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Spiritual Foundations

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After worry over the crises of 100,000 acres of 500 year old forests being destroyed in the Bighorn Fire, over 10,000,000 infected by the Pandemic, 2 plagues of Locusts devouring Africa, flooding in Venice Italy, we have had our own concern of when and how we may reopen to worship God. While gathering together may seem trivial, the point is if we establish strong spiritual foundations first, and revisit these periodically, then we are not only monitoring and reacting to these worries but building faith for generations!

All who have been escorted up the hill on the Owl Express, who have been personally greeted on their way into Worship, who have listened as Valley Church's Chancel Choir process in singing, all who have looked beyond the pastors to the high hills from whence our help comes, all who have felt the safety and security of the Head Ushers watching over us, have yearned for the assurance of coming home to God and this communion. But underneath all the illustrations, and wonderful expressions of love we do, our hard reality is that we are a wounded and hurting people, who need to be forgiven and to forgive, that can only happen in worship of God. Young families are preoccupied with schooling and questions; but when we have reached our age, there comes reflection on previous marriages, abuses, deaths, words said.

Having all the churches closed the middle of March, I reached out to the pastor at Desert Hills Lutheran and we agreed to recommend returning to celebrate worship on the first Sunday in July. Last week, I contacted him again, realizing that for both of our congregations "Independence Day" was too early because in Green Valley all of us are over 55, most over 75 and those with Diabetes, Heart issues, Cancer survivors, those with Artificial Joints, all have compromised immune systems. Projections from the Health Department are that Arizona may still be months away from the peak of infections.

Meditating upon when and how to worship, God reminded me of the Book of Ezra. We go to the Old Testament, because while the Temple at Jerusalem was again destroyed in the New Testament in 70 AD Israel never returned to worship in the Temple afterward. The Book of Ezra 200 to 400 years before the birth of Jesus tells the Biblical story of rebuilding the faith, by rebuilding Worship after Babylon's exile. This is different from creating Valley Church in the 1970s, or the original building of Solomon's Temple, because Israel had an existent memory of the Temple. So "returning" there is struggle with nostalgia and desires and practicality.

Because for most of us Catechism, Communicants, Confirmation Class were several years ago, let us remember that The Bible was not organized as a novel to be read from "In the Beginning" through the final benediction and "Amen" of the Revelation to John. The Torah are the Books of Law, establishing our relationships to God, to Creation, and to one another. The Book of Deuteronomy then retells the 40 years of Exodus, but with an underlying theological understanding: Whenever the people followed God they were blessed; when they turned from God, God turned away.

After these come stories of entry into the Land with building of a great Monarchy with the Temple of Solomon at Jerusalem. The Temple and the Monarchy were central to the faith of Israel, because the King was God's Anointed and our relationship as Chosen and Forgiven were realized in Worship. Then stories of the erosion of faith, the dispersion of the northern 10 Tribes of Israel, exile of Judah to Babylon.

While these are told following the style of the Torah; a different author, a “chronicler,” began a second history from the rise of Kings through the deportation and return to the land, in Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther. Similar to Deuteronomy, this Chronicle is written understanding that when the people and kings were faithful to David, to the Temple and worship of God, they were blessed; when they complained, turning away from the Descendants of David, the Temple and Worship, they struggled. The Book of Job then questions so which comes first, “are we faithful because God blesses us, or does God bless us because we are faithful?” What happens to our faith if all the blessings of life are taken away? Then there are Psalms, Proverbs, Major prophets which are longer and shorter Minor prophets, that tell of the destruction and exile of the Nation through the lives of the Prophets.

So what difference does any of this make to us?

First Things First: When after 70 years those in exile returned to their homeland, before rebuilding their houses, the palace of the King, or the businesses of the economy, first they re-established the foundations of the Temple. They labored for two years, clearing debris and decay, then establishing the foundations, when according to Chapter 3 everyone in Jerusalem came together for a great celebration.

Just as today, no matter what we do we cannot please everyone. Some came overjoyed with excitement at coming together! While those who remembered the glory of the original Temple, looked at the bare Foundation stones and wept that what had been was gone. The intriguing part is the sound from a people who had been in isolation for 70 years. Imagine sitting on your feelings for 70 years! The loss, the defeat, the shame, then elation at being set free, and fear and being overwhelmed at having to rebuild. Whether joy and laughter, weeping and mourning, all sounded the same, as the sound of people in worship of God. When did we come to acceptance of reverence for God as being silent? Ezra describes Trumpets and Cymbals, Shouting and Laughter and Weeping all as praise of God.

But Ezra does something marvelous. He preaches that in our lives we have already been laying “spiritual foundations” by offering sacrifices and praying! Although they had come up to Jerusalem with their offerings, with the explicit purpose of rebuilding the Temple, their highest priority was not the building campaign, not their offering, but to Worship God. Recall Jesus instruction, that when you come to worship, if you remember having sinned against your brother or sister, leave your offering and go, beg for forgiveness, resolve your differences, then come to worship God. During this time, we have a great opportunity to consider our spiritual foundations. Who is God in our lives? What do we believe? What parts of our faith in God have we attempted to pass along to our families and friends? Have we remembered the church in our Wills and estates? Can we forgive the persons who hurt us, who abandoned us?

Third, not only at ground breaking and completion of building, but periodically along the way at intervals, they stopped their labors to worship God. Imagine the pragmatists: We finally got the Foundations laid, now we can finally start building. Why are you stopping to worship? Where the CDC had originally offered guidance of Closure and waiting to level off, followed by Essential Businesses Opening at Phase 1 and a leveling off, then Opening and leveling off at Phase 2, it seems as though our community and region have not yet leveled off but continue to rise in infections and deaths. We are now 112 days into this time. We are not ready to dismiss all protocols. We no longer make an animal sacrifice as was done in Temple Worship, but in a season of sickness, a time of fire on the mountains, we release a dozen butterflies as a gift to nature, a worship and praise of God. On occasions in my life when I have had a great difficulty, a death or parting with a friend, I have tried to make a special Offering to God. Naming that before we can go forward, before we can do what we want in life, we need to identify God in our lives.

I mentioned at the outset, that hundreds of years after construction of this Second Temple, which the disciples admired as having beautiful stones, the Romans destroyed the temple in 70AD. After which Judaism changed, no longer could they come for Sacrifice. Instead of a temple, Synagogues for teaching as a Community Center were created, and Christianity arose cognizant that the Church does not need to be a building, the Mountains can be a Sanctuary. And rather than our offering sacrifices of animals, we recognize Jesus' sacrifice for the forgiveness of us all.

Realistically, when persons do return to this Sanctuary to worship God, I fear we will be disappointed. Everything has been sterilized and cleaned. But as awesome as the Chancel Window view of the Mountains, we have come to worship to share in Fellowship, and at least in the beginning we will not be able to have Coffee Hour Fellowship. This Church is known for having a spectacular choir, but because of projection of breath with our voices, the health department encourages our not having a choir or congregational hymn singing. The Sacrament of Communion is especially rich and meaningful, but out of concern for transmission, we will be encouraged to not share Communion. Currently, we can do more in worship of God and can celebrate more freely by staying home than coming together!