

THE RETURN HOME

“Going Home”

A sermon by

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TEXTS: Ezra 6:1-12 and Haggai 2:1-9

Ezra 6:1-12

Then King Darius made a decree, and they searched the archives where the documents were stored in Babylon. But it was in Ecbatana, the capital in the province of Media, that a scroll was found on which this was written: ‘A record. In the first year of his reign, King Cyrus issued a decree: Concerning the house of God at Jerusalem, let the house be rebuilt, the place where sacrifices are offered and burnt-offerings are brought; its height shall be sixty cubits and its width sixty cubits, with three courses of hewn stones and one course of timber; let the cost be paid from the royal treasury. Moreover, let the gold and silver vessels of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took out of the temple in Jerusalem and brought to Babylon, be restored and brought back to the temple in Jerusalem, each to its place; you shall put them in the house of God.’

‘Now you, Tattenai, governor of the province Beyond the River, Shethar-bozenai, and you, their associates, the envoys in the province Beyond the River, keep away; let the work on this house of God alone; let the governor of the Jews and the elders of the Jews rebuild this house of God on its site. Moreover, I make a decree regarding what you shall do for these elders of the Jews for the rebuilding of this house of God: the cost is to be paid to these people, in full and without delay, from the royal revenue, the tribute of the province Beyond the River. Whatever is needed—young bulls, rams, or sheep for burnt-offerings to the God of heaven, wheat, salt, wine, or oil, as the priests in Jerusalem require—let that be given to them day by day without fail, so that they may offer pleasing sacrifices to the God of heaven, and pray for the life of the king and his children. Furthermore, I decree that if anyone alters this edict, a beam shall be pulled out of the house of the perpetrator, who then shall be impaled on it. The house shall be made a dunghill. May the God who has established his name there overthrow any king or people that shall put forth a hand to alter this, or to destroy this house of God in Jerusalem. I, Darius, make a decree; let it be done with all diligence.’

Haggai 2:1-9

In the second year of King Darius, in the seventh month, on the twenty-first day of the month, the word of the LORD came by the prophet Haggai, saying: Speak now to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and to the remnant of the people, and say, Who is left among you that saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Is it not in your sight as nothing? Yet now take courage, O Zerubbabel, says the LORD; take courage, O Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest; take courage, all you people of the land, says the LORD; work, for I am with you, says the LORD of hosts, according to the promise that I made you when you came out of Egypt. My spirit abides among you; do not fear. For thus says the LORD of hosts: Once again, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land; and I will shake all the nations, so that the treasure of all nations shall come, and I will fill this

house with splendor, says the LORD of hosts. The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, says the LORD of hosts. The latter splendor of this house shall be greater than the former, says the LORD of hosts; and in this place I will give prosperity, says the LORD of hosts.

I remember going to see the new Robert Redford/ Paul Newman movie, *The Sting*, for the first time. As many of you know, I grew up in a rural setting outside a small steel town in Pennsylvania. The only con-men I had met were the shills for the carnival games at the Canfield County Fair or the Lawrence County Farm Show. You know the games I mean . . . the ones where even if you win a prize, it's not one of the big prizes on display . . . the anniversary clock, the giant stuffed teddy bear, or the new football. The prize you get is one of the cheap trinkets from under the counter. The entire purpose of the game is to separate you from your hard-earned money. You quickly learn two lessons. The first is "A fool and his money are soon parted." The second lesson is DON'T PLAY!

The Sting showed me the world of con men and con women. Aside from the great Scott Joplin score that introduced me to ragtime music, the plot of *The Sting* was enthralling. I was hooked. The story revolves around a bunch of grifters working together to pull off the "long con," the big "sting," in the depths of America's Great Depression.

The final scene of the movie depicts the raid of an illegal high-class off-track gambling den. During the raid, Paul Newman shoots his partner, Robert Redford, believing he has betrayed him. An FBI agent shoots Paul Newman. Robert Shaw, the mark, is hustled outside. He leaves a half a million dollars in wagered money behind.

The camera moves in for the close-up of Redford on the floor. The FBI agent kneels beside him. Blood oozes from both sides of Redford's mouth. He looks dead as a mackerel! The FBI agent whispers, "He's gone!" Suddenly, Redford opens one eye; then the other. Then he breaks out in a grin. The con men close up shop. All the grifters are paid. End of story. Who got conned? Well, certainly the mark, Doyle Lonnegan. Later, I realized that I got conned, too. They got me! I surely didn't see that coming!

On reflection, watching the movie a second time and third time, I began to pick up the clues. There were two stories. The real story that was happening behind the scenes and the fabricated story that often bore little resemblance to the real story.

It sort of sounds like Randy Frazee's *The Story* we have been following since September. There is the Upper Story, what God is doing behind the scenes. There is the Lower Story, what we experience here on the ground. God is sovereign and is weaving our story into His larger story, even using our mistakes, sins, and human failures to write the larger story of salvation. Sometimes it seems so unbelievable!

In 586 BC the Babylonian Empire destroys Judah and its capital city, Jerusalem. The walls are breached. Many of the best and the brightest of the Jewish people are exiled to Babylon. They spend seventy years in captivity. At least a generation and a half die in exile. Then, Babylon itself is defeated.

