

Table and Temple

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church on September 20, 1992. Scripture Lessons: Ezra 3:1-13.

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

Do you ever look at the size of our new church and get scared? Will we be able to afford the utility bills? Do you ever worry about the state of the economy and the financial difficulties that many of us are in and wonder how we'll ever have enough money to finish our church? ~~Do you ever wonder if our willingness to sacrifice time, energy, and money is strong enough to make this venture a success? Will new generations of men and women come to trust in Christ and serve him as Lord and Savior through the ministry of this church?~~

Those who built the second temple also had a lot of fears. They were a conquered people dependent upon the good will of the Persian emperor, Cyrus, to build. They were surrounded by neighbors on the north, east, south and west who were hostile to their religion. They had their own destroyed towns and homes to rebuild. But, despite their fears, they began to rebuild some fifty years after Solomon's Temple was destroyed.

As we anticipate returning to our new church, let's continue to prepare ourselves by reading the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. I hope what we read will encourage us. In today's Scripture Lesson I want to draw your attention to four principles that guided the Old Testament people of God as they prepared to return to their new temple.

1. The first principle is the importance of corporate worship: "When the seventh month came, and the Israelites were in the towns, *the people gathered*

together in Jerusalem." Thousands of Jews returned to the Holy Land and settled in many towns and villages. But when the seventh month came they put aside their private concerns and the work of rebuilding their own homes and towns and gathered as one people in Jerusalem. *to celebrate the rebuilding of the Temple, etc*

Have you ever noticed how people enjoy celebrating together. When we have to ^{celebrate} *an anniversary, a family reunion, wedding* we travel for miles and miles. People travel from all over the North East to State College whenever there's a home football game. This afternoon thousands of Eagle fans will gather in Veterans Stadium to see ~~them beat~~ ^{get beaten} Denver even though I'll see it so much better on the television and won't get any beer spilled on me. ~~Do you~~ ^{ever} think of how Quakers travel for miles in order to sit together in absolute silence. ^{There is} ~~There's~~ something about shared silence that's different from solitary silence. And when Christians have something to celebrate, as we do every week in the resurrection of Jesus, we come together as one people.

"My faith is a private thing," people say. "I believe in Jesus, but I don't need the church." Not! People who are redeemed and saved by Christ can't celebrate adequately what God has done for us in Christ as solitary, isolated individuals. The Christian faith is not merely a private and personal faith. It's a public faith. It expresses itself in public worship.

As we anticipate returning to our church, therefore, I'm proposing that we make an all out effort to invite all our members to join with us corporately to worship God. I'd like every member of our congregation to receive a personal letter ^{phone call or visit} from another member announcing ~~to them~~ when we're re-entering our church and inviting them to gather with all God's people who are members of this church to worship. ~~We'll make a~~

~~concerted effort to contact all our members before we return to our sanctuary.~~ We'll write to out of town members to invite them to journey from wherever they are to join us as we celebrate our coming home. They need to know they're still valued members. We'll contact all our shut-ins... some may be able to attend with help from us... but we'll make an effort for them all to know they're a part of our congregation even if they're physically unable to join with us.

This is a time for every member to renew our commitment the priority of corporate worship as an expression of our love for God and God's people.

2. As we prepare to enter our church a second principle is the principle of sacrifice. "Then Jeshua son of Jozadak, with his fellow priests, and Zerubbabel ... with his kin set out to build the altar of the God of Israel, to offer burnt offerings on it..." They sacrificed daily, weekly and monthly.

The sacrifice of Christ on the cross brought to an end, once and for all, our need to bring animal sacrifices to God. There's no sacrifice we can make which can earn forgiveness for our sins. Whatever sacrifices we make for Christ and his Kingdom, we do so out of gratitude for what God has done for us through Christ.

The rebuilding of our church has led many of us to make sacrifices. And we'll all be called upon to make far greater sacrifices in years to come in order for us to see the House of the Lord completed. Nothing worthwhile is accomplished without sacrifice. Because we've experienced the steadfast love of God for us, sacrifice is a way that we express our love for God.

