



March 30: No Going Back | Ezra 3:10-13

In 1519, Spanish Conquistador Hernando Cortez landed in Mexico with only one objective: seize the gold of the Aztecs. Cortez was totally committed to his mission and his quest for riches is legendary.

But how did such a small band of only 500 soldiers succeed? What motivated them? Aside from greed, before they headed out to steal the gold, he uttered these three fateful words “Burn the ships”. Taking away their ability to turn back.

The signing of the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776, marked a pivotal “no turning back” moment for the American colonies. Fifty-six men from the thirteen colonies boldly signed their signatures on that document.

Their act of defiance against British rule was a declaration of their commitment to the ideals of liberty and self-governance and it was treason. They risked their lives, fortunes, and reputations. Yet, their courage and resolve laid the foundation for the United States of America.

On July 16, 1969, Apollo 11 with Neil Armstrong, Michael Collins, and Edwin “Buzz” Aldrin on board participated in one of the most defining “no turning back” moments in history. As they were launched completely off this planet! That was commitment!

All throughout history, as people crossed physical, political, and emotional boundaries that had once been closed to them, history was made. And the resilience of the human spirit was once again revealed and celebrated!

These three big historical events are based on this basic truth, that to make choices, to move forward in life, and to keep following God often forces decisions from which there is no turning back.

We may not have big historical moments like these in our personal lives.

But to a smaller degree, we have all embraced these kinds of defining moments...moments like proposing marriage and/or saying “yes” or “no”, having children or adopting or fostering, selling a home/buying a home, choosing and sticking to a career path for education and professional development.

They all embody deep commitments that set our lives on a fixed course in a new direction.

As Methodists, we even have these moments in our faith walk, in being God’s people the church. When a baby is baptized, a family commits and the church commits to raising that child

in the faith. When a youth confirms their faith in Christ at the end of Confirmation, they are saying they will follow Christ with their lives.

And when people commit themselves to becoming members of a church, or in decisions to follow Jesus in our every day lives, in taking marriage vows under God, in serving and giving and praying;

These actions all mark intentionality of purpose. These small acts place our feet on a path of spiritual growth, of following God...in which there is no going back to less faith or less following.

Our faith history is full of these no turning back moments:

Adam and Eve were chased out of the Garden of Eden, the way back was blocked by an angel with a flaming sword. When God closed the side of the Ark, sealing in Noah and his family in the flood...there was no turning back. When the Israelites passed through the Red Sea, God closed it behind them. There was no returning to Egypt and slavery, to what had been.

Their lives remind us, instruct us of a deep spiritual truth in following God: our faith encourages us to let go of the past and embrace God's current guidance and blessings for us.

That God reminds us there is no returning to what seemed better and to look for the new things God is doing in our midst.

There is no going back to what was, only committing to going onward with God in trust, in following God for today and what is AND into what will be...into God's good plans for us.

But that is hard to learn. (grab the Bible and hold it, look at it) I am comforted by our trustworthy testimony that records how the Israelites struggled with letting go of the past and trusting God for God's new plans for them. They struggled again and again.

And since the apple doesn't fall far from the tree...maybe when we struggle at times, today can give us some perspective and insight.

Maybe our ancestors can instruct and support us. To overcome that temptation to want to go back to what was and to stay open to God's current NEW unfolding blessings.

First, a little historical perspective. Before the book of Ezra, the Israelites had been exiled in what is called the Babylonian Exile in 586 BCE. After a series of invasions, King Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylon destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple, taking many Judeans into captivity for 70 years.

It was a time marked by profound loss and reflection. Serving as a period of purification, forcing the Israelites to reevaluate their relationship with God.

Which should sound a bit familiar to us. I love how God always leads us in to the relevance of the Word! This should sound familiar.

Their exile echoing in many ways Jesus' 40 days in the desert where he was tempted and tested. And echoing our own Lenten journey in which we are seeking to repent, be refined and refocused on our relationship with the Lord.

Leading us to Ezra chapter 1, verse 1 where we see how God set things in motion as we read, “**...the Lord moved the heart of Cyrus the King**”. And from that point forward, King Cyrus released the Israelites and supplied them to rebuild the Temple and restore their faith.

