“Getting Our Priorities Straight”
“Ezra 1-6; Haggai 1-2; Zechariah 1; 8

Do recognize these two guys? If you guessed Ralph Kramden and Ed Norton on “The Honeymooners” you would be right. “The Honeymooners” was a sitcom that was on TV from 1955-1956 and ran for only 39 episodes. Now you may think I’m dating myself by even referring to the “The Honeymooners”, but I am quite sure I only saw the reruns! My favourite character was Ed Norton played by Art Carney. Norton was a New York City sewer worker and there is one little ditty that he quoted that has stuck with me. When I looked it up, I realized that I had it garbled, but here is the original:

“As we say down in the sewers -
When the tides of life turn against you
And the current upsets your boat
Don’t waste those tears on what might have been;
Just lay on your back and float.”
That creates a rather interesting picture in my imagination.

All of us face times when the tides of life flow against us. The people of Judah found themselves living as exiles in the land of Babylon. As we saw last week, they didn’t even want to sing their old songs. They hung up their harps on poplar trees and sat down and wept. Who could blame them? They probably didn’t even want to carry on with life. With the future so uncertain, why bother with getting married, having kids, building houses and planting gardens. Their plan was probably to just do the minimum and survive. But God had other ideas. It was their sin that had led to their downfall, but it was God who placed them in Babylon. Here are the instructions that he gave them through the prophet Jeremiah. 4 This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: 5 “Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. 6 Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. 7 Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.” (Jeremiah 29) This is just the opposite of what you would expect. The common wisdom would be: “Go on strike. Do as little as possible. Whatever you do, don’t help the enemy. Don’t make any plans for the future because it is so uncertain.”
You see, God has future plans for these people. This is not the end of the road. Listen to this promise a few verses later on. **10 This is what the LORD says: “When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place. 11 For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.** As we begin our lesson today, we find that those seventy years have come to an end. For three generations they have lived in Babylon and a whole new phase is beginning in the lives of these exiles. What is even more surprising is who God will use to bring about their return to Jerusalem.

Close to 150 years before the events we will look at today, Isaiah wrote these words of prophecy in chapter 45.

1 “This is what the LORD says to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I take hold of to subdue nations before him and to strip kings of their armor, to open doors before him so that gates will not be shut: 3 I will give you hidden treasures, riches stored in secret places, so that you may know that I am the LORD, the God of Israel, who summons you by name. 4 For the sake of Jacob my servant, of Israel my chosen, I summon you by name and bestow on you a title of honor, though you do not acknowledge me. 5 I am the LORD, and there is no other; apart from me there is no God. I will strengthen you, though you have not acknowledged me, 6 so that from the rising of the sun to the place of its setting people may know there is none besides me. I am the LORD, and there is no other. 7 I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the LORD, do all these things.

Who is this Cyrus that is referred to here? Cyrus the Great was a Persian King who in 539 BC conquered the Babylonian empire. Cyrus was a most unusual king in that he respected the customs and religions of the lands he conquered. He established a government that worked to the advantage and profit of all his subjects. This was certainly true in the case of the Jews. God gave Cyrus a very benevolent heart towards his chosen people. **1 In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah, the LORD moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm and also to put it in writing.**
Story p. 264; Ezra 1) Notice two things in this verse. First, what Cyrus did was in fulfillment of prophecy. Second, it was the Lord (who) moved the heart of Cyrus. In response, Cyrus released the Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. He even put it in the form of a royal written decree which would later prove very important.

This is a remarkable turn of events. Cyrus didn’t just say, “Okay, you can go.” He says 2 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. He felt that it was his God-given responsibility to rebuild the temple of the Lord. Notice that he doesn’t stop there. 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. Cyrus is giving them the resources to rebuild the temple.

Why would God do this? Why is God making such a big deal out of his temple? We all know that God doesn’t need a house to live in. 24 The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. (Acts 17:24) God may not need a house but we need a picture, and the temple is a picture of the powerful truth that God wants to be in the middle of his people. The temple was not built on a mountain that no one could climb or in an inaccessible desert. It was built right in the middle of Jerusalem, the largest city in Judah. Anytime the people saw the temple they were reminded that God had a passion to dwell with them, right in the middle of their neighbourhood.

However, it communicated a different picture as well – a picture of our iniquity or sin. Could anyone who wanted to just walk into the temple and go into the “holy of holies”? No, only a priest could enter the “most holy place” and then only after a blood sacrifice. Century after century the temple presented a picture that there needed to be a blood sacrifice for people to have access to God. From our vantage point in history, we can see that the temple was an educational tool that was preparing people for the coming of Jesus the Messiah. Jesus came into the neighbourhood in the form of Jesus of Nazareth and gave himself as the final sacrifice for sin. Through Jesus we have access to God. The temple was an educational tool so that when Jesus came, the people would be able to connect the dots more quickly and say: “Oh, so that is how it works!”

