

Turning Our Faces: Weeping or Laughing

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Ezra 3

Intro--Steve

In Karen Armstrong's book on the history of Jerusalem, she describes the decades following the devastation of the city in the year 70, when Roman soldiers massacred the people in their homes and in the streets, burned the city, and completely destroyed the Temple. In the years that followed, the stragglers who were Jewish and had remained in the vicinity of Jerusalem would gather on the Day of Atonement at the now-desolate site of the Temple. They would stand around the piles of burned rubble and weep, beat their chests, and cry out their grief.

On this same site, over 650 years earlier, in 586 B.C.E., the Temple of Solomon had been destroyed by the Babylonians. When we read about exiles in times that are ancient to us, it does not strike much of a nerve. That was so long ago, and we are so removed from social and national upheavals in Jerusalem 26 centuries ago.

But we are not strangers to national tragedies. I recall several years ago, hearing a comedian attempt a joke about JFK's assassination, and it fell miserably flat, deservedly so. Fifty years is not long enough for even dark humor about such a national catastrophe. Even for those who were not here in 1941, 1963, 1968, or 2001, we are all affected by what happened then, for all of our lives are different because of the imprint of national trauma.

Today's story in Ezra is about 50 years after the exile. The memory and the stories of that awful day are still fresh--people screaming, families being separated because the Babylonians were interested only in the young, healthy, and elite among the population. The entire population was traumatized, but the worst trauma was seeing with their own eyes what the prophet Jeremiah had warned about. Jerusalem would fall, and the Temple would not be spared. The Holy of Holies going up in smoke was an unthinkable tragedy, and a national theological crisis felt deeply in the bones of every Israelite.

Now, 50 years later, the Babylonians had been overthrown by the Persians, and Cyrus, the conquering king, decreed that the Israelites could return to their homeland, and rebuild the temple. The procession of Israelites returning to Judah was different from the one 50 years before. The survivors who had been young then were now old. Those who had been born in Babylon and had no firsthand memory of the catastrophe were now responsible for the daunting task of rebuilding.

Their elders had sat on the riverbanks of Babylon and wondered out loud how they could sing their songs in a strange land. The new generation wondered, perhaps not out loud but to themselves, how they could sing of God's steadfast love in a homeland that would be as strange as a foreign land to them.

The first task was to set up an altar on the site of the Temple, and Ezra gives us a picture of their frame of mind, telling us that they arranged the altar with a fear of their

neighbors. Led by Ezra in the years to follow, they would act as if they had returned to a land with no people, but in these early days, they set up an altar while looking over their shoulders.

It was in the second year of their return that the foundation of the new temple was laid. Worship is at its best when there is a spirit of anticipation, and this was abundantly present when, in the words of Ezra:

*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 with cymbals, and they sang responsively, praising and giving
thanks to the LORD.*

Weeping and Laughing- Weeping- Leah

As the people gathered that day, they did so with all the feels. The foundation of the Temple had been laid and they gathered for worship on the Festival of the Booths. As the fanfare of the trumpets and the cymbals made music, the people joined in responsively, praising and giving thanks to God, as they sang, "For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel."

The people proclaimed responsively all together--the steadfastness of God and in the midst of their collective worship, some were weeping and some were shouting for joy at the recognition of the new Temple foundation being laid. Ezra tells us about the multitude of emotions and it seems like they accepted where each person was on the continuum that day.

What a song to hear from far away, as Ezra says it could be heard. But what a sound--a community at worship that allowed people to be wherever they were--happy, sad, joyful, grieving, or all of the above. That is a witness to the steadfastness of God at work.

I hope at the Festival of Booths so long ago, that some of the younger folx went to the older folx who were weeping and asked them to tell them the stories of how the Temple had been--to tell them about the prophets who proclaimed from that holy site and the rich history.

I hope the younger folx asked the older folx to tell them about when they were small and had been presented in the holy halls of the Temple for the first time. I imagine they asked them what that foundation looked like, and that those who were weeping were able to tell them about the hope they felt and the memories they had of their family coming together at the Festival of Booths when they were younger.

If grief is cumulative, we can assume that the day at the ceremony of the laying of the foundation, the grief about the new foundation was also a grief about who wasn't there. At any holiday, we think about those are not with us---and for that group of people who could remember the original Temple, it was the first time the Exiled had returned to worship for the Festival of the Booths. They were remembering the ones who died while

walking into Exile, the ones who died while in Exile, and ones who were gone long before Exile every happened.

Grief is cumulative and can arise most boldly and powerfully, during our moments of worship, just as it did for the people at worship at the dedication of the Temple foundation.

But even as the weeping was happening, something else was rising that morning in worship--the sounds of joyful proclamation, these sounds both so powerful that they were indistinguishable from one another.