Early in their return, they are laying the foundation to rebuild the temple. Verse 10 shows us this is a worship service. The priests are there in their colorful vestments, holding trumpets. The Levites with cymbals in hand and go to their places in preparation to praise the Lord.

As they all watch in hushed anticipation, holding their breaths, just as the cornerstone is completely, finally lowered into place, PRAISE erupts!

God is good; his love towards Israel endures forever! And all the people gave a great shout of praise to the Lord,

And that should be the end of the story. They returned and rebuilt the temple. And they all lived happily ever after!

Instead, something noteworthy happens, in the very next verse, “**But many of the older priests and Levites and family heads, who had seen the former temple, wept aloud when they saw the foundation of this temple being laid, while many others shouted for joy.**

No one could distinguish the sound of the shouts of joy from the sound of weeping, because the people made so much noise. And the sound was heard far away.

The weeping and the rejoicing in this passage were both so loud that they were indistinguishable. So, big feelings on both sides.

People were passionate about the present moment and others were remembering how things used to be...the glory of the old days and bigger temple. People responded with shouts of joy and some wept loudly.

In this rebuilding event in the life of the returning Israelites, this text shows us they held space for grieving what was AND held out hope for what will be.

But just imagine what would have happened for them if the Israelites had chosen not to remember and honor their past with tears? That wouldn't have been right.

Or what if they had chosen to stay stuck in the past and therefore unable to focus on the present moment, unable to perceive the blessings God was giving them even as they prepared for a better future?

But somehow, somehow they were able to cling to God and have room for all the emotions in this scene of great praise and worship.

I don't know if you are thinking back to a recent time in this church in which there was a desire to get back to normal. A time during Covid maybe? We just wanted to get back into our building, back together, back to what we knew and understood. Back to normal. Covid put all our churches through the wringer.

But I also became mindful of this, time also puts all our churches through the wringer. Through the same wringer that Covid did. Every church that tries to church, experiences this same dynamic of the Israelites.

Of one generation with gray hair and remembering when. Even as the next generations are being born, are growing up, and trying to figure out if church can be for them.

We can't lay all the blame of our struggles at the feet of Covid. It wasn't helpful at all! But we were struggling before Covid...to see God and church as relevant and worth our time.

Let's be honest with ourselves and each other, many had been asking this question in the quietness of their own hearts for years before Covid, this, **"Does God care if I go to church?"**

I am grateful for how Israel's rebuilding of the Temple helps us give meaning to our experiences of Covid and aging. We are grounded by their experience.

And I am also grateful for Israel's example of what they did to weather their storms. How they modeled trusting and worship of God, trusting God to give them strength to both honor their past and hope for their future.

This is a very real gift to us. Their example of praise and the promise that God is good. And that God's love for us endures.

This promise stabilizes us. God stabilizes us, always as our Rock. This praise and promise of God's nearness, helps hold the past, present, and future together... sustaining our spirit.

It's a promise big enough to hold, carry, and comfort everyone - those who are excited and those who are grieving and maybe we are both grieving AND excited.

We can hold space for all our emotions for all the mixed emotions that come with change, and growth, and growing up and growing old that happens in all the lives of God's people.

We won't invalidate or minimize what we are feeling. And we can simultaneously call each other to lives grounded in God's powerful, lavish, abiding love for us. Both are needed.

I invite you to re-center yourselves in the promise of God no matter the situation you are facing. And no matter your emotions about our present and future as a church.

You might even want to write, **"God is good, God's love toward Israel endures forever,"** on a piece of paper and put it somewhere you will see it regularly throughout your day.

To maybe help you navigate change and big emotions that arise. You could say this refrain whenever you are struggling to remain in the present or hopeful about the future. Because God is good, and God's love for us, for us personally...does endure forever.

And that truth is enough grace for us for this day. Amen.

Here are a few questions for our Time of Reflection now and the rest of this week:

What aspects of the past are you missing or grieving? How can you give thanks to God for those good things today, this week?

What are your hopes for the future? What new thing is God doing in your life now? And how can you give thanks today for those things and this week?