A Necessary Calling

TEXT: Ezra 1:1-7

Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on June 15, 2025

If I preached from the lectionary—that three-year cycle of Bible readings that are a guide for UMC worship and preaching but are mandated in some other Christian traditions—you would never hear a sermon from the book of Ezra. Not a single verse is ever suggested across the three-year cycle.

There is one verse included from Nehemiah, which is part of the same scroll as the book of Ezra, and in late Medieval Bibles, the two books were called First and Second Ezra, with nothing named for Nehemiah at all. It's believed that Ezra wrote them both. As a result of all that, both the book and the man named Ezra are minor characters to Christians, if they are known at all. Ezra is recognized as a Saint in both Catholic and Orthodox traditions, but that wasn't enough to get him into the lectionary.

It therefore comes as a surprise to many Christians that Ezra is a huge deal in Judaism. To understand that we need to revisit the largest faith crisis in the ancient history of Judaism, the conquest of Jerusalem by the Babylonian empire and the subsequent capture and exile of all but the poorest classes of manual laborers in the Kingdom of Judah in the 6th century BCE.

Remember the overall timeline of Israelite governance after the Exodus with Moses and the entry into the Promised Land of Canaan. When we visited with the prophet Samuel a few weeks ago, the Israelites lived in the land as a loose federation of tribes, coming together only for common defense when under threat, at which time the tribes united under charismatic military leaders called Judges.

By the time Samuel was an adult, there had been enough contact with surrounding nations that the people decided they wanted a king like other countries had. That's a whole sermon in itself, as both God and Samuel thought having a king was a terrible and dangerous idea and said so. But the people insisted and although God told them they would regret it—and they did almost immediately—God had Samuel anoint a king, beginning a period called the United Kingdom in Israel. Saul was the first king, then king David, and the last king of the United Kingdom was David's son, Solomon, who built the first temple in Jerusalem.

On Solomon's death, there's another sermon-worthy squabble between Solomon's sons over succession to the throne; and the United Kingdom became the Divided Kingdom as a result: One son became king of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, with Samaria as its capital, and the other son became king of the smaller southern Kingdom of Judah.

When we talked about Jonah, we looked at the Assyrian Empire, which had the largest city and largest military in the world at the time; and, through both forced exile and assimilation, Assyria wiped out the northern Kingdom of Israel, where ten of Israel's twelve tribes lived. They tried to take the southern Kingdom of Judah also, but failed.

A century later, Babylon had become ascendant as a world power and put an end to the Assyrian Empire. And then it was the Babylonian Empire that finally was successful in conquering the southern Kingdom of Judah in the sixth century BCE.

It was a brutal and years-long campaign and siege; and when Babylon finally breached Jerusalem, they burned it to the ground, destroyed the temple, took the physical treasures of the Temple and the human treasures of Judah to Babylon as exiles.

One of those exiles was the prophet Ezekiel, who was marched, quite literally, through valleys of the corpses and bones of his countrymen, giving some added context to his vision of the Valley of Dry Bones that we read in worship last week. It wouldn't surprise me if his vision wasn't a manifestation of PTSD.

The Assyrian Empire had been known for its cruelty. Although the siege of Jerusalem was horrific, the exiles, once in Babylon, were given a common area by the River Chebar to live; and apart from generally being captive there, were allowed to live and work as they wanted, with some even entering into royal service. The stories from the book of Daniel are from this period.

Rather than wanton cruelty, the hallmark of the Babylonian Empire was general incompetence and corruption. The famous "writing on the wall" in the book of Daniel was a warning from God that the days of the empire were numbered as a result, but it fell on deaf ears.

As the Babylonian kings were focused on enjoying the good life for themselves, and basically ignoring their responsibilities to their people, yet another empire was taking advantage of their inattention, even to the point of capturing land within sight of the capital, which the Babylonian king didn't notice because he was away at his summer palace. That new empire was the Persian Empire, under the leadership of its first king, Cyrus the Great.

Cyrus ultimately took the capital in Babylon, but without bloodshed. When Cyrus came knocking at the gates, the Babylonian king was still off at his summer palace and the people basically opened the gates and said, "Please, come right in—we can't stand our guy." And thus, Babylon fell to Persia.

A year later, in 539 BCE, Cyrus issued a decree allowing the Israelite captives to return home to rebuild both the temple and the walls in Jerusalem; and that rebuilding is what we learn about in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. The priest Ezra, a descendant of the last high priest of the temple Solomon had built and Babylon destroyed, led the effort to rebuild the temple and Nehemiah led the effort to rebuild the city walls. That decree is quoted in the passage that Neil read from the opening paragraphs of the book of Ezra.