There is a new ruler on the scene, a new regime, a new way of doing things. It is the Persian Empire, and the Persian Empire is in control of Cyrus the Great. Cyrus was an unusual ruler for the time. The Babylonians brought the cream of Judean society to Babylon and tried to make good Babylonians out of them. It is a general rule that people who are forced to comply with tyranny find ways to resist. The Hebrews resist. They seek to maintain their culture and religion during their time in Babylon. They do maintain that culture. That is the story of Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego writ large.

When the Persians conquer Babylon, though, King Cyrus tries a different tack. Instead of trying to make Persians out of the conquered nations, Cyrus generously permits conquered people to keep their religion, their language, and their culture as long as they are loyal to Persia. He is one of

the first great champions of human rights. He lets exiles go home. He helps them re-establish their homelands. In the case of the Hebrews, Cyrus even promises to fund the rebuilding of their temple, providing the gold, silver, livestock, and materials to make it happen.

Amazingly, in the year 538 BC, fifty thousand Jews, funded by a pagan king named Cyrus, begin the march across the desert to return to Jerusalem. They are the pioneers. They are priests, Levites, and the advance guard who return under the leadership of Zerubbabel and the High Priest Joshua to rebuild a temple that only the very youngest of them might remember. They lay the foundation of the temple. Then they meet opposition. They get discouraged. They stop. The building of the temple languishes.

For sixteen years, the people settle in. They plant their fields. They rebuild their homes. They train their grapevines. They raise their children. Worship and sacrifice continue on the temple grounds, but without the temple itself.

The temple site itself looks like an abandoned construction site. Weeds grow up, small trees and bushes may be seen. Blocks of stone and piles of timber lie conspicuously about. In terms of worship, nothing much has changed since they first re-entered the land.

In Persia, Cyrus dies. A new king named Darius comes to the throne. In Judah, a prophet by the name of Haggai is given a word from the Lord. *“Thus, says the Lord of Hosts: ‘These people say that the time has not yet come to rebuild’ . . . ‘Is it a time for you yourselves to live in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins?’”* (Haggai 1:2 & 4) The people are overcome with zeal for God’s house. They are ready to begin, but there’s a problem. The governor wants to know who authorized the temple reconstruction. No one told him about it! Zerubbabel appeals to King Darius.

A search is made of the royal archives. Cyrus’s original decree is found. It is the decree that Cyndi read this morning.

The work begins.

In 515 BC the finishing touches are complete. The temple is restored. This is the temple that King Herod will later renovate and further adorn. This is the temple in whose courts Jesus will teach, where Jesus will overturn the tables of the moneychangers.

Back when Babylon destroyed the temple, who could even conceive that such a thing could take place? Who knew? Who saw this coming? Who would think a destroyed nation, a scattered people, a religion whose main place of worship has been destroyed, could ever rise again?

God.

I have a good friend who says, “Coincidence is when God performs a miracle and chooses to remain anonymous.” Have you ever experienced one of those? Have you ever had something happen in your life and later, while reading Scripture, God pulls back the veil and allows you to see how He has been at work in your life? You couldn’t see it at the time, but in retrospect, it all makes sense!

Sometimes, you cannot see God at work except in hindsight.

God’s prophets had foretold the return of a remnant. God’s prophets had promised the restoration of Israel. This return and rebuilding is living fulfillment of Ezekiel’s vision of the Valley of Dry Bones. The dry bones live again! This is the living fulfillment of Jeremiah’s prophecy, where God proclaims to the exiles, *“I have loved you with an everlasting love, therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you. Again I will build you, and you shall be built, O virgin Israel! Again you shall shake your tambourines, and go forth in the dance of the merry-makers.”* (Jeremiah 31:3b-4)

One hundred years before the return from exile, the Prophet Isaiah names Cyrus, by name, as the instrument God will use for this purpose. When Isaiah issues this prophecy, the Persian Empire does not yet exist. Cyrus has not yet been born. Is it any wonder that very few saw this coming?

“Thus, says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus . . . For the sake of my servant Jacob and Israel my chosen, I call you [Cyrus] by name, I surname you, though you do not know me. I am the Lord, and there is no other; besides me there is no god. I arm you, though you do not know me, so that they may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is no one besides me; I am the Lord, and there is no other.” (Isaiah 45:1a, 4-6)

The same thing happened with the birth of the Messiah. The prophecies were there . . . hundreds of them. How did they miss it? The same thing happened with the resurrection. The prophecies were there. How did they miss it? Yet, the disciples miss it. They did not truly understand until they went back and reread those prophecies in the light of what they had experienced and in light of what God had done.

Remember, all we can see is the Lower Story. It is only when we begin to read the Lower Story considering the Upper Story that we begin to understand how God is weaving disparate strands of history and human life into His greater story. It is then appropriate to praise God when you see how God has been at work behind the scenes to bring about a different ending to the story you thought you were writing.