3. A third principle that guides us as we prepare to reenter our church is the principle of obedience to Scripture. "Jeshua and Zerubbabel set out to build... as

prescribed in the law of Moses the man of God." And when the foundation of the Temple were laid and worship began they were careful to do everything "according to the directions of King David of Israel." Those who rebuilt the temple were concerned to obey the Word of God that had come through Moses in the Law of God and David in the Psalms.

On the connection your church will be a reference to Eph 2:20,

Scripture read and preached always takes precedence in Reformed worship. Our Directory of Worship says that "the reading, hearing, preaching, and confessing of the Word are central to Christian worship". Nothing should take precedence, in our worship, over the reading and preaching of God's Word.

We hear so many words. We hear the words of politicians. We hear the words of news commentators and entertainers. We hear the words of family, friends and neighbors. We hear the word of enemies. These words sometimes-frighten us, or intimidate us, or frustrate us, or anger us, or puzzle us. Reformed Christians hear these words and take them seriously ~~when that is called for~~, but we seek to measure all these words against the standard of the Word of God in Scripture; *we seek to understand the world in the light of God's ancient revelation,*

Karl Barth exhorted ministers to preach with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. He didn't want preaching to be disconnected from the world of current events; neither did he want ministers to preach their own opinions and ideas. As our Directory of Worship says, "In Christian worship the people of God hear the Word proclaimed, receive the Word enacted in Sacrament, discover the Word in the world, and are sent to follow the Word into the world." As we prepare to reenter our church let's renew our commitment to read, hear, study, love and obey the Word of God in Scripture. Let our worship and every area of our lives be lived in accordance to

Scripture.

4. A fourth and final principle that I find in our Scripture lesson is that we experience mixed emotions in all the most significant events in our lives. When we return to our church we may expect it to be a time of mixed emotions. When the foundations of the second temple were laid "many of the priests and Levites and heads of families, old people who had seen the first house on its foundations, wept with a loud voice when they saw this house, though many shouted aloud for joy, so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people's weeping, for the people shouted so loudly that the sound was heard far away."

Isn't this the way it is with all significant events. At wedding we often see tears of sadness as well as tears of joy. Even at funerals when there is so often tears of sadness there are, nevertheless, often tears of joy as we remember we love the humanity of our loved ones.

Returning to our church will be a significant event in our lives. Few if any of us will ever have the opportunity of going through a church building process again. The church that we're building is built to last. It isn't a plastic, throw-away church. We're building a church to meet not just our needs and the needs of the town today, but we've tried to anticipate the needs of God's people ten, fifty, hundred years from now. And because the event of going back to the church will be such a significant, once in a life time, event in our lives there will be mixed feelings among us.

Some of you were never in the old church. Some of you were too young to remember it. But many of you remember it very well. You remember the pew where you and your friends and family sat. You remember little details that only someone

who worshiped and worked in that church would be aware of. When we go back to our church you'll remember where you stood before the communion table when you got married in the old church. You'll remember the stone baptismal font when your child was baptized. You'll remember receiving Holy Communion. You'll remember the room where you met with the elders ^{as a child} to be received to the sacrament of Holy Communion. ^{stained glass windows} You'll remember the old church, even as we enter the new, and you may expect to shed tears of sorrow because it won't be the same and you'll wonder, with sadness, whether you'll live to see the sanctuary and Christian education rooms completed.

You young people, on the other hand, live this life largely in the future, just as I did when I was your age. This is certainly not an unbending rule, but very frequently the older member will be looking back and within as he or she enters the new church, ^{How well may be for wedding; How well it be for playing sardines;} whereas the younger member will be looking ahead. And this is how it should be; looking back to the old and God's steadfast love in good times and in bad times and looking forward to the future that God's steadfast love has prepared for us.

As we return to our church in a few months, maybe in a mere 12 weeks, look back and review the many times you experienced God's steadfast love; but look forward as well to the great future God has for his people in this place. And when we return may our rejoicing be so loud that this town and those far away will know that God is among us.

Let us pray: Almighty God, you have set us the task of building a new church where generations yet unborn will worship you; look graciously upon our efforts. Inspire us by your Spirit, that we may not become despondent, but may have faith to match all difficulties, believing that in your strength we may, not only, soon enter it with joy, but also complete it in due time. We ask this through our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.