

## WELCOME 29<sup>th</sup> January 2023 – 4 Epiphany '23 A

Ezra 1:1-8 & Nehemiah 1:1-11

**Welcome!** It's great to be together again today! **Bible Study Qs** are there to equip you so God can lead you deeper into His word/work in your life, & so you can share that w/ someone else. We also use them for our **Zoom Bible Study Catch-ups** on Friday @ 1p.m.

**As we move into this week...** Turning **over** a new leaf. Clean **slate**. Tree **change**. Fresh start. Sometimes those are exciting moments. We want to believe change is good...a break from what **was** to what **will be**. But the hardest part of any of those is seeing ourselves **NOT** as we once were...but as we are now.

It's that moment we give up the **"What if....?"** for **"What is."**

Many of us/most of our world has been stuck on "What if...?" for a long time. What if ...a new virus? ...war in Europe widens? ...China gets more aggressive? ...prices & interest rates keep going up? ...I need more care? ...family situation gets worse?

But God speaks deeper than our "What ifs...?" to declare "What is" It's not a word of speculation conjecture anxious guesswork or wishful thinking...but the assurance of God's people being restored to their God-designed purpose & God-intended work in God's world.

**In** the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, the Lord fulfilled the prophecy he had given through Jeremiah. The Lord stirred the heart of Cyrus to put this proclamation in writing & send it throughout his kingdom...

In the story of our faith ancestors & in our lives today, God comes to move your heart & act through you to accomplish his vision & purposes...right here...right now. Not some imagined or dreamed up perfect future, but in the midst of where God has put you in your life...today **You** are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people; in order that you may proclaim the excellent goodness of God who called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light. – 1 Pet 2:9

We'll experience & share that today...Let's pray...

## PRAYER OF THE DAY

*Heavenly Father...we in no way deserve to be where we are...in your presence embraced by your love...but here we are because you have chosen to be grace & love for us & to be here with us.*

*Right now...lift our hearts from the cares & concerns that cloud every day ...let this moment be your gift to us where with your Spirit you renew our strength & restore us into the image and likeness of your Son Jesus Christ.*

*Take control of all we are and all we do so that in your good time we see your plan & purpose reach its completion & your Kingdom grow. In Jesus' Name...Amen.*

*Let's sing...*

## **FAITH CHAT:**

1. What promise have you seen God keep in your life, like Ezra did?
2. What in today's world "brings you to tears" like Nehemiah?
3. When was the last time God "stirred your heart" for his people & his purposes? What did you do?

#### 4 Epiphany '23 A – BEYOND LIMITS: REIMAGINE

When my dad retired from 42-ish years with the Southern Pacific Railroad he said the hardest thing to get used to wasn't not getting up & going to work...mom was still @ 5 yrs away from retirement so their morning "get up-get going" routine stayed basically the same. For him it was what I have heard many times since "Who am I **now?**" now that I am not the go-to-guy at the Englewood Rail Yards Intermodal Link. It was that jump from seeing himself not as he once was but who he is now. Hold that thought...

We pick up Ezra at about 70 or so years of God's people being exiled from their homeland. Take stock of that for a minute. Where do God's people belong? Israel. The land God promised would be theirs...as his dwelling place among them in the Temple in Jerusalem. Where are they...Babylon now under the control of the Medo-Persian Empire. They are a 2x conquered people whose history & destiny are in the hands of a pagan king's rule...the Davidic monarchy is over. And the Temple, the promised "God among us" place of worship from which their life would be grown & strengthened...gone...demolished & burned into unrecognizable ashes.

