

RETURN TO GATHERED WORSHIP

It's not unusual for a person or family to get out of the church routine for a while and then come back at a later time. But this, the pandemic-forced exile of the whole congregation from worship, life, and ministry together, that's new, and it's been hard.

- Even in times of other crisis, gathering has been the way people have faced the challenge.
- Uniquely difficult has been how following Christ's command to love your neighbor during this pandemic has meant not gathering, not doing the very thing we are normally called and need to do, to gather.
- It's been the cross we were called to bear, but crosses exact a price, and so has this one. What exactly the price will be we do not yet fully know.



Our journey of return has begun, and it is a good thing. But what has changed since we were last together? What will it be like for us to return? For each of you? For all of us as a congregation together? This is the first day of finding out.

The time is ripe for us to learn faith lessons from the Old Testament story of the Return from Exile. We've been talking about how the people of Israel, known at that time as the Kingdom of Judah, had undergone an exile much more devastating than what we have known.

- Jerusalem had been destroyed. The temple reduced to rubble and bare rock. The people either killed by the foreign invader or sent off into exile into a foreign land.
- Imagine being exiled from the world you once knew and from your place of worship.
- Can you imagine it? I think you can.

God had not abandoned his people. Even as they went into exile, they were comforted with God's promises of return. Jeremiah 29:10, *"Thus says the LORD, when Babylon's seventy years [of exile] are completed... I will fulfill to you my promise... I will bring you back to this place."* Imagine their joy, the joy of that first small group of exiles returning to Jerusalem.

- Imagine yet also their heartbreak, the heartbreak of all the death and loss they suffered.
- Imagine their weariness, the weariness of all that they had endured.
- Imagine their disorientation, they were back, but it wasn't the same as before, and it wasn't going to get better until they themselves joined in making it better.

Can you imagine them feeling all that? I think you can.

Their story feels very close to home right now, doesn't it? Because of that, you might be able to better appreciate with new interest all those parts of the Old Testament that are all about the Return from Exile.

- In the history books, Ezra and Nehemiah about the return from exile
- Esther is a story from during the exile.

You might be surprised how so many of the Bible's books of major and minor prophets are about the Exile and Return.

- Lamentations is all about the exile.
- The whole 2nd half of Isaiah is about the promise of return from exile.
- Many of the other prophets are also about the exile and return.
- Jeremiah 31:21 declares with joy, *"Set up road signs, put up guideposts, for the highway, the road you will take to return, O Israel."*

Some of the most beloved Bible promises of hope were originally about the return from Exile.

- Remember Ezekiel and the valley of dry bones coming back to life again? "Dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones." That's a vision of God returning the exiled people to life again.
- Today's reading from Jeremiah 29 contains a Bible verse that's a favorite of many, and it too was a promise to those returning from exile. Jeremiah 29:11, *"I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for good and not for evil, plans for a future and a hope."*
- Hear that promise now also for you.

It's going to take a while to recover from all that you and our congregation will need to recover from now. But we'll get there, for that is God's promise, and God is faithful to his promises.

Still, we've got a big recovery job ahead of us.

- After a tornado or a hurricane, you can see all the destruction, you can see all the recovery work that's got to be done. The destruction is obvious; it's strewn across the neighborhood.
- For us it might be harder to see all the recovery work we have ahead of us as a church.
- Partly that's because the building looks great. But we are a church not a building, and it's the church that's going to need the recovery.

The word "church" means "gathering," and what we have to recover is our "gatheredness."

- We need to recover the blessed ties that bind our hearts in Christian love.
- It's what the Bible means by the "koinonia" of spirit-filled, Christ-centered relationship and community.
- It all begins in worship, but we also need more than a return to worship, we need a return to life giving community with one another as fellow travelers in Christ, as brothers and sisters in Christ. We need to be church-in-person for one another again.
- The return will happen in waves of recovery. There's going to be holes and empty spaces in our gatheredness for a while as each will need to return only as soon as they are able, and some will never return.
- But we will recover, for the Lord will lead us there together, and together we will follow.

Let's close by hearing again God's promise: *"I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for good and not for evil, plans for a future and a hope."*

Amen.