

THE CONCEPT AND THE COST

I am in way over my head now. Those of you who have been following the series on the Second Temple period have probably realized that already. Why did I preach these sermons about a people trying to renew their Covenant with God – and rebuild their temple, the walls of Jerusalem, and their Way of Life – way back in the fifth century (538-432 B.C.)? Why aren't we talking more about our current struggles in places like Afghanistan, Iraq, and Iran? Well, most people are. Books pour off the presses at a great rate. Some of them say everything is our fault. Some of them say everything is their fault. Some of them just want to make money and these are the hot subjects. The best ones warn us that our perspective is too small, that we would have to comprehend the histories of many countries and religious movements – and the interaction of vast tides of cultures, wars, atrocities, hopes, and dreams – to truly understand what's going on.

But how many of our citizens will read day and night for the next ten years before forming opinions? What percentage of our own members have any grasp on the Rise and Fall of the Ottoman Empire? What percentage of our political leaders have any deep comprehension of our own heritage and traditions, never mind those of the Chinese, the Arabs, the Serbs, the Turks, or the endless other players in our complicated and interactive world?

Nonetheless, democracies are influenced by the opinions of their people. Not necessarily right opinions, educated opinions, or prayerful opinions – just opinions. Rule by slogan. Rule by impression. Rule by emotional reaction. Well, we do much better than that – sometimes. In any case, public opinion has a huge impact on what happens in our country, and therefore in the world. If the impact is not always direct, still it is always there, and always a powerful part of the mixture.

The world is too big for us. The time lag between events and our understanding them is always great. Nothing new. It has always been so. That makes it no less troublesome.

I mention these things because it is important for us to remember that we are not in charge of the world, however much we might want to be. Americans love to talk about how we can all make a difference.

And that is true. But that does not put us in charge. There is never a time when things are peaceful everywhere in the world. There is never a time when we have no legitimate reason to be frightened or upset about something. There is never a time when poverty, starvation, and injustice do not stagger and stun us – unless we wear blinders and stick our heads in the sand. The problem with fear is not that it is unreasonable. The problem with fear is that it is totally logical but seldom helpful. If we want any quality of life – that is, any purpose or meaning to life – we have to keep trading fear for faith. And since we are not in charge and the world is too big for us, that faith cannot be in ourselves. If there really is a God, there is hope. If not, there is no hope.

If there is a God, we each have the option to serve, worship, and obey him to the best of our ability. That does not put us in charge either. Quite the opposite. But it also gives us the option – in every circumstance, however dark – to get caught being faithful. I may not succeed. I may not survive. In fact, both conditions are inevitable. But I can get caught being faithful. And it can get much better than that. If possible, I can live in the midst of a people – a faith family – that also wants to get caught being faithful.

But faithful to what? Faithful to God. Faithful to Christ who reveals God and reconciles us to him. But even that can be vague. Faithful to building the Kingdom of God on earth, even though we know it never comes to full completion here. Faithful to building communities that want to know and serve God; communities that know there is the possibility of love and light in the midst of all the chaos and greed; communities that know there is a dimension – deeper, truer, more real – than anything and everything going on at the surface of life.

That is precisely what was happening in the Second Temple period. Zerubbabel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and the returning exiles did not believe primarily in the reality going on around them. They dealt with it; they were not trying to pretend it did not affect them. Sanballet, Tobias, and their quite considerable host of enemies were a serious threat, so they worked with tools in one hand and weapons in the other. They were grateful for the kings of Persia who inexplicably befriended and supported them, but they did not believe primarily in the reality going on around them. If they had, it would have been over. Here was the Persian Empire, the mightiest empire the world had yet known. It stretched from halfway across India to Greece, and all the way down through

Egypt. If that was their reality, they never would have left Babylon to come back to the rubble that was Jerusalem.

What were they doing putting one stone upon another in the shambles that was left of the Jerusalem wall? Jerusalem was nothing. Even in its heyday, Jerusalem was as nothing compared to Susa, Ecbatana, Babylon, and dozens of other cities in the Persian Empire. But the returning exiles were not focused on world events or on what the world looked like on the outside. They knew about it, but they were not focused on it. What they cared about was God, and the Covenant with God. It seemed to them that God was inviting them back into the Covenant. They were glad that Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes kept siding with them at critical moments – kept helping them return and rebuild. Among other things, this actually meant that they were no earthly threat to the kings of Persia. They were an insignificant handful of people who wanted to worship God according to an ancient promise, and be faithful to an ancient Covenant with their God.

During this very time, two of the greatest battles in ancient history shook the world. From an outer perspective, they changed the world forever. In 490 B.C., Darius landed 50,000 soldiers on the plain of Marathon, north of Athens. It should have been the end of Greece. The Athenians, seeing the hordes coming, sent word to Sparta to come quickly. Actually, they sent a runner (Philippides) who covered the 150 miles in about two days. Sparta replied that she would be right there, as soon as church was over. (That is, right after completing an important religious ceremony.) By the time the Spartan army arrived, it was all over. The Greek hoplites, though greatly outnumbered, fought together in a phalanx formation that Philip of Macedonia and his son, Alexander the Great, would keep improving. The Greek long spear, sword, and armor were also superior to the Persian equipment. They crashed into the traditional jumble of Persian hordes. In the end, 192 Athenian soldiers died, and 6,400 Persian soldiers were killed. The Persian army withdrew. Darius himself died four years later.

According to legend, an Athenian messenger was then sent from Marathon to Athens, about 25 miles, to tell the glad tidings of the Persian defeat. Having delivered his message, he died of exhaustion. Eager to escape this veil of tears, people have been running the marathon ever since. But all this you know.

