

Homecoming

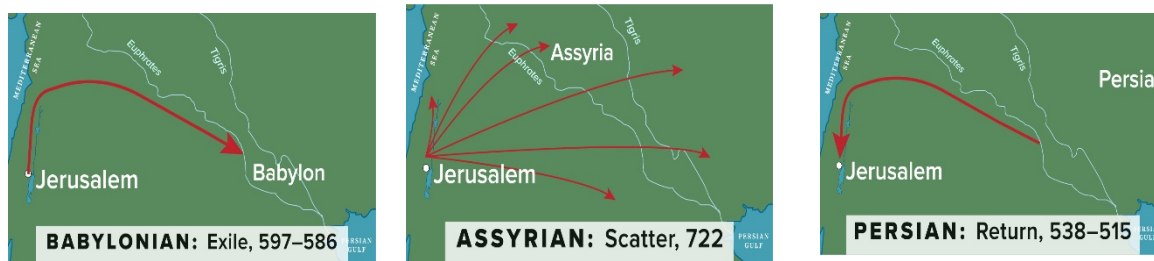
Ezra and the return from Exile

CCC – the Story Jan 6, 2019

\$ Announcement – Giving in December was amazing – 1.4 Million. That means that at this point, our total expenses match our total giving. A really good place to start in January! It also means that we are just about halfway through our Beyond Belief giving totals – Just over 12 Million dollars about halfway through our time. There are some people who are giving ahead of the curve with great generosity and others who are behind the curve, but we are trusting that in the end, we will all be faithful to our commitments and generous in our mindset and trusting in God together, he will provide! Can we all just praise God for his goodness to the church financially?

Israelites – Yearning for home after 70 years in Exile. The Story – Going through the Biblical narrative from the Garden of Eden to the New Jerusalem... We are about 60% done and heading fast toward the climax. Currently, the people of Judah are in exile... but if you are new to the Story, you have no idea what that means! Also, you need to get your free copy of the story as you leave and read chapter 20 for next week!

Review – 400 years of kingdom... 3 huge empires



Come back = Zerubbabel – People and Temple - Ezra – the Law

- Centers around four letters from Persian Monarchs telling the people of Israel to reestablish their home:

2 "This is what Cyrus king of Persia says:

"The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. 3 Any of his people among you may go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple of the Lord, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem, and may their God be with them. 4 And in any locality where survivors may now be living, the people are to provide them with silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with freewill offerings for the temple of God in Jerusalem."

Joy of Homecoming – Big deal... getting home

What is home for you? - A place- Maybe Omaha. Or maybe somewhere else and Omaha is just a stopping place. A memory. A person?

Airport Story? Flight delayed due to mechanics... new plane towed over... Pilot went past his legal flight time.... New pilot... refused... new pilot, but had to wait til he landed to even ask him. All we wanted was home! And for that moment, home was just a roof over my head, clean sheets and my BED!

2 Big Victories

- The temple was built! Moreover, King Cyrus brought out the articles belonging to the temple of the Lord, which Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and had placed in the temple of his god. Ezra 1:7
- The festivals started – Feast of booths... 7 day party in tents to remember 40 years in wilderness. Then Joshua son of Jozadak and his fellow priests and Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and his associates began to build the altar of the God of Israel to sacrifice burnt offerings on it, in accordance with what is written in the Law of Moses the man of God. ³Despite their fear of the peoples around them, they built the altar on its foundation and sacrificed burnt offerings on it to the Lord, both the morning and evening sacrifices. ⁴Then in accordance with what is written, they celebrated the Festival of Tabernacles with the required number of burnt offerings prescribed for each day . Ezra 3:2-4

2 Big Disappointments

- No Glory in the Temple ¹²But 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. Ezra 3:12
- Married Foreigners...who worshipped other gods... didn't you learn from the exile?
- Ezra finds out and he pulls out his beard and rips his clothes and weeps. And the book ends on the awful note of a list of people who intermarried with idol worshippers.

Babylonian Exile ended and it didn't end. Practically, the Jews lived in Jerusalem, but the Persians still rule the Jews, then the Greeks, then the Romans. The Temple is there, but not the glory. The people are there, but keep rebelling on critical things – like marrying idol worshippers.. Exile actually becomes a metaphor for their condition for 500 years.

