

The Return of the Exiles
Sermon 195 | Greystone Baptist Church | Heritage Sunday,
September 10, 2023
Ezra 1:1-11

A lot can happen in 70 years. Seventy years ago Queen Elizabeth was crowned, the Korean War ended, the communist suspicion had our nation captivated and afraid, the polio vaccine was developed, the first color television sets hit the market and the first corvette rolled off the assembly line and onto the car sales lots.

Seventy years ago the average cost of a new house was \$9,550, and a new car \$1,650. Average annual income was \$4,000. A gallon of gas was 20 cents, a pound of hamburger meat was 53 cents, and a dozen eggs would set you back 27 cents.

70 years ago... We were still 69 years away from ChatGPT and 50 years away from the invention of Tesla. We were still 54 years away from the first iPhone. We were still 48 years away from September 11, 2001. We were still 30 years away from the beginning of the Greystone mission here, and 31 years away from that mission taking on its own name and charter as Greystone Baptist Church.

Seventy years ago we were still 28 years away from the first PC. We were 16 years away from Neil Armstrong's first step onto the surface of the moon, and 9 years from getting John Glenn into orbit. We were 11 years away from dancing to the music of Jackson 5 and 45 years from dancing to NSync and the Backstreet Boys.

70 years ago, we were still 7 years away from Kennedy's election and 10 from his assassination. We were 2 years away from America's entry into the war in Vietnam and we were still 1 year away from the overturning of Brown vs. Board of Education, ending the separate but equal doctrine and beginning the integration of public schools nationwide.

Yes, a LOT can happen in 70 years. Though it may sound long here, this list is quite abbreviated and doesn't even begin to tell the whole story of all that took place in seven decades of history. Would you ever want to go back?

To time-travel back to 1953 and just pick up where we left off, without computers, without the advances of the Civil Rights Movement, without the aches and pains that time has gifted? A lot can happen in 70 years. Especially when those years are born out of pain.

The Israelites lived in exile for 70 years before *the Lord stirred up the spirit* of the Persian King Cyrus, prompting him to issue an edict declaring that the people could return home. It was a joyous thing! A long-awaited homecoming. But seventy years before that, the scene in Jerusalem was one of utter devastation. The Temple was destroyed, decimated by the Babylonian king which was interpreted (of course) as punishment for the sins of the

people. And IN this destruction, the people lost not only a beloved institution and a beautiful building, but they lost the very means of their connection with God. God's house was the Temple, the Temple was where God lived and without it, the relationship between the people and God was lost, broken, irreparable. *This* loss was nothing short of devastating.

For 70 years the people lived in the rubble of their devastation.

This might explain why Cyrus' decree and the return of the exiles are featured multiple times in our Bibles. In Ezra, Nehemiah and 2 Chronicles we find several stories that tell of the return of the exiles. Some of these stories were quite optimistic. They described the rebuilding of the Temple and its altar, after which the people sang out: "For [God] is good, [and God's] steadfast love endures forever" (Ezra 3).

...This was the same song that was sung at the dedication of Solomon's temple, (all those years ago) when the glory of the Lord appeared in dramatic fashion. But this time the traditional songs were not met with the same unbridled praise; instead they were mingled with the tears of those longing for the past. "Those who had seen the temple in its former glory found it impossible to celebrate the new foundation, and wept at the site" of its new state.

Though the new temple was being rebuilt - this is what they had been waiting for, praying for, hoping for... the Temple was being reborn - rising from the literal ashes - right before their very eyes. Though their desires and longings were being met they could not rejoice because they could not move through their grief over the temple that *had been lost*.¹

A lot can happen in 70 years, and to pretend like the people and God could just pick back up where they left off would be a bit of a joke - or at least a bit naive. Everything had changed. Nothing would ever be the same again.

The stories of exodus and exile make up so much of the Old Testament. Each one an ancient interpretation of God's provision, God's blessing, God's punishment, and God's presence in the lives of God's people. These times of wilderness and exile are filled with uncertainty and change - and yet these stories take up so much space in the Bible. They are times of growth and learning, of trial and brokenness, and yet these are so often the times when God's presence takes on new, unique, and exciting forms. Remember the pillars of fire and cloud? (What I wouldn't give to see that!)

Much like the different Gospels tell different stories about Jesus, or different perspectives of the same stories, the stories of the Babylonian exile and the return under King Cyrus offer us nuanced perspectives on this historic event. Different glimpses into the past.

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/rebuilding-the-temple/commentary-on-ezra-11-4-31-4-10-13>

Through it all, there is a common theme, a divine thread (if you will) woven through all the pain and the promise, stitching together both exile and homecoming, and this thread (of course) is the experience of God's presence *with* the people. No matter what, WHEREver they are, whether they have been on their best behavior, following the laws of Torah or if they have been an absolute disaster, broken in every way, God is with them. Whether they made it to church or not, whether the Temple - the very house of God - was in shambles or the foundations were just being rebuilt, God was with them.