How does such a complete devastation happen? How could who they were be so completely demolished such that who they are now is nearly unrecognizable? Well let's just look at the very last King in Jerusalem...**Zedekiah** was 21 years old when he became king, & he reigned in Jerusalem 11 years. But Zedekiah did what was evil in the sight of the Lord his God, & refused to humble himself when the prophet Jeremiah spoke to him directly from the Lord...Likewise, all the leaders of the priests & the people became more & more unfaithful. They followed all the pagan practices of the surrounding nations, desecrating the Temple of the Lord that had been consecrated in Jerusalem. **The Lord, the God of their ancestors, repeatedly sent his prophets to warn them, for he had compassion on his people & his Temple. But the people mocked these messengers of God & despised their words. They scoffed at the prophets until the Lord's wrath could no longer be restrained & nothing could be done.** – 2 Chron 36:11-16

Exile didn't happen because God fell asleep @ the switch. God's people are not in Babylon because of the failure of a political system or bad military tactics. God's people ignored God's Word through his prophets, & lived lives of rebellion that were an affront to God's holiness. They practiced idolatry in direct opposition to God's faithfulness...until the Lord's wrath could no longer be restrained & there was no other alternative. There would be no soft landing this time. No last minute get out of jail free card. They were **SENT** to Babylon to demonstrate God's fidelity to his Word & his sovereignty over all things...even defeat & destruction...that he could even use pagan foreign nations to accomplish his will for his people & his world.

God had been clear about this outcome & it is still true: When God's people try to establish their identity – live autonomously - outside of what God has said...there comes a day of reckoning...the house of cards collapses. Not every bad thing that happens is God's wrath reaching a breaking point...but do not be surprised if you set your course in opposition to what God has said & you hit rough seas. They were **SENT** to Babylon to demonstrate God's fidelity to his Word & his sovereignty over all things **AND YET...**In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, the Lord fulfilled the prophecy he had given through Jeremiah. He stirred the heart of Cyrus to put this proclamation in writing & to send it throughout his kingdom: "This is what King Cyrus of Persia says: "The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth. He has appointed me to build him a Temple at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Any of you who are his people may go to Jerusalem in Judah to rebuild this Temple of the Lord, the God of Israel, who lives in Jerusalem. May your God be with you! Wherever this Jewish remnant is found, let their neighbors contribute toward their expenses by giving them silver & gold, supplies for the journey, & livestock, as well as a voluntary offering for the Temple of God in Jerusalem."

**NOW...** Their **FREEDOM** was to reveal the depth of his grace & restoring forgiveness. If you hear nothing else today...take this bit home: Whatever your circumstances, trust the Word of God, & trust the power of God to fulfill his Word. **|| Look at how Cyrus sees himself as an instrument of Yahweh as HE reiterates THEIR call.**

They were **SENT** to Babylon to demonstrate God's fidelity to his Word & his sovereignty over all things...even defeat & destruction...that he could even use foreign pagan nations to accomplish his will for his people & his world. **NOW...** Their **FREEDOM** was to reveal the depth of his grace & restoring forgiveness. God still reigns. God will still accomplish his will in his people. They are still his people. God still has plans for them they can't even begin to imagine. God/Yahweh made them a nation, freed them from Egypt, brought them into the land of his promise. That same God sent them into exile leaving 1000s of dead, the rubble of burning cities & his Temple in ruins behind in their wake.

**NOW THAT SAME GOD** is bringing them home. Whatever your circumstances, trust the Word of God, & trust the power of God to fulfill his Word. **|| God can change anything in an instant according to his purposes for your life. It will not always be the same thing in the same way in the next season. Do not plant your flag too firmly on the hill of what has always been...don't drop anchor in the shoals of what was...**

*Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old.*

*I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth; do you not perceive it?*

*I will make a way in the wilderness & rivers in the desert.*

*The wild animals will honour me, the jackals & the ostriches,*

*for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.* – **Is 43:18-21**

God **ALWAYS** speaks deeper than “What was” or “What if...?” to declare “What is.” And that is never a word of speculation conjecture anxious guesswork or wishful thinking...but the assurance of God’s people being restored to their God-designed purpose & God-intended work in God’s world. But you know what the problem is in Jerusalem & with us...?