What's notable for our purposes in that opening, is that in the decree, Cyrus says that he has been called by God to do this. Cyrus was not a Jew, but he bears the title of God's anointed for this action; and "anointed one" in Hebrew is Meshiach—or, in English, Messiah.

But, while God's calling needed to begin with Cyrus to allow for the return and rebuilding, it doesn't end with him. since temples and cities don't rebuild themselves. The passage tells us that, in response to the decree, all kinds of people volunteered to go do the work—"every one whose spirit God had stirred to go up to rebuild the house of the Lord, which is in Jerusalem." And off they went.

But that first wave of folks only got as far as laying the foundation for the new temple before running into opposition. A conflict around building a place of worship. Imagine that! Part of that conflict came from the descendants of the ten tribes from the northern Kingdom of Israel who had not been taken into exile but had remained and intermarried with the conquering Assyrians.

They were happy about the return of their kin from the south and, perhaps dreaming of a united kingdom once again, were excited for the rebuilding of Jerusalem. So excited, in fact, that they asked to help with the effort. They were rebuffed with the all-too-common prejudice of being called mixed blood and a version of the "You haven't suffered what we suffered, so no." That was yet another brick in the invisible wall of hatred between Jews and Samaritans that existed in Jesus' day and well beyond.

The problems in rebuilding Jerusalem, lasted roughly 100 years; and it was finally the Persian king Darius who resolved the disputes by pulling out the old decree of Cyrus—Persia's first and greatest king—as a reminder that the rebuilding was ordered. And since Persia was still in charge of the region, work could finally proceed.

Two decades and two more kings later, Ezra and Nehemiah finally appear on the biblical scene. Both are living in Babylon, as many of the exiles had been content with their lot there and remained. But Ezra and

Nehemiah are both called by God, get permission and assistance from the current king to go to Jerusalem, and have the gifts and background to get their respective jobs done.

All of that has things to teach us about calling. The first is that God's calling isn't limited to any one religion or class of people. Cyrus was not a Jew and never became one. God didn't care about that. The ideal way to get the job done was to get the king to order it. That calling to Cyrus bore all the marks of a call from God. It was the good, loving, and just thing to do. An earlier king had traumatized a people with a brutal siege, ripped people from their homes, burned everything to the ground, and then carried them off to a foreign city.

It was good for the Israelites to let them go home, but it was also good for Babylon so that unrest would not build in the city, and since Judah was still part of the Persian empire, even after rebuilding Jerusalem, the king would be guaranteed a grateful and trouble-free territory. Thus, it was also good for Cyrus—eventually earning him the title of not just "the Great," but, among the Israelites, of "God's anointed." "Messiah." Win/win/win.

And while it was necessary to give such a call to the king, God also called vast numbers of regular people to go do the work. Ezra chapter two is entirely filled with the names and numbers and jobs of those thousands of people. Those of you who sign up to be liturgists better hope I never decide to preach from Ezra 2!

The second lesson is that a call to do something does not necessarily mean a call to finish it. God raised up all sorts of people across those first hundred, frustrating years to deal with all the obstacles and resistance they encountered; and all of them died without seeing the finished work.

Now you could take the Calvinist view and say that God intended for all that mess. Maybe so. But given the bad fruit that resulted from what were, in my view, some bad decisions made in that first wave—especially the increased hatreds and divisions between those who were once one people—I will stick with my Arminian, free-will leanings and say that God may well have intended that first group to finish the work, and bad choices along the way made the work of 5-10 years take 100 instead.

I've said before in this series, just because God calls us to something doesn't mean we can't screw it up. God's call sets a direction and a goal along with all the resources we would need; but all of that is not a guarantee that we'll be successful, because our freedom to make even catastrophically bad choices is never taken from us.

God will keep up the help and guidance, but if we give up listening or keeping the fruit of the Spirit front and center as we work, any problems, setbacks, or outright failures are on us. And the damage we do when we try to do God's work, without God's loving and wise spirit informing our actions, can last centuries, millennia, or longer.

Lastly, the call of God is always to a task—large or small—which is somehow necessary to fulfill the larger human vocation of serving and protecting the earth, and all who dwell within it, in love. Those callings are as varied as we are, but God does not call us to frivolous things.

