

“Rebuild and Raise Up; Repair and Restore”

Isaiah 58:9b-12 Rev. Clinton G. Roberts First Presbyterian Church of Lake Forest August 21, 2022

On the 29th of October, in the year 539 BC, the seasoned soldiers of Cyrus the Great strode down the long Processional Way leading to the blue-tiled Ishtar Gate in the City of Babylon, which was actually three magnificent gates constructed by King Nebuchadnezzar 36 years earlier at the height of the Neo-Babylonian Empire. I have seen the remnant of these gates in the Topkapi Palace of the Ottoman Sultan in Istanbul, and the lions depicted on these glazed blue tiles are spectacular. But it was Nebuchadnezzar who destroyed the gates, walls and palaces of Jerusalem and razed the Temple of Solomon itself in 587 BC, forcing the King of Judah and its leading citizens into captivity. Half a century later, Cyrus the Great would reverse these deprivations, promulgating the Edict of Restoration allowing the Jews to return to their homeland, as this is recorded at the end of the Second Book of Chronicles.

What the people saw upon their return was very different than what things looked like before the Babylonian Conquest. Jerusalem’s walls were breached and broken down in many places; the streets were depopulated and in disrepair; and the Temple of Solomon, one of the wonders of the ancient world, was gone altogether.

To say that God’s people were discouraged by this would be an understatement. A time of fasting and penitence was proclaimed, which even extended to a call to “put away” all foreign wives as a form of Nativism and an attempt to propitiate Yahweh. Yet during these difficult years, which are recorded in the Book of Ezra and addressed by the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, the walls were repaired. And although it was far less grand than before, the Temple of God was rebuilt. God’s people took action to move their faith—and their nation—forward into whatever future God would choose to provide. The very heart of this faithfulness would be expressed in words attributed to the prophet Isaiah, who walked the streets of Jerusalem two centuries earlier saying, *“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light”* (Isa. 9:2). And now, an unknown voice of equal power and promise, standing firmly in the tradition of Isaiah would speak to a different time and a different historical context: *“...then your light shall rise in the darkness, and your gloom be like the noonday”* (Isa. 58:10). And that brings to mind Jesus, who said in his Sermon on the Mount, *“You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hid...let your light shine before others, that they may see the good you are doing and give glory to your Father in heaven”* (Mt. 5:14-16).

When the Jewish people returned from Exile in Babylon, some believed that the path to restoration lay in cultic practices of fasting and sacrifice. But the prophet who gave us the final chapters of Isaiah had something far more revolutionary in mind. Speaking for God, the prophet wrote:

“Is this not the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke; to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn...you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, ‘Here I am’”
(Isa. 58:6-9).

Our text for today immediately follows that call to action, and it brings with it a promise that when we seek to “*unburden*” those who are weighed down by poverty, homelessness and injustice, when we stop playing the “blame-game” and refrain from false and malicious speech; when we undertake to feed, clothe, empower and care for one another, then these actions (and not our religious observances) will turn our gloom into the noonday sun. We’ll become like a well-watered garden, and we will walk forward to “*Rebuild, Raise Up, Repair, and Restore*” the foundations laid down in this nation over many generations. It is God who will achieve these things through us—the promise cannot be clearer than that.

II

In many aspects, I believe, there are clear parallels—some are physical, but even more are spiritual—which connect God’s people who returned from Babylonian Exile with God’s people who are returning now from an Exile caused by this Pandemic. While the perils of Covid-19 in all its iterations are not over, churches in America have re-opened their doors—but to much smaller congregations. According to a recent study in The Christian Century, out of a survey of 10,441 adults taken just before Easter, only 27% said they had attended church services in person that month, which is down by more than half from an average of 67% before the pandemic. And these numbers have not moved much during the five months following.

In a corresponding development reported in Christianity Today, pastors are leaving the ministry at 3 times the rate which occurred before the pandemic. Ask any serving pastor, and they will nod with understanding. It is hard, even demoralizing, to serve in such a time as this, when some congregations are even pointing their fingers in blaming their own spiritual leaders for the decline in attendance.