And friends, that is good news. Because if we believe the Bible is true. If we believe these stories have any authority for our lives, then it means that we are the inheritors of a faith that has learned time and time again that though everything around us may change - God is faithful still. God is with us. And God will always be with us. No matter what. End of story.

Except the story doesn't end there.

You see, a lot had happened in those 70 years but God wasn't finished yet. You see the story of the relationship between God and God's beloved creation is a story of perpetual becoming. Time marches on and things keep on changing, moving forward, whether we like it or not - and God is in the middle of all of it - working with us, within us, and making us new.

That is exactly what God was doing as the people came to rebuild their lives in Jerusalem, God was making something new, creating life where there seemed to be only death, building a foundation where once there was only decimation. New life for a new day, built with a plan for a new temple built atop the broken foundation of the old.

A lot can happen in 70 years.

Now we haven't yet made it 70 years. Well, some of us in this room probably have, but as a church, we're still just 39 years old. Which in our day, means that Greystone is just now hitting middle adulthood - you know, that season when adulting is no longer so much fun as it is a little boring. No more buying the first house or starting the first big girl job. Now it's all HVAC repairs and roof leaks. (I mean, I'm joking, but it's also true)

We haven't yet made it to 70 years so we can't look back and see from THAT kind of perspective but we can still look back - and I believe it is *good* to look back - to remember where we started and to make note of what God has done in our 39 years together.

So let's look back:

39 years ago the global economy was in flux. Struggling to rebound after the most severe recession since World War 2, unemployment rates were high, inflation was high, and people were scared. (sound familiar?) This would have been a good time to play it safe. To hold on tightly to personal resources and wait for better days before taking a risk.

But it was *precisely into this uncertainty* that the mission of Greystone was born. Not only was the economy in distress, but our own people, the Baptists, were imploding as well. Pitting sides of liberal and conservative against one another (as if the two theological sisters hadn't been living in the same house all along), we were reaching a breaking point, one had to go, and the dividing issue was whether or not women could teach and preach. It is obvious now where Greystone landed on that issue.

And even though a lot can happen in 39 years, remembering that part of our story says something about who we are, who we have always been, what kind of stuff makes up our DNA ... that we were born into such a season of uncertainty and yet we boldly stepped out on faith, affirming that anyone, regardless of gender, could preach and teach in Christ's church.

Remembering that context, listen to how we describe the search for our first pastor, in our history book: Frequently... they referred to the prospective pastor as 'he/she' implying that they would consider both women and men. They wanted someone who was "well-groomed and nice looking"... a person between the ages of 30 and 45. Someone with degrees from a recognized, accredited seminary, and a good preacher.

I won't speak to the well-groomed and nice looking part, but the fact that our value toward openness and inclusion was so boldly stated in the middle over the Baptist controversy over that very thing: Greystone said, No! This will be a church where women and men are equally called.

And our story didn't end there, we kept on moving forward in faith, trusting in God and one another.

God isn't done with us yet because *ours* is a story of perpetual becoming. A story of God who loves us too much to let us die on the vine of same-ness, and stuck-ness. A God who wants us to grow and change and thrive and become the kind of church our world needs today and better yet, the kind of church our world needs tomorrow. A church that sees far beyond the challenges of prior generations and previous iterations... A church that can stand proudly as a bridge between the pain of loss and the promise of a future guided by the Holy Spirit, a church that is a house of rest and a place of renewal. A church that is open to every spiritual migrant seeking sanctuary. A church that was born into a broken and uncertain world... but still articulated a bold vision for a different kind of church, a church that could be a home for all the people of Northwest Raleigh. A church that would not be divided by the leading controversy of the day but whose stake would already be planted in the ground of inclusion - saying that God calls men and women equally into service. That is our story, and that is our heritage.

So as we stand here today - exiles returning home after some time of distance. Whether it's been a week, a month, a year or more... maybe it's a good time to retell the stories of our courageous beginnings. A vision for a different kind of church, a church where everyone is welcome and every member a minister in their own right.

And maybe while we reminisce and remember the good old days, it might also do us well to remember that a lot can happen in 39 years. ...*especially when the Lord gets to work stirring up those / our spirits!* A lot can happen in 39 years. Look at all the Lord has done right here! Can you even imagine what might be next? Every now and then, I think I get a little glimpse... but only time will tell for sure.

All I know is this: God is here, God *has been* here, guiding us, comforting us, holding us together, and giving us everything we need to rebuild the temple, the church, the house of God that is needed not only for today, but for tomorrow the same.

A lot can happen in 39 years. Lord, we can only hope to be a part of it. So help us become a bridge that spans the rubble of our past, acknowledging the painful losses, but planting our feet firmly in the promise of a future together with you. Amen.