

# “Bittersweet”

September 13, 2020 (Covid 26 – Live Stream 2)  
Ezra 3: 10-13

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*The day they gathered for the sod turning to build the new arena was finally here. After losing their beloved hockey arena in a fire, several long years had passed before they had raised enough money to be able to rebuild. All of the officials were on site: the mayor, the President of the area hockey association, coaches, kids of all ages, the local MPP and MP, even the Zamboni driver on her machine was there doing laps around the site. They hired a band that was rocking out classic songs like: “The Hockey Song”, the Hip’s “50-Mission Cap” and “We are the Champions” from Queen. As they cut the ribbon and dug the ceremonial first shovel a great cheer went up. But not everyone was cheering. The president of the hockey association, some of the coaches along with some of the older folks who’d grown up playing and watching games in the old arena and could still conjure the memory of the smell of the locker room, shed some tears. They loved that old rink where all the magic happened, and as grateful as they were that the rebuilding had begun, this was a different arena. The tears, along with the applause and singing and cheering all mingled together. The whole town could hear the celebration. But the truth is; it was bittersweet.*

Have you ever had a loss and had to start again in a new way? The story of the arena rebuilding after a fire could be a way to reimagine our scripture reading for our modern ears. Even more close to home, imagine the destruction and rebuilding of our historic church.

As we heard from the book of Ezra, the people of God had finally returned from exile. Though some stayed behind in Judah and Jerusalem when the Babylonians attacked, many had been driven out. They lost their homes, they were likely separated from some family members, they lost their community and their culture and they lost their way of worship. Especially they lost their temple. For the Jewish people at that time, the Temple was central to their worship, for in it dwelt the presence of God. While they were in exile, they struggled to worship God. They sang: “*By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!” How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?*”

Finally, decades later, they were able to return to Jerusalem and begin to rebuild. The day had come when the foundation was laid and the

rebuilding of the temple had begun. Unlike the first Temple where King David and King Solomon paid for the building with no expense spared, this time the people of God came together to make this happen. This was a community effort.

But as they gathered together and celebrated the first step, the laying of the foundation, not everyone was cheering. The priest, the Levites, the elders wept with a loud voice when they saw it. Why? Likely this Temple was smaller and would be more modest than the last one, but they also just had a sense of the loss. Even as they were rebuilding and starting over, they couldn't help but be aware of all they had lost.

Today we are back together in our sanctuary. We have not worshiped together in this sanctuary since March 15<sup>th</sup> – 6 months without worshipping God physically together, in this space that many hold so dear. Some of you who are watching from home don't attend this church, but your worship has been disrupted too.

As we return together, we realize in our being that it is not the same. We have not returned to March 15<sup>th</sup>. So much has changed in how we are able to worship. But the losses are not just about the church — there are other losses too. Losses of how we connected with friends and family, and other losses that may have nothing to do with a pandemic.

As we return to worship, I am keenly aware that my father, the Rev. Dr. Alan Bennett, who was the minister Emeritus and the minister here before that, is no longer here – he wouldn't have been allowed to play his trumpet anyway, but that doesn't stop me from noticing his absence in his seat with the band.

The Bible is full of laments, of songs and psalms that express loss and grief. I'm not sure we lament enough in our culture. We are so quick to move on and to 'get over it'. But the truth is unless you name and are aware of where it hurts, you're not going to be able to heal and move into a new place. Grieving and lamentation — acknowledging and giving voice to the pain — is an important part of the healing journey towards something new.

I'd like us in a moment to sit and meditate, and think about some of the losses that you've experienced in the last 6 months. Where does it hurt? Where has it been hard? What have you lost? For a couple of minutes we are going to listen to a song and I want you just to let surface and become aware of the losses you've experienced.

We listened to: *\*Song 'In the Quiet Curve of Evening 'vs 1 & 3\**

Healing and recovering from grief do not happen in an instant, but unless you are aware of where it hurts and what you've lost, you can't

begin to heal. I encourage you to continue to name the hurts and allow yourself to feel the feelings that go along with those hurts.

While you continue to lament and continue to grieve, take a step forward anyway. The priests and those who were weeping over this new foundation were not trying to stop it from being built. They were not standing there saying: 'Stop the building. Stop right there. Unless we can go back to the temple exactly as it was before, we are not going forward.' Or 'Until I'm over the loss we are not moving forward!' Sometimes people get stuck in the past and how it used to be. We have to acknowledge the hurt and that even though it hurts or doesn't feel the same, we need to keep walking forward.

