

B Narrative 15, 2019
December 15, 2019
Poulsbo
Pastor Alison Shane

Ezra 1:1-4; 3:1-4, 10-13

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace from God our father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

These readings in Advent have taken us on a flying tour through the later stages of Israel's scriptural life. We started with Jeremiah, prophesying to half of a nation in jeopardy, warning them that God was kinda done with their shenanigans. Then Isaiah, prophesying to a disbanded nation, scattered in exile, assuring them that God is done punishing them and that all will soon be well. And today we hear from Ezra, not a prophesy but a historicalish account of Israel's return from exile.

As Advent texts, these function much like the ghosts in "A Christmas Carol." Jeremiah gave us the ghost of Christmas past: "Look at what you've done!" Isaiah gave us the ghost of Christmas present: "You are reaping what you sow, but there is yet hope for you." Ezra offers us the ghost of Christmas future: "Your life can go any number of ways, and the question is: Will you be weeping with a loud voice or shouting aloud for joy?"

Israel had been waiting so long to see the promises of God fulfilled, but as the foundation was laid for a new temple, while there were many who shouted aloud for joy, there were also those who wept with a loud voice. Perhaps they were mourning the loss of the temple they had known and loved. The new one will never be quite like the old one. Or perhaps they were mourning the time lost in between. Or perhaps they were mourning the realization that, even with a temple built, life would never go back to the way it was. Israel could never go back to the way it was. The exile had separated them, and many saw no need to be reunited. The exile had changed them, and the world had changed while they were in Babylon. Things would never be the same.

Had God forgotten the promise to make them a nation again?

Or perhaps was God using this opportunity to fulfill the promise of a king in a new way, a way that would ensure the heart of the promise: that God's chosen people would live on?

The Christian church today can identify with Israel in this.

We have been seeing what many are calling the "decline of the church." There are fewer people in the pews across the country, there are fewer coins in the coffers, there are fewer and fewer people identifying themselves as a person of faith within a community of faith. But I don't think the church is in decline. I think it is in reformation, an upheaval of the Holy Spirit, who seeks to make us something new so that the good news of Jesus can be heard in THIS culture in THIS time. But every time we see a spark of renewal, it is accompanied by a letting go of a beloved program or activity. And while there are many who shout aloud for joy, there are also those who weep with a loud voice. Perhaps we are mourning the loss of the church we have known and loved. The new one will never be quite like the old one. Or perhaps we are mourning the upheaval we are living in these in-between times. Or perhaps we are mourning the realization that, even with a revitalized body of Christ, the church can never go back to the way it was. We can never go back to the way we were. The church's Babylon has not been one of exile but one of complacency, lulled to sleep by the assumption that what we've been doing for 50 years

continues to have the same effect. But the world has changed while we were in Babylon. Things will never be the same.

Has God forgotten the promises? Has God given up on us?

Or perhaps is God using this opportunity to fulfill the promises in a new way, a way that will ensure the heart of the promise: that God's chosen people will live on?

Some of us see these patterns in our individual lives, too. Christmas rolls around with all the heart-warming reminders of God's promises fulfilled in the arrival of Jesus. The lights remind us that Jesus, the light of the world, is among us. The carols remind us of the humble, human nature of the coming of God among us. The gifts remind us of God's greatest gift to us: a redeemer who comes to rescue us from the exiles our sin brings us into. But among these shouts of joy, some of us are weeping with a loud (or a quiet) voice. Because Christmas won't be the same this year.

The loss of a loved one, the loss of a job, a move halfway across the country awaiting us in the new year, a break-up, a friendship poisoned, a child lost to addiction...

Life can never go back to the way it was. We can never go back to the way we were. We are feeling like we are in exile in our own lives. Things will never be the same.

Has God forgotten the promises? Has God given up on us?

It feels like it sometimes.

But the witness of scripture is clear: even in our exile, God is here. Even in our exile, God is keeping those promises. God did not promise to return Israel to exactly the same as they had been. God promised to provide a king to guide them, and God guided them into a *new* future. God did not promise the church of 1955 that we would always have church buildings and Sunday morning worship and paid staff. God promised a Spirit to inhabit the people of the body of Christ and to guide them when two or more gather. God does not promise that we will never experience loss or change. God does promise to walk with us through loss and change, and God promises us a community of faith to help us through.

God is guiding us into the future. It's ok to weep, and it's ok to shout for joy. Those sounds intermingle in lives well lived, so that sometimes we can't even tell the difference ourselves.

God is here. God is fulfilling promises, bringing you life in new ways, guiding you into a future that is different, but still filled with the grace, the love, and the presence of God. And in the end, God will make our joyful shouts overwhelm our weeping. God has promised. And God keeps God's promises.