Babylon itself became synonymous with 'the evil kingdom that sent us into exile.' This is a pattern.

Notice:

- In the garden of Eden, when people rebelled against God, they were sent out of the garden and into exile. After multiple episodes of ongoing decay, where did they wind up? The tower of Babel – i.e. Babylon. Last thing before God called Abraham to go to Israel.
- In the book of Revelation, Babylon is pictured as the great evil kingdom. When Babylon falls, our new spiritual kingdom – the new heavens and new earth – are established.

But in between these realities, we have the NOW. In the now we live in exile.

- For example, we might say that right now we love our homes, we love our state, we love our country. It is all very nice – maybe the best in the world.

- But I am still marked by sin and depravity, as are my relationships.
- I yearn for God’s glory in this world like the Jewish people yearned for it in the temple. THERE HAS GOT to be SOMETHING MORE! Jesus brought a glimpse of the kingdom, but it is still coming in its fullness. We really were made for something more.
- We get glimpses of it, but it is only partway here... such is the nature of the kingdom of God
 - This is why we see some people get healed, but others live with maladies for a lifetime. The kingdom is here, but still coming in its fullness
 - This is why we see the alleviation of so much poverty, but people still starve around the world. The kingdom is here, but still coming in its fullness
 - This is why we see technological progress, economic health and great art, but we still fall short on sexual ethics, the explosion of pornography, selfishness, litigation, ego, and more...

Might I propose this simple thought for us today.

- The home we want is not a place or a building or a city.
- Home isn’t a feeling or an environment
- Home is not even the people that you love the most. People will come and go.

Home is God himself. Listen to me on this one.

- What the Jewish people needed was not the place of God, it was the presence of God.
- Giving themselves to idols, intermarrying and excluding people when they returned were all ways that they showed their need was not a changed context, but a changed heart. They needed what Ezekiel said “I will take your heart of stone and replace it with a heart of flesh
- A.W. Tozer said it well. “What you think about God is the most important thing about you.”
- Now if you want a bite sized takeaway today, write that quote down. It could literally change the whole trajectory of your life. Here is why:
 - The whole of the Universe and our existence has to be founded on something real, something prior to the big bang, something deep and very powerful. God is ground zero for existence himself. When we get God right, we are centering ourselves on the very thing that our existence, planet earth, the milky way and the Universe itself is centered on. We were MADE to be centered on God and make our home in him.
 - We cannot know our purpose apart from what we think about God. Our purpose for life must spring from God’s purpose for our life. That purpose is to know and love him while we love one another. Without a God of love, we do not have this purpose.
 - Finally, in order to be at home, we must align ourselves with what is true. Think of the accountant who thinks that 3+4=9 or the physicist who thinks gravity makes you float. The more you give yourself to that which is false – in history, or math, or politics, or accounting – the worse off you are. The same thing is MORE true when it comes to ultimate truth! We must change our minds and priorities to fit with God’s!
 - In other words, it is not OK to just believe in a generic God-of-choice. The real God of the universe created it all out of nothing. He carefully formed planet earth to support life. He designed people – including you and me. He visited in the form of Jesus of Nazareth and proved his divinity through stupefying teaching, dramatic miracles and

performing his own resurrection. Your belief must not be in a God of convenience or a choice of the day, but in the real, one, true God!

What you think about God is the most important thing about you. Really. Because he IS home. We all yearn for a home that will not be found in any city.

So the Israelites had all of the forms of religion – temple, sacrifices, and feasts... for 500 years. But they were yearning for something deeper.

Jesus was the home that they were looking for. Interestingly, Jesus lived in Israel – yet was homeless for much of his ministry years. He welcomed all of the people who were isolate or in exile – the poor, the sick, women... and offered them a piece of that kingdom of healing and justice.

Jesus had this amazing quote that could shape us all in this regard. It comes from John 15- **If you remain in me...**

What word do you notice over and over? Remain... Remain in me. Some older translations say “Abide” in me. It is a kind of a funky word in the Greek that means to dwell or encamp. In other words “Make your home here.” If you do, you will bear much fruit.

