

Ezra

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Before you ask. Let me tell you why we named our son Ezra.

I have done one of these sermons for each of my children. At least part of the reason is because I am bad at elevator-length explanations.

And so if you were to ask me why we named our son Ezra, you would have heard this sermon. Even if we were standing the freezer aisle at Hanneford. Better here. And this way I can just do it once.

Not to mention, the prophet Ezra, is certainly worth knowing about.

Ezra's story begins—as most stories in the Hebrew Bible do—with the Babylonian exile. Around 700 BC, the Israelites had been conquered by Babylon, Jerusalem was destroyed, and the people were taken away to live as strangers in a strange land.

The people endured this exile for generations.

It lasted until Babylon itself fell to the Persian empire, and their king Cyrus. And as we heard in this morning's text, Cyrus took a very different approach to the Israelites than the Babylonians had.

Cyrus sends the people home. Not only that, but Cyrus also sponsors from the treasures of his own empire, the rebuilding of Jerusalem. By Cyrus' decree, the Second Temple is built, the walls of Jerusalem are rebuilt, the people are returned to their land. All—of course—in exchange for their affection and most importantly their loyalty.

Ezra and Nehemiah are the two figures named in the Bible as central to this process. They are remembered as something of the project-managers of this return and rebuilding.

It sounds like Nehemiah did a lot of the bricks and mortar work.

Ezra for his part worked on the spiritual reconstitution of this community. And while the temple, and the walls, and the city, and the people coming home, all get a lot of attention, and with good reason. Something else happened during this Persian sponsored restoration that would endure longer than anything else.

The Torah.

This was the moment, coming back from exile, that the leaders of the Israelites, among them Ezra, gathered for the first time the fragmented stories, myths, and traditions of their faith, and collected them into something pretty close to what we know as the books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

This is the first time these stories were all gathered in one place. And, it is the first time that those stories are elevated to be a sort of rule of life for the community.

This is also the moment when the book of Psalms starts to form. Again, by gathering together cherished songs and poetry passed along through generations, and beginning the painstaking work of curating and editing a single collection that all the people can share.

These are some of the most ancient roots of the faith that you and I share.

This is like that moment in geological history when the molten earth begins to cool. The faith is beginning to take shape.

Ezra does not do any of this alone. But his is the name attached to the project for us to remember. He is the avatar of this moment in the history of Israel, when the people whose nation had lay in ruins a few generations prior started to put the pieces back together. And what they came up with was something unquestionably connected to their deepest history, and yet undeniably new. A new story, made of the old stories, a story they could share.

So that's the prologue.

But I still haven't answered the question. Why name our child Ezra?

Look, the enemies may not be at the gates, but someday it feels like they may not be as far off as they once were.

And our home is not burning, except that, in many ways, it is.

You and I are not living through anything quite as dramatic as Babylonian invasion, and yet for a lot of us the sturdy walls and sacred temples around which we once organized our lives perhaps don't feel quite as sturdy or eternal as they once did.

And sometimes it doesn't happen to us all at the same time, but each of us has seasons of life that feel like a siege, or an exile, and you yourself might be in the midst of one now.

Now when things get shaky, I notice two instincts that seem to prevail.

One is the futile effort to turn back time. As if we glue back together the shards of all that we have lost, sweep the new stuff under the rug, and just close our eyes, and bear down, and change the world back to the way it once was. We have seen this.

And then there is another instinct which is to throw it all away. Whatever was part of bringing us here, must be no good. Institutions, traditions, religions, entire generations,

are just relegated to being “part of the problem” and are ignored, or discarded. We have seen this.

When the world gets shaky, many people want to retreat to some long-since-past stability, and others want to wipe the slate clean and start fresh, as if we could.

I think we need some Ezras.

We need people who are willing to gather us together in the midst of what feels, hard, uncertain, and scary, and help us look to the best of who we already are, to stitch together something new out of that.

I think this is a moment in history for our faith, for our nation, and even for our species, to figure out what the story is that we share, and to start to elevate that common truth in the center of our lives. Its not going to be just re-hashing the story that worked 100 years ago, that won't do us any good. But it also won't do us any good to try to cut something out of whole cloth.

This is a moment in history of reshaping and redefining, and we need to find the maturity and wisdom to do that work reaching back with appreciation and reverence for the best of who we have been while we reach forward toward something new that God is doing with us.

That is what Ezra was doing. And its what we need now.

And hey bud, no pressure ok.

Its not just a job for you.

Its for all of us.