In the Book of Psalms, there are fifteen Psalms called "Psalms of Ascent." One of these is Psalm 126. It is thought that this Psalm, and perhaps several other Psalms of Ascent, were written at the time of Nehemiah. This was when the third wave of exiles returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. By that time, the temple has been restored.

Psalm 126 is the Psalm the Jewish people recite before the Grace after Meals every Sabbath evening. The joy, celebration, and praise of this Psalm are telling.

Hear the words of this Psalm and imagine yourself as an exile of the third wave, returning home to Jerusalem and seeing the restored temple for the first time. Remember what you and your family have endured. Remember what you, as a people have lost. Remember those who died on the way to Babylon, and those who died along the way of return. Call to mind growing up in a foreign land, but now setting foot in the land of your birth, or the land of your ancestors. Only then will you get the sense of power that resides in these words.

"When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then it was said among the nations, 'The Lord has done great things for them.' The Lord has done great things for us and we rejoiced.

"Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like the watercourses in the Negeb. May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy. Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves." (Psalm 126:1-6)

The eyes of faith see things that faithless eyes cannot see. The eyes of faith see providence where other people see only coincidence. We didn't see that one coming! Yet God did!

It was God's plan in God's time for God's people for God's reasons. Others may see coincidence. Believers see providence.

While he was a missionary in Africa in 1968, William Pruitt had an unusual experience. After a long, tiring day he returned to a little hideaway house he'd built years before. He was exhausted when he reached the house and turned in for a good night's sleep.

The next morning, he awoke and "thanked God for another day of life." He prayed that God would watch over him. Then he checked a small engine he had in the storage room. He hadn't been to the hideaway for some time and wanted to see if the engine was still there. In a corner of the storage room he saw something that looked like rope. It was black and coiled into a circle as though very carefully placed there. "I don't remember having a rope like that," he thought to himself. The next thing he knew he felt a spray of liquid on his face and in his eye. "It was as though a red-hot nail had been driven through my right eye," was how he described it. What he thought was a rope was a spitting cobra, one of the most poisonous of snakes. Frantically he splashed cold water onto his face. The pain was excruciating.

Someone nearby heard his scream. Three persons he did not know came to his rescue. The first came and killed the snake. The second was a nurse. She was unsure how to treat him but then remembered a sample of an eye medication she had stuck in her bag. "I don't know anything about it," she said, "but it's all we have." Half an hour later the third stranger appeared, he was a French doctor. The doctor treated William and instructed him to get some rest. After a few hours the doctor

was gone, and he never told them his name. As you can imagine, it was a long day for William. Would he live? Would he have his eyesight? These were the questions he pondered that day.

The next morning his eyesight was fully restored and so was his energy. In fact, his eye wasn't even red. William offered a simple yet heartfelt prayer to God. "I thanked Him for all of those who had had part in my recovery...."¹

Had William Pruitt been the object of an extraordinary series of coincidences? Is that how he was healed? William doesn't think so. Was it just a coincidence that a doctor and a nurse were in the area that day to offer their help? William firmly believes that God had a part in what took place that day twenty-five years ago.

That is the nature of the covenantal relationship that Israel had with God. It is also the nature of the covenantal relationship we have with God. It goes back to the covenant with Abraham and is reiterated throughout the Old Testament. "I will be your God and you will be my people." To all the world, it may look like coincidence, but it is not!

It might seem unusual that God is using Cyrus, or permitting exiles to return to Jerusalem, or making the means and resources available to rebuild the temple. It is not. God is merely fulfilling his part of the covenant with his people, his promise to restore the conditions of Eden where He will dwell with His people. God uses ordinary means to achieve extraordinary ends. God uses ordinary people, even pagan kings like Cyrus and Darius to bring about extraordinary events.

We didn't see that coming! But we should have. God never punishes just because God is cranky. God is not arbitrary. God accomplishes God's purposes even in the midst of judgment. God is holy. Holiness requires judgment or it God's law is meaningless. However, God is also love. Love provides restoration or we are beyond hope. God is working God's purposes out so that ". . . all things work together for good, for those who love God and are called according to His purposes." (Romans 8:28)

God keeps covenant with God's people. The remnant returns to Zion, as promised. God re-establishes the nation of Israel in its own land. God writes a new ending. Isn't it wonderful that we may begin again? Isn't it great that the story we so often write is not inscribed in marble forever. F. Scott Fitzgerald famously wrote, "There are no second acts in America." I believe that Fitzgerald was wrong. The God revealed in the pages of the Scriptures is described as the redeemer of our collective and individual stories. We do not need to end as we have begun. We can have a second act.

That second act is not because of us. It is only because of God.

David describes God this way in Psalm 103, "*The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He will not always accuse, nor will he keep his anger forever. He does not deal with us according to our sins, or repay us according to our iniquities. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion for his children, so the Lord has compassion for those who fear him. For he knows how we were made; he remembers that we are dust.*" (Psalm 103:8-14)

Soli Deo Gloria. To God alone be the glory. AMEN.

¹ "Strange Day at Lake Munkamba." William F. Pruitt. Snowflakes in September. Nashville: Dimensions for Living, 1992, pp. 55-59.