

In a few months we will go back --

Rebuild the House of the Lord

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on September 13, 1992, the 14th Sunday after Pentecost. Scripture Lessons: Ezra 1; 2 Corinthians 5:1; Mark 13:1-8.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

After the fire that destroyed our church I turned in every direction for help as to how to proceed. I called the national headquarters of our church in Louisville, Kentucky. I called the Synod and the Presbytery. But no one seemed to know what to do when a church burns down. Finally, I turned to the Bible and remembered the story of what God's people once did after their temple was destroyed. The story is found in the Old Testament books of Ezra and Nehemiah. ^{Since I will be preaching ... encourage you to read} Ezra tells the story of how God stirred up the spirits of God's people to rebuild the Temple which had been destroyed. ^{in later chapters} Ezra goes on to show how, in the process of rebuilding, God ~~rebuild~~, renewed, and revived ^{The relationship of his people to himself.} God's people. The book of Nehemiah goes on to show that God's concern was *not only for the Temple and the renewal of faith of his people.* His concern was for the renaissance of the whole city of Jerusalem. ^{also} I believe that God is stirring the hearts of his people here in Oxford to rebuild the Oxford Presbytery Church. And it's exciting to think that, through this process of rebuilding, we will be rebuilt and reformed and revived as God's people after many years of disappointment and deferred hope. ~~And~~ ^{also} It's exciting to think that, perhaps, God wants us to lead the way, ~~not only in rebuilding our church, but~~ in rebuilding and reviving the whole town of Oxford in every area of its life; in the areas of business, and justice and education, ^{economics} and family life.

We aren't the only ones who've had to rebuild a church after a fire. I take heart from the story of the rebuilding of the temple which is found in the ~~Old~~

~~Testament book~~ of Ezra. There are amazing parallels between what we've gone

through these past 3 years and what happened to the people of God 2,500 years ago.

*Maybe God will stir up our spirits & encourage us to our efforts to Rebuild & complete
Notice these parallels. ~~At the~~ Presbyterian Home & beyond.*

1. Both Solomon's Temple and our church were destroyed and reduced to rubble. Just as God preserved his people despite the destruction of the Temple, God has preserved us despite the loss of our Church.

2. The Old Testament people of God became exiles from their land and house of worship for about 70 years. During their many years of exile the People of God discovered that God could be worshipped and served without the Temple. Many ancient people once conquered, lost their religion and identity, but God's Old Testament people maintained their identity and faith. They not only maintained their identity, they grew in their understanding of who God is and what God requires of us.

We also have been exiled from our land and building, although for only three years. Despite the loss of our beautiful church building, God has preserved and strengthened our identity and sense of purpose. For example, shortly after the fire, the Building Planning Committee visited churches that had burned and rebuilt. All of them suffered a loss of membership and a reduction in their worship attendance. But God has blessed us. Two years before the fire our average attendance was about 150 a week. Our average attendance after the fire has been about 175 a week and I believe and am trusting God to take us over the 200 a week threshold when we get back into our church. Before the fire our high school Sunday School class was lucky to have two or three kids. We began the Fall Sunday School season with 15 high school kids. Several weeks ago I was thrilled when two high school kids stood up and

gave a brief testimony as to how their relationship to the Risen Christ has been strengthened. It's wonderful what God has done for us since we've been exiled from our land and house of worship.

2. Not all of God's people returned from the Babylonian Exile to *Jerusalem* but only those whose spirit God had stirred got ready to go up and rebuild the house of the LORD. Not all of our members have stayed with us. Most have and we've even added new members. But some members have left. We shouldn't disparage those who haven't stayed with us to rebuild the House of the Lord. May God bless them and enable them to grow spiritually and serve the Lord to the fullest capacity. But, praise the Lord, God has stirred your hearts to respond to the great and once in a life-time challenge to rebuild our House of the Lord in Oxford.

3. The Old Testament people of God faced opposition and discouragement in their attempt to rebuild the Temple. They laid the foundation of the temple but then had to postpone the building of the rest of it for years and years. Long years went by when nothing seemed to be happening.

We've also faced discouragement and delays in rebuilding of the church. From May of 1989 to September of 1990 the ruins stood and nothing seemed to be happening. Then the walls were leveled and the rubble removed. It looked like something was finally happening. But then we waited for another year before the foundation was laid and the walls began to rise. We hope to get into our rebuilt church by January but it may be years before the work is completed. But in spite of discouragement and delays, God has stirred our hearts to rebuild the House of the Lord.

4. There's another parallel between those who rebuilt the Old Testament Temple and we who are rebuilding the Oxford Presbyterian Church. Both they and us have enjoyed the financial support of the community beyond our own membership. "All their neighbors aided them with silver vessels, with gold, with goods, with animals, and with valuable gifts..." Surely, God stirred the spirits of his people in Babylon to return and build the house of the Lord when their neighbors contributed so much towards the rebuilding.

What an encouragement it has been to me to receive gifts from our neighbors; to hear people like Carl Fretz express his concern that our church be rebuilt. The people of this town want our church rebuilt almost as badly as we do. Many people who aren't affiliated with our church believe that our church standing and ministering in the middle of the town is essential to the identity and spiritual life of Oxford.