John Wesley took that to extremes and told the early Methodists to totally refrain from frivolous things. I disagree. I don't think the harmless and fun ways we relax and enjoy the world and each other are things that God disdains. The sign of the covenant with Moses is the Sabbath commandment, after all. It's spending an entire day not working.

But in my experience and reading of the Bible, God's calling is about what God would like us to be doing on the other six days—the six days we are called to work; whether that is the paid labor of a career, or volunteering to help clean up a mess, or raising a child to recognize God's voice, or passing along wisdom to future generations.

We may not know why we are feeling nudged to do something, and we may be long gone before whatever part we play can be connected to its purpose. But, whatever it is, it is a necessary calling; even if we are never able to answer the "necessary for what?" question.

And that brings me back around to Ezra and why he is such a towering figure in Judaism. The sacking of Jerusalem and the Babylonian captivity were violently traumatic events that affected people for generations. But it wasn't just physical trauma. It was a full-blown faith crisis.

Of course, there was the kind of faith crisis that we all have when horrible things happen to us and we ask God, "Why? How could you let this happen?" The two books of Chronicles in the Bible, which also never appear in the lectionary, are written to answer that question in relation to those events. Scholars believe Ezra wrote those as well, and the general answer to the "Why?" question in Chronicles is that Israel had bad kings.

But the faith crisis for the exiled Israelites wasn't only the "Why?" question It was also a "What do we do now?" question.

The core of Israelite worship revolved around the sacrificial system. There was no mechanism for the forgiveness of sins, for healing, for petitioning God for help, for celebration of life events, or for remembering and celebrating the festivals, history, and events that represented their faith apart from making sacrifices; and, once Solomon built it, there was exactly and only one place to do that—the Temple in Jerusalem.

When Solomon's temple was destroyed and the people removed from the country and unable to even erect a simple altar on that site, the question of "How are we to worship God without the Temple?" was both real and devastating.

As the exiles wrestled with that question—which was existential to their coherence as a people of faith—the roots of Judaism as it's known today began to take shape in discussions in the Israelite community around the River Chebar in Babylon and the focus gradually turned to the Law of Moses rather than the physical place where worship was conducted.

After all, God had not only objected to the Israelites having a king. God had also objected to building the Temple in Jerusalem in the first place, since locating the worship of God in a single, immovable place, rather than the moveable tent and Tabernacle that they had before, created a single point of failure and all kinds of potential problems, almost all of which happened at some point.

And if you want to draw a line from that to the number of churches in New England who have gone under trying to prop up their own immovable places of worship, or have come to consider their buildings more holy than the God they are supposed to represent, I will not stop you.

Ezra did rebuild a much smaller temple when they went back, but he did much more than that. When that second temple was completed, Ezra began reconstituting how worship there was conducted, and focused on teaching the Law of Moses to those who either never knew it or had forgotten. The sacrificial system came back; but it was no longer the sole focus of Israelite worship.

Along with that, Ezra established a group of scholars and prophets called the Great Assembly to be the authority on matters of religious law. The Great Assembly was the forerunner of the Sanhedrin, the group with the same purpose who conducted Jesus' trial in the first century. The present form of Judaism with its focus on the synagogue and teaching the Torah was largely shaped by Ezra's Great Assembly.

Ezra's temple was much smaller than Solomon's and just before Jesus was born, King Herod began large-scale improvements. But, given that forty years after Jesus' death Rome came in and quashed a rebellion by wiping out that temple, too; by then Judaism was at least religiously prepared to build a faith lived in obedience to the law and the prophets because of the religious foundation on the Torah that Ezra had built.

Oddly enough for all that, and despite a long genealogy for him at the start of Ezra 7, there is debate about whether Ezra actually existed. One solution to that dilemma is yet another book of the Bible attributed to Ezra, and that is the final book of the Christian Old Testament, the book of Malachi. The Hebrew Bible is ordered differently, but ends with the book of Chronicles, so in that sense, they would both end with something attributed to Ezra.

The prophet Malachi focuses on many of Ezra's concerns—on purifying the faith, rooting out corruption, and some harsh warnings that fit with the character of Ezra we see in the book that does bear his name. And since Malachi is not a name but a title, meaning a messenger of God and makes no claims about its authorship; and since there is a tomb for the prophet Malachi but not for Ezra, it's a possibility.

And if Malachi is Ezra, then we do have Ezra in our lectionary after all and Christians hear him on the second Sunday of Advent in Year C: Malachi 3:1-4:

"Behold, I send my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?

"For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, till they present right offerings to the Lord. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years."

That, too, sounds like a calling. Amen.