AND

He said in John 14 – I am going to prepare a place for you. There is this thing called the new heavens and the new earth that Jesus has been working on for 2000 years now. And if he made this universe in 6 days, just think of what he can do in 2000 years! It is the home we yearn for where he is at the center of all things and we all align with him. We don't live in exile or semi-exile anymore, but in all of the fullness of God. Do you want that?

Then you need to trust God. Why not start 2019 by trusting God in all things?

Others of you might say that 2019 has been a time of getting off center. You made your home elsewhere – in a job, in resentment, in bad habits, in escapism, in pain. Or maybe you just got distracted. You know, I always feel this way as I head toward the new year. Not mostly because the calendar turned, but because there is so much indulgence in December. So much consumerism, so much sugar. And man I am guilty. I just feel like I need to shake off the mud and refocus on God. I find fasting to be helpful – maybe you would too. Fasting from certain foods, social media, from video games, from sugar, from consumer habits or TV. There are a bunch of things you could fast from, but the key is not deprivation, it is taking that space in your life to refocus on God. I'd love to challenge you to do this to make your home in God!

For some of you, this is a new decision... it is a letting go of the past, confessing it has been a mess and letting God lead your future. It is a decision that means you are trusting that Jesus really IS the center of the universe. That he really IS God. That he really DID rise from the dead. That he REALLY is making a new home for us and inviting us in. He IS God!

Christina

I love this illustration of Homecoming. Christina was a young mom in Brazil. She had four kids and her most precocious and unpredictable was the youngest, Marisa. All of the kids were reeling when their Dad died of a freak accident at work, but Marisa was hit the hardest. At 9 years old, she acted out with

defiance toward her Mom. She said she hated their small town life and by age 13 was seeking attention by flirting with and dressing for the older boys. One night, the lure of the lights and glamor of Rio de Janeiro were too much for her. She left a note for her mom and left in the middle of the night.

Well, Christina knew what happens to thirteen year old girls when they show up alone in the big city. And she also knew that the more Marissa was taken advantage of, the more she was abused, the more overwhelmed with shame she would become and wonder if she could ever go back to her Mom.

So Maria hatched a plan to go after her daughter. With no cell phones and no way to contact her, she had to do something. So she took her meager life savings and got a bus ticket to Rio. She found one of those photo booths that prints up six pictures of you when you sit in there. She spent her life savings on hundreds of pictures –each with a warm smile. Then she stayed up all night and the same thing on each one. “It doesn’t matter what you’ve done. It doesn’t matter who you’ve become. Come Home.” “It doesn’t matter what you’ve done. It doesn’t matter who you’ve become. Come home.”

She went to every seedy night club, every dark bathroom, every skanky hotel and cheap bar she could find. She put a picture in each place. And then she went back to the bus exhausted.

Musician enters stage

It was months in the city for Marisa. Her Mom was right. The city was no place for a lone teenage girl. One night, after a particularly hard episode, she found herself washing up in the bathroom of an ugly bar. And to her amazement was a picture of her Mom. HER MOM was looking for her! She cared. And she turned over the picture to hear the same message her heart needed to hear. “It doesn’t matter what you’ve done. It doesn’t matter who you’ve become. Come Home.”

Music Starts Here

So, it’s decision time. For Marissa. And maybe for you. Maybe you have been seeing little snapshots of the love of God all over the place. Maybe you have seen little lovenotes of welcome. Maybe you just need to give up the distractions or the addictions and come home.

Man, if you feel that stirring in your heart, then for goodness sake, come home! You do it by saying yes. Get on the bus to God’s heart and let him change your heart. Trust him with everything. With your life, with your future, with your eternity. Turn from all the junk that keeps you from him and focus on his life. You want to do that? You can seal this deal with a prayer – just like Marisa could make a phone call – Mom, come pick me up.

You can make that phone call to God – Dad, come pick me up. He is waiting for the call. I promise.

PRAY together

Who made that decision to say yes to come home to God today – raise your hand up real high! Praise God. We want to meet you – so stop by next steps and our team will connect you in disciplinemaking community. Oh, nothing makes me want to worship more than people trusting God, so would you stand with me and let our team take us into worship!