I was speaking with a presbytery executive from a neighboring presbytery the other day about this, and he said he has seen a number of churches, both small and large, who are engaging in this behavior. But the problem goes much deeper than this. Our churches have been in decline for more than a generation. And succeeding generations, beginning with the Boomers but accelerating through the Millennials and even more with Gen Z, are now viewing organized religion, and specifically Christianity, as increasingly irrelevant to their faith and lifestyle. That is the sea we’re swimming in. And it’s affecting all our congregations to greater or lesser degrees.

Like many of you seated here today or watching online, I remember a time when churches in America were booming. It was in the 1950's and 60s. World War Two with all its horrors was over. Millions of Americans were going to church—or starting new ones. Growing up in Swarthmore, PA, churches were packed on Sunday morning. And they were packed in Lake Forest also. Deb's father, a Presbyterian Minister in California, started a number of new congregations in little over a decade. He rented out an Elementary School cafeteria in a new subdivision, put out the word, and the people would come, bringing their children with them.

It was a different time in America, but the same God was being worshiped as the God we worship today. And when we read texts like this one from the Post-Exilic period, we realize that God hasn't changed. God is still with us, and Jesus Christ is *"the same yesterday, today and forever"* (Heb. 13:8).

When I think about the times we're living through, when, according to McKinsey & Company, a research group, in nations like the UK, Australia, Canada and even India along with the US, people are quitting their jobs at a rate 25% higher than before the pandemic, and 65% of these people are not returning to the same industry. We can see that we're really entering into a new era, where new strategies and creative adaptations will become increasingly critical across both church and society—and in our political life as well.

I'm reminded of a conversation between Frodo and Gandalf in J.R.R. Tolkien's Lord of the Rings, which was written during the height of the Second World War. Reflecting on the war with Sauron the Dark Lord, Frodo says, *"I wish it need not have happened in my time."* *"So do I,"* responds Gandalf, *"and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us."*

Those words ring true for this time, and our church, as well.

III

Last Fall, as the Omicron variant was threatening to shut us down again, First Pres. set forth on a path ahead, to which the congregation responded with the strongest stewardship in years. The path envisioned a future which included a re-investment in ministry, the acquisition of needed technology and a substantial increase in mission outreach to our community and beyond.

- We began planning for a return to 2 services in the Fall of '22, but with a different strategy: offering 2 services with different music but the same message. Many of you have met Christina Maldonado, our new Worship Team Leader who will help us achieve this strategy.

- We invested in cameras, audio, outdoor worship capacity and online streaming to minister to those who were not sitting in the Sanctuary on Sundays but were connecting with us in other ways.
- When war broke out in the Ukraine last February, we responded with more than \$50,000 in direct relief while adding 3 new mission partnerships totaling \$60,000 in support. And at the end of April, we successfully brought back the Annual Spring Rummage Sale which supports all our missions and serves our neighbors in need.
- Lastly, during a time when people are leaving the ministry, our own Jim Cochrane is entering the ministry through God's call to serve as our Associate Pastor for Youth and Young Adults—even as we continue to seek an additional Pastor in Faith Formation to help move all our ministries forward.

This is what it looks like for us to “*Rebuild, Raise Up, Repair and Restore*” the foundations of our church after a time of enforced exile: foundations which reach back many generations. How will this happen? The message from Isaiah is clear. God will do it through us—when we don't lose sight of the Main Thing. The Main Thing is not institutional survival: it is “*feeding the hungry*” and “*caring for the afflicted;*” it is “*loosing the bonds of injustice,*” and “*helping the burdened walk free.*”

As Jesus said so clearly, on the night before his death, the Main Thing is to *love one another* as he has loved us, and to put that love into action—in all the ways we can. God has promised to be with us “*in parched places,*” which may accurately describe your life—and your spirit—this morning. But if that is the case, remember this: God is the giver of life, and God is ever-faithful. God will strengthen you from the inside out: he will “*make your bones strong,*” and you will become like “*a watered garden.*”

I know this is true because I happen to be married to a gardener, and my job is to water the garden which Deb and I have been tending together for 40 years this very day. I know that with God's help, we will continue to grow our garden—and so will you. So will you, because God is with you in parched places. And God's living waters never fail.

Amen.