

Ezra is recording a momentous event in the life-cycle of God’s people.

They are not only returned to the capital, at the direction of Cyrus of Persia, but they are given orders (and budget) to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. The humiliation of the past is going to be corrected – and while they still essentially a subject people, they are going home – they will get to worship in their sacred place once again.

As much as we appreciate this beautiful old building – with over a century of our history represented by the walls, the windows, the bricks and the ‘feel’ of the place – as much as this might mean to us, we cannot fully appreciate what this return would mean to this particular band of social refugees described in the book of Ezra. Having been marched out of Jerusalem in captivity, it was understood that God had given up on them altogether, and – having been deprived of a dwelling place - was ‘on the loose’ and unpredictable.

Without a fixed address for the divine presence, there could be no real worship. Sure, you can pray anywhere, but the temple was THE conduit for prayer, sacrifice and nearly every ritual action that connected God to God’s people. The physical manifestation of God’s strength, glory and presence was the brick-and-mortar temple that once dominated the city.

So, the treasures are ‘rescued’ from the storerooms where Nebuchadnezzar had stashed them, and the people are charged with a massive reconstruction job. The rituals are observed, the jobsite is prepared and with all the appropriate pomp and circumstance, the foundations of the Lord’s house are established.

Singing? Absolutely. Sacrifice? Certainly. Trumpets and cymbals and songs and prayers...and as the rituals unfold, the weight of dreadful memory is lifted from their shoulders – and tears accompany the praise. It’s a time of great rejoicing. God’s home is being rebuilt – the unimaginable is begun. Such an emotional time. The people have found the home for their joy.

And we know a little bit about that.

We are celebrating 140 years of Christian witness here in Medicine Hat – 120 of that spent right here at this address. We had to alter our habits to adapt to the pandemic, and our return to something like normal was cause for celebration, and no mistake. We take great pride in our building – we spend a lot of time and money on upkeep and would be devastated if something caused us to start over again from nothing. No matter how many times we are told (or we sing) that ‘the church is not a building...’ this building right here IS church for us.

And how often, during a service of worship, has a particular hymn moved you to tears? How many times has a particular memory taken your breath away? How many weddings, and Baptisms, and funerals have you attended – sitting, whenever you can, in YOUR pew – that have confirmed the significance of this place in your life?

So, we can imagine what it might have been like to return to a scared space – to worship again sitting in the family pew. There are places that we know joy, and this is one of them.

Ezra 3:10-13 & Luke 2:25-32

Simeon was one of those who waited in the new temple for an old promise to be delivered. He spent his days waiting for a reason to rejoice.

He too lives under foreign rule – a less benevolent regime than that of Cyrus of Persia. The Romans haven’t destroyed the temple, or outlawed worship, but still, things are not as the faithful imagine they should be.

So, Simeon spends his days watching and praying that God might break through the misery and deliver on the promise of consolation. Simeon is old. His time is running short. And on this day a small family arrives to dedicate a first-born son.

And in that place – that holy home where God and the hope of God’s people resides – Simeon meets the promise of God.

Not just for his people, but for all people. And more importantly, not just for this place – but for the whole of creation.

For once the promise of God takes flesh, everything changes.

Simeon rejoices because the dream of his whole life has come true. HE has seen the promise – held Jesus in his arms, and through the Spirit’s insight, known him for what he was. Salvation – for all. And while he celebrates in that sacred place, ***his song recognizes that the liberating promise is liberated in Jesus.***

The Son of Mary carries the promise in him.

Among us – alive to our joy and pain – present in our celebrations and our sadness. And in Jesus, the focus of our worship and wonder is drawn away from a particular place, and lodged instead in life and work. Among the poor. In the midst of the outcast. The blind and lame – those whose troubles might have disqualified them from ever knowing joy, will find that joy comes to them.

## ***“Rejoicing”***

Ezra 3:10-13 & Luke 2:25-32

*Advent 3, 2023*

This birth we wait for – the promise we cling to – walks among us even now.

Christmas is the celebration of presence – God with us. This is the season of joy finding us. This is the reminder that God is not bound to a particular place – be it the vast mysterious ‘heaven’ or a building of sacred significance. God is on the loose. The Spirit cannot be restrained. Jesus has come, and the joy of the promise is ours to share.