Even though they had seen this promise of restoration return & revival fulfilled right before their eyes...what happened? Not much...By the time Nehemiah gets word of the situation among the returnees...quite a few years later...there’s a temple...some semblance of sacrificial worship...but little more. They remain vulnerable, exposed to attack...comfortable & complacent among the ruins & rubble of the formerly glorious city. They live w/ complacent resignation to powerlessness as if exile never ended; as if their slavery still existed. The assumption that ruin is inevitable...rubble is normal...but rebuilding beyond imagination. Not just stuck in a rut...but believe the “rut” is ok. What’s worse...

I reckon huge #s of churches & even followers of Jesus live right there. As long as there’s no hassles & no hardship how it is is just fine. As long as I don’t get asked for more than I’m comfortable with...we’re all good. As long as my little spot is kept for my little self...it’s cool. The verdict on that: **They** are in great trouble & disgrace. When God’s people live anything other than the life they’ve been given by God...live bondage not freedom, despair not hope, sorrow not delight, sullen not joyful, fear not boldness, complacency not conviction...anywhere else but worship among God’s people...it’s a disgrace. Paul would say, **“The Gentiles blaspheme the name of God because of you.”** Rather than our lives pointing to the grandeur glory & sovereign rule of the Father...they call attention instead to his people’s complacency captivity & contentment w/ chaos...

I get it that there’s safety in complacency. There’s safety in being comfortable. There is a certain safe space in minimizing risk & not trying too hard or doing something out there...keeping things familiar. I just know when the church plays it safe...no risk no stretch no boldness no danger...we lose. Ready...all 4 gospels record this event from the crucifixion narrative: **Then** the people who arrested Jesus led him to the home of Caiaphas, the high priest, where the teachers of religious law & the elders had gathered. **Meanwhile, Peter followed him at a distance** & came to the high priest’s courtyard. He went in & sat with the guards & waited to see how it would all end. – Mt 26:57-58 Where has Peter been for the last 3 years? Right next to Jesus. Where did he say he would be even if the other 11 ran off? Right next to Jesus. Where is he now? **“At a distance.”** What happens next? Denial...X 3. **At a distance** where it’s safe is always the losing place...play it safe complacent someone else’s job...lose.

**In** the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, **the Lord fulfilled the prophecy he had given through Jeremiah.** He stirred the heart of Cyrus to put this proclamation in writing & to send it throughout his kingdom...Then **God stirred the hearts** of the priests & Levites & the leaders of the tribes of Judah & Benjamin to go to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple of the Lord. **And all their neighbors assisted**... Which means God stirred their hearts too...when God’s people get on with the work God has given the world gets on board...God **ALWAYS** speaks deeper than “What was” or “What if...?” to declare “What is.” And that is never a word of speculation conjecture anxious guesswork or wishful thinking...but the assurance of God’s people being restored to their God-designed purpose & God-intended work in God’s world. Even when circumstances appear impossibly dark, God will make a way for his people. God will always call for more from you than you have offered in the past because he will always give more than he has in the past. **For** God’s gifts & his call can never be withdrawn. – Rom 11:29

**God has called Living Water Fellowship  
to be a vibrant Christian community**

**that glorifies God**

**by inviting all people to become disciples of Jesus**

**who grow in his grace and**

**go in his power**

**to show his love to the world.**

When was the last time God “stirred your heart” for his people & his purposes? Wept & prayed like Nehemiah? What did you do?

**TAKE IT HOME –**

How is God calling you deeper, further & riskier into his vision & purpose as Living Water moves to advance the Kingdom of God in this coming year?

What do you need...support...encouragement...companionship for that to happen?

**You** are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people; in order that you may proclaim the excellent goodness of God who called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light. – 1 Pet 2:9

Let’s pray...

*Lord Jesus, fix our devotion on you alone. Give us the clarity of vision to see people in our lives who need your word of hope and touch of grace from us. Make us a vibrant Christian community that glorifies God by inviting all people to become your disciples. We pray in your name...Amen....*