Xerxes returned in 480 B.C. with a huge fleet of ships and a far larger army. The fleet suffered heavy losses in a gale, and then Themistocles, the Greek commander of the Athenian fleet, lured the Persian ships into shallow waters where they couldn't maneuver as well as his lighter ships; he destroyed half of them, though it had been 700 against 500. Xerxes was still too powerful to stop, but Leonidas, the Spartan king, with 300 of his bodyguards, held the Pass against the Persian hordes long enough for Athens to be evacuated. Xerxes won but couldn't stay there forever, and he had not destroyed the Greek army. Eventually he left and things went right back to what they were before. And oh yes, the Pass was called Thermopylae. But all this you know.

There would be many other battles and no end to "current events," but these were huge happenings. They signaled the end of one empire and the rise of another, and no one alive in what we call "the Western World" would be unaffected. Is it over? Is it ancient history? In 1971, Iran had a huge celebration of the 2,500th anniversary of the founding of the monarchy by Cyrus. Those who took part in that celebration do not think it is over.

Not a whisper or even a hint of these incredible events appears in our Scriptural story. The returning exiles are focused on other things: Build the dinky-dumb little wall, read the Law of Moses, and stop marrying foreign wives unless they want to become Jewish too. And no matter how tiny we are in the vast epic of huge events going on all around us, let us return to being faithful to our God.

Nehemiah, as you heard in today's reading, is very practical about his very spiritual purposes. He does not care what's happening in Thermopylae. But he does care what's happening in Jerusalem, and some people are getting rich off of other people's misfortune. Some are losing land for debts they cannot pay – even losing children, and themselves, into slavery until debts can be paid. Nehemiah is outraged. That is not the Covenant Way! You help each other with the benefit and blessing of the whole community in mind, not just trying to amass your own private riches. The people realize how far from being faithful they have strayed, and they make dramatic changes to reform their ways. Usury – loaning money at interest – is always considered a great evil. But be careful! It's fine to loan money at interest to foreigners. It's also fine to loan money at interest to friends and neighbors who are using it for business purposes – that is, as capital that will help earn

them a profit. But if you are loaning money to help somebody or because they are in trouble, then it must be an interest-free loan. That is the Way of the Covenant. God's Law means we care about each other. God's Law means we want everybody in the community to prosper. The origin of our concept of "redeem" and "redemption" comes from the act of buying off a person's debt so that they can return to productive life in the community.

Nehemiah is a very religious Governor and social reformer. He does not care about everything going on in the whole world. But in Jerusalem, he wants the community to take the shape and form of God's Covenant Law, and this has a very practical and significant impact on the lives of everyone in the community. I have only hinted at a little of it.

All through history, there have been remarkable attempts to build faithful communities that take God's will and WAY with utmost seriousness. Most of us are familiar with some of the more famous stories of these attempts: Abraham started it. It was much clearer in Moses and Joshua. David, Hezekiah, and Josiah were trying hard to make the Covenant Way the WAY of the whole Jewish kingdom. Now we add Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah to the stories. But the list is much longer. The concept – the dream – is behind the Benedictines, the Franciscans, the Jesuits, and every serious Monastic Order. Luther in Wittenberg, Calvin in Geneva, Zwingli in Zurich, and countless lesser-known groups and leaders were living and dying to return to the concept of being a serious community of faithful followers. One of the most serious efforts to do this was played out in New England, both in the Plymouth Colony and in the Boston Bay Colony – having huge influence, as you know, at the very roots of our own country. The parallels between the Second Temple period and the Puritans are amazing, at least to me.

Whenever we have tried to move from the notion of a faithful Christian Community to the idea of a faithful Christian State, things backfire. (Why would God do that to us?! We'll have to ask him when we get to the other side.) The record shows that coercion overcomes faith when we try to turn religion into a political state. The concept of the separation of church and state was born out of the failures and injustices that occur when we try to legislate faith. That in turn dooms us to living in the severe tension between faithful communities – if we can find or build them – and a secular state. The inconsistencies are incredibly troublesome. But up to this point in human history, this is

still our best chance. Freedom of religion AND life in a political state that tries to deal with human problems on a human level.

So why do people keep returning to the dream of being part of a faithful community? They never last. They are never perfect. They are never well executed, at least not across the board or for very long. Why does the dream keep arising: rebuild the temple, return to the Covenant, rebuild the walls? It keeps arising because there is no other hope short of Heaven. It keeps arising because we have souls, and our Creator keeps calling us to Ways higher and better than anything contained within the limitations of this world. We cannot build a Christian state. But we can build, or rebuild, a Christian church. Even that is difficult and rare enough.

Is there any doubt in your mind about whether or not somebody needs to rebuild the temple in our time? Or to be more specific, to build and rebuild faith communities that love, honor, and serve Jesus Christ and His WAY? Can you visit churches today, or drive the coast in summertime between Laguna Beach and Newport Beach, and not wonder about the Babylonian Captivity of the churches in our time? Is it okay to stay in Persia, enjoying the luxuries and benefits of a foreign empire, when Jerusalem and its temple lie in ruins, and most people don't even know the Covenant or the Gospel well enough to know what they are missing, or well enough to be faithful even if they wanted to be?

Is it your intention to rebuild the temple, renew the Covenant, and rebuild the walls here? Maybe you think, as so many did in the long-ago story we have been telling, that God has abandoned us? Or that God doesn't care anymore how we live, what we hope in, or how we use our time and our lives?

Well, I am no Ezra or Nehemiah or even Zerubbabel. And you have problems of your own. So perhaps you cannot hear me calling: Please, come help us rebuild the temple. Come out of Babylon, leave the ways of Persia, return to the Ways of our God – so that whatever happens, we may be caught being faithful.