Joyful shouts- Steve

From Ezra:

And all the people responded with a great shout, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid. But many of the priests and Levites and heads of families who had seen the first house on its foundations, wept with a loud voice when they saw this house, though many shouted aloud with joy, 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.

This may have been long, long ago, but Ezra's eyewitness account is so clear and compelling that for a moment we can almost feel as if we were there. As Leah just said, something else was rising that morning in worship.

For the ones who were old, and could remember the terror of that day 50 years ago, the forced march to Babylon,

the leaving behind of friends and family, never to see them again,

the early years of feeling totally abandoned by God because it seemed to all of them that God died when the Temple crumbled;

They saw the foundation of the new Temple, and with the memory of the glory of Solomon's Temple suddenly and painfully vivid to them, they started sobbing, weeping, then wailing, and they could not stop.

But something else was rising up that morning in worship--from the throats of the younger generation, came the laughter of pure joy, the healing sound of joyful shouts that could not be suppressed. Those who heard the sound from far away, and could not distinguish the weeping from the laughing, were not close enough to see how the younger ones were affected by their elders, and how the old ones were affected by the young.

They could not see the younger ones, with tears of joy running down their cheeks, reaching across and putting their arms around the elders, nor could they see the old ones, with tears of grief running down their cheeks, unable to hold back a smile as they reached out to the young, and embraced their exuberance.

That's the kind of thing that happens in worship, and it's unlike anything else.

I had a long, Friday-morning-conversation with Mahan Siler this week.

Mahan officially welcomed me to Elderhood. During our phone call, he told me of a friend who had just died. They had a 60 year-old friendship, and she was 105. She moved to

Asheville five years ago, so they were able to have frequent visits. Mahan said that she never stopped growing and expanding. With each year, her world grew larger, and she was inquisitive and engaged until the end. She could remember, as a four year-old girl, going with her mother the first time she voted, the first time any woman in America could vote--101 years ago! And she had a clear memory of her mother saying to her that day:

Maybe someday you'll be able to vote for a woman for President.

Mahan told me that she lived in a state of gratitude--not every now and then, not when things seemed to be going well, but all the time.

As I took in the wisdom and goodness of her life, she became--for me--part of this living, dynamic biblical text, showing us how the young and the old can stand shoulder to shoulder in worship, and whether there be laughter and tears of joy, or weeping and tears of grief, together they can experience a state of gratitude.

During these final months and now final weeks with you, I feel closer to a state of gratitude than ever before. I want to tell you one thing I'm grateful for as I reflect on our 18 years together.

It has to do with the priestly function of being a pastor. I like the way Ezra describes the scene that morning--the priests stationed with their trumpets, the Levites with their cymbals, ready to let the people know the moment had arrived to praise the LORD. Unfortunately for me, I don't play the trumpet, and fortunately for you, I don't try.

But another priestly function is to bless God's children, and I love that part of being a pastor. I'm not at all shy about being priestly. I don't hold back from saying:

The face of God shines upon you.
The Lord bless you and keep you.
You are a beloved daughter or son of God.

So here's my blessing for these days that we're living in together:

I want to bless the laughter and the joy that are rising up in this place.

I want to bless your excitement and joy about Leah.

I want to bless your anticipation about the open and hopeful future of this Beloved Community.

I want to bless our children, and welcome them whole-heartedly into the worship and life of this congregation.

I want to bless our youth, and all who are new in our midst, stationed to be part of the powerful life of this amazing congregation.

Leah:

Blessings are indeed one of the great gifts we can give to one another. From beginnings to endings, meals, or gathered around this table, offering a blessing of words or presence is one of the ways we speak hope and love to one another in community.

So here's my blessing for these days that we're living in together:

Let us bless the moments when lumps are in our throats, and grief is rushing to the surface.

Let us bless our memories, our love, our transformation of life alongside Steve and Jean.

Let us bless all that has been, all that is, and all that will be.

Let us bless the wisdom that resides in this place from those who have been here for generations, listening for Holy Spirit calling us.

Let us bless the steadfastness of our elders, who listen, lead, and show us how to walk on The Way.

Let us bless the space between, the space where the weeping and the shouts of proclamation all rise up in the midst of the worship of God.

Steve:

Around the year 539 B.C.E., gathered around the foundation of a new Temple, the old and the young sang the same words that were sung at the dedication of Solomon's temple. This ancient liturgy about the steadfast love of God is a way of saying that the love of God never ends.

It was long ago, but these words will never get old:

Steve:

**For the LORD is good,
for the LORD's steadfast love endures forever.**

Leah:

**For the LORD is good,
for the LORD's steadfast love endures forever.**

Leah and Steve:

**For the LORD is good,
for the LORD's steadfast love endures forever.**

Congregation:

**For the LORD is good,
for the LORD's steadfast love endures forever.**

Thanks be to God!

Amen!