That is faith. The book of Hebrews tells us "*Faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.*" (Hebrews 11:1).

A couple of weeks ago my husband and I needed to head downtown – actually we were going to clean his office as he was in between cleaners (that's another story). Anyway, we decided to bike downtown. Now by the time we were ready to head home it was dark. We had reflective vests but only Alex had a headlight on his bike, and I only had a tail light on mine. Maybe not super smart, but we figured as long as we stuck together, we'd be ok – besides a good portion of our route home would be on the Brock Trail with no cars. It all sounded good until we got to the Brock Trail, which in that section was pitch dark. Alex, who was in front of me and had the head light, could see quite well and was going pretty fast. I on the other hand could hardly see a thing and it was pretty freaky. But I thought to myself — he can see, and as long as I keep up to him I can see him — so why not relax and enjoy a thrilling blind ride down the dark trail? Ok, I don't totally recommend it. Don't try this at home, kids! But sometimes even though we can't see the full path, even though you don't feel like you have control and it doesn't feel comfortable – sometimes you have to keep going forward anyway.

I really don't like worshiping like this. I don't like not being able to do our Holy Buzz and go around giving everyone a hug or a handshake, and I really don't like not being able to sing. I keep forgetting we're not supposed to sing – especially with the 'Go Now in Peace'. But we are called to continue moving forward even when everything has changed. We are called to have faith that God can meet us here. Not only is God meeting us here, but he is going on ahead of us, guiding us and calling us out.

In a moment we're going to play another song and I want you to reflect and think about what new step you are now being called to take.

Though you can't see the whole picture, what is one step forward that you are being called to take towards healing in your life; towards being the person you are called to be? Towards re-connecting with God? Pray to God to help you take that next step.

*We listened to another \*Reflective Song, 'All Who are Thirsty'*

You know, I've had this fear that after trying out church face to face, that people would be so horrified at the new normal that they wouldn't come back. I thought that especially about Celebrate Life—

Those of you who have attended our evening service in the past know that we used to meet in the hall around little tables, drinking coffee and eating treats from Tait's Bakery. It had a casual and homey feel to it. Now there are 50 chairs spread exactly 6 feet apart (thank you Paul) in the large gymnasium. There is no food, no mingling or connecting the way we used to. It's so, so different from how it was. But you know what? People are coming. They are coming in numbers similar to last March. In fact, there are new people coming who even came back the next week. I shake my head and think: why? Why are you here? You know why they are here?

It turns out it wasn't the coffee or my winning personality (which hasn't been as winning lately!) It turns out they are hungry for experiencing the presence of God. It turns out that the Holy Spirit can be felt in any setting – even a worship with Covid-19 health protocols in place. It turns out that people need what we are offering. What are we offering? We are offering the peace of Jesus in anxious times, the strength of faith and the courage to take one more step knowing we are not alone.

Here's the thing. Even in the middle of the lamentation, even in the middle of taking those shaky steps forward, we who are Christians are called to praise God and even celebrate; because we know that God knows what we don't know, you know?

As we look at this scripture reading from the Hebrew scriptures with our Christian glasses on, (because as Christians those are the lenses we wear when we read the whole Bible,) I can't help but think: if they had only known that this humble foundation was the beginning of the temple where the prophet Simeon would meet the messiah! Do you remember that?

*Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, "Master,*

*now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.”*

Can you imagine their celebration on the day the foundation was laid if they had known that the Christ, the very presence and face of God would worship in the temple their hands had built?

Even now when things don't feel quite right, God is building something new in this church and in you. You know, God is not limited to our little ways of doing worship. Our God is so much bigger than any temple and even bigger than all the limitations placed on us by this pandemic.

We are going to have one more song of reflection, and during this song I want you to spend the time giving thanks. Thank God for all the good that is in your life and in this church now, and then thank God for what we don't yet see. If you are open to it, I want you to imagine or picture in your mind what new temple God is wanting to build out of your life. What about this church? How can you imagine God using this church in the future? Give thanks for what God is already doing and will do.

Life comes with some sweet and a lot of bitter, but when we see through the eyes of faith, we will have strength to take the next step and we will have hope for a future filled with abundant life.

Thanks be to God. Amen.