We've received gifts from nearly every state in the union. We've received gifts from other countries. We've received gifts from churches, near and far, from service organizations, from young people who have given away their baby sitting money. God has stirred up the spirits of many people and organizations to rebuild the House of the Lord.

Why? Because God has given us a vision. God has given us a vision of a church that transforms the culture and town. God has given us a vision of a church which believes that God's word has application to every area of life: ~~to politics and economics and social issues.~~ God has stirred our spirits with a vision of a church that's for the whole community, and not for just ourselves and for people just like

us; for the poor and the rich; for the old and the young; for the handicapped and the spry; for the liberal and the conservative; the strong in faith and for the doubting. Surely the Lord God whom we've come to know in Jesus Christ has stirred the hearts of many of us to rebuild the House of the Lord.

5. There's still another parallel. Many things were saved from Solomon's Temple before its destruction; silver and gold basins; silver bowls and many other kinds of vessels. They were saved and taken to Babylon where they were placed in the house of Nebuchadnezzar's gods. King Cyrus of Persia had them released so they could be brought back to Jerusalem and to the rebuilt temple.

We also saved many things out of the church. We saved the communion service. We saved the bells.^{we saved nearly all my books} We saved many chairs and some furniture which the youth group has cleaned up. We saved the bell tower. We saved some iron pillars which are being used in the new church. The stone circle which was on the facade of the old church was saved and will be incorporated in the new one. These old things provide continuity with the past and remind us of how God has delivered us, like Shadrach, Meshech and Abednego, from the fiery furnace and, like Jonah, God has delivered us from the belly of the whale that threatened to swallow us up and destroy us. ^{I am looking forward to bringing these things back to our church building}

One final thing which I don't know yet whether it's a parallel or not.

Solomon's temple lasted nearly 400 years before it was destroyed. The Temple which the returned exiles rebuilt lasted for about 500 years, or a hundred years longer. It was this rebuilt temple that was graced with the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ, first as a little child whose parents brought him to the temple for his dedication; and later, as a man he came to cleanse the temple.

Our neo-gothic church was completed in 1864. It burned down 125 years later. May our rebuilt church last 200 - 300 years or more, and may we be blessed with many visitations of the Lord Jesus Christ in the person of the Holy Spirit.

The story that Ezra tells has become our story. *We are at a time when we expect everything to happen instantly...*

Pray that God will continue to stir ^{our spirits} ~~the spirit of God's people~~ to give freewill offerings to rebuild the church. God has certainly been stirring my heart to rebuild as I've talked to people in the community, with fellow pastors, and with people from out of town who have all been praying for us and often giving to us. God has stirred my spirit, especially, with some of the letters we've received. One first grader wrote a note to Dave and Beth Keefer which Dave shared with me, "Dear Mr. and Mrs. Keefer, I am sorry about your church. I know how much you liked your church. I liked the church, too. *I hope that the people build a new church... Love, Michael Maxwell.*" And little Ramon Aguilar wrote, "The church in Oxford burned down. I saw the fire... It was a very big fire.... The organ burned, all the stained glass windows, and the piano. The people are going to fix the church. They are going to build it again."

Let us pray: "O Lord... stir up the spirit of your people to rebuild the church." May that be the continual prayer of all of us.

**Oxford Presbyterian Church
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (USA)**

A Simple Outline of Ezra and Nehemiah

Ezra 1-6	The Return of Zerubbabel and the Reconstruction of the Temple
Ezra 7-10	The Return under Ezra and the Reconstruction of the People of God
Nehemiah 1-4; 6:1-7:3	The Return under Nehemiah and the Reconstruction of the Walls
Nehemiah 7:4-12:43	Renewal and Reform

Ezra and Nehemiah in their Historical Context

1000 BC	Saul becomes first king of Israel (1002 BC - 1000 BC) King David (1000 BC - 960 BC) King Solomon (960 BC - 925 BC) The Temple is built in Jerusalem
753 BC	Foundation of the city of Rome
587 BC	Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylonian Empire conquers the kingdom of Judea, burns and demolishes the Temple in Jerusalem, brings the monarchy to an end, and deports many Jews into captivity in Babylon (The Babylonian Captivity lasts, roughly, 70 years). The people of God cease to be a political kingdom and begin to become a "church"
553 BC	Cyrus II, the Great, of Persia (553-529) conquers Lydia, the Medes, and the Babylonian Empire. In 536 BC he frees Jews from the Babylonian Captivity and aids their return to Israel.
538 BC	The rebuilding of the Temple of Jerusalem begins under the leadership of Zerubbabel (538 BC - 516 BC). It takes over 20 years to complete the Temple
Ca 458 BC	Ezra comes to Jerusalem to rebuild the people through teaching and enforcing the Law of God.
Ca 445 BC	Nehemiah comes to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem
356 BC	Alexander the Great born
100 BC	Julius Caesar born The Birth, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus
AD 70	The Jerusalem Temple burned and demolished due to Jewish revolt against Roman rule. The Temple has never been rebuilt.