking and smiling as friends do and as I passed their little road they were walking away with ease and comfort, clearly comfortable in and enjoying each other's companionship. And I had tears in my eyes.

Have you told anyone lately, that you love them? People need to hear it a lot. Twenty years after we rebuilt the house of the Lord that is Brewster Baptist Church, once again, "***We have the potential to recenter, rebuild, and refocus on what matters most—on loving Jesus and each other well. May it be so with us in this time.***"

A Prayer That We May Know God by Bryan Jeffrey Leech

God of Wisdom, "the more we know of you the more we realize the need to know more. We desire to know you and to know you well. We long to enter into intimacy with you, so that instead of merely knowing facts about you, we may move from being your servants to becoming your friends.

As we progress in our quest of you, may we also face honestly those subtle temptations that keep us from approaching you with humility and openness.

Help us, Lord, to take time to be quiet, so that in the stillness we may hear those things which are never shouted, but which are whispered to those who take time to listen. Help us to be childlike but never immature; that we may hang upon your every word, until our thinking is renewed-and, without knowing it, we experience the mind of Christ. Amen.”

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. Have you ever been part of a rebuilding or renovation project on a house or other structure? If so, what was that process like for you? How would you describe it?
2. After a period of great disruption and change, how do you think the exiles felt when they were given permission to return to Jerusalem to rebuild their community, the altar, the temple, and the walls of Jerusalem?
3. There was significant opposition to the rebuilding efforts and there were periods of stopping and beginning again. How do you respond when you face obstacles, setbacks, and challenges to what you believe God is calling you to do or who God is calling you to be?
4. Why is where we place our focus so important in life? For example, focusing on who or what we have, and not on who or what we've lost. It's not that you forget those who have gone before us or been part of your life, but how do you live faithfully in the present?
5. 20 years ago, at BBC we dealt with the disruption that followed the 9/11 attacks and the changes that came with entering our newly expanded facility. In the wake of the disruption brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic and many other larger issues, how can you help to “rebuild the house of the Lord” that is BBC both at the physical facility, online, and in our small groups and ministries as we move forward?
6. Why is being part of a faith community and being connected to something larger than yourself important for you and for all of us?