The temple did not exist while the Jews were in exile. Why, then, did God want the temple to be rebuilt? There are three reasons:

1. God’s passion: The temple is a picture of God’s passion to dwell amongst his people.
2. Our problem: Our sin separates us from our God.
3. God’s solution: God requires a blood sacrifice so that we can regain access to his presence.
It was a big task that the exiles faced. There were close to 50,000 people that moved from Babylon back to Jerusalem. They carried with them 5,400 articles of gold and silver. It took them four months to make the 900 mile journey under the leadership of Zerubbabel their governor. After they arrived they got themselves settled in their towns, and then they gathered in Jerusalem. The very first thing they did was to rebuild the altar. 3 Despite 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. (The Story p. 264; Ezra 3) Then they started to rebuild the temple by laying the foundation.

When the foundation was finished, there was both weeping and shouts of joy. 13 No one could distinguish the sound of the shouts of joy from the sound of weeping, because the people made so much noise. And the sound was heard far away. (The Story p. 265; Ezra 3) The last part of that verse has an ominous ring - And the sound was heard far away. The problem was that when the enemies of Judah and Benjamin got wind of what they were doing, they caused trouble. At first the Jews maintained their focus on the task, but their enemies instilled fear in the people’s hearts about continuing to build. They bribed officials to make things difficult for the Jews. It wasn’t the fault of the returned exiles, but it had an impact. Laying the foundation of the temple was as far as they got. For the rest of the reign of Cyrus and into the reign of King Darius their enemies frustrated their plans. They abandoned the rebuilding of the temple for sixteen years and focused instead on building their own homes.

What does God do when his people lose focus? He sends one of his prophets. 1 In the second year of King Darius … the word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai to Zerubbabel ….. governor of Judah, and to Joshua ..... the high priest: 2 This is what the LORD Almighty says: “These people say, ‘The time has not yet come to rebuild the LORD’s house.’” 3 Then the word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai: 4 “Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?” (The Story p.266; Haggai 1) What was God saying to the people of Judah? “You have misplaced your priorities. You have gotten off the track.” You see, regardless of the difficulties, they had replaced God’s priorities with their own priorities. They replaced God’s
project with their own projects. They didn’t intend to abandon it forever. Sooner or later they would get back to working on the temple. But they became convinced that now was not the time. The temple turned into an abandoned construction site for sixteen years. It sat there for enough years for weeds to overrun the site. Enough years for the surrounding nations to say, “They sure don’t take their God very seriously.”

They poured all their energy into their houses, businesses, vineyards and farms, yet they grew more miserable with every passing day. Why? Listen carefully to these words of Haggai:

5 Now this is what the LORD Almighty says: “Give careful thought to your ways. 6 You have planted much, but harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it.” 7 This is what the LORD Almighty says: “Give careful thought to your ways. 8 Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build my house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored,” says the LORD. 9 “You expected much, but see, it turned out to be little. What you brought home, I blew away. Why?” declares the LORD Almighty. “Because of my house, which remains a ruin, while each of you is busy with your own house. (The Story p. 266-267; Haggai 1)

This is how God responds to misplaced priorities. Do you know that God will send times of trial and suffering to call his people back to their original purpose? We think that God sends times of severe testing as a result of sin in our lives. But the reality is that God sends trials at times to wake us up and exhort us to examine our ways. The problem here was that God’s people had forgotten their initial passion. Have you ever wondered how God gets our attention when we won’t give him our attention? The answer lies in what we just read. When we give all our attention to our things and little attention to his things, we grow more miserable with every passing day. He permits droughts, doubts, down turns and difficulties. He allows a chill in the corner office, a dent in the savings account, a lonely wind through the house and we find our lives marked with futility. We make money and it falls through our fingers. Life just doesn’t seem to work.

Don’t think that every tiny mishap is a judgment of God’s anger. Hitting every red light or getting a sore throat has no theological significance. But we must realize that there are extended seasons of life when difficulty seems to be piled on difficulty and God seems to be saying to us: “Wake up! Give thought to your ways. Examine your life.” It is so easy for us to get carried away with our interests and ideas.
I don’t know if anyone else is like this, but I can get all fired up about something and I will be consumed by it. But after a period of time, I kind of lose interest and move on to something else. About 5 years ago I took up biking in a big way. I was biking at least 15 km a day. My route ran down through a conservation area and along the shore of Lake Ontario. I loved it and worked hard at cutting the time in which I covered that distance. Then winter came along and I wanted to continue biking, so I went out and purchased one of these contraptions called a CycleOps. You set it up in the basement, set your bicycle’s back wheel up on it and turned your bike into an indoor trainer. It was expensive and it wasn’t long before I lost interest in it. If I put 20 km on it I would be surprise. I didn’t gradually lose interest. It was rather immediate. Besides, something else came along that I got interested in that and I had no time for that trainer. By the way, it is sitting in the trunk of Susan’s car right now. So if anyone would like to buy a CycleOps with really low mileage, I have got a good deal for you.

The unfortunate thing is that so often, this is the way we treat God. We get really interested in him. For a season we pour ourselves in to the things of God. But then our interest begins to wane. Other things come along and gradually they take God’s place in our lives. Sometimes it happens suddenly. Sometimes it happens so gradually that it takes awhile before we realize that walking with God and following his plan for our lives is just no longer a priority for us.

Very possibly God is saying to you this morning: Give careful thought to your ways. You see, God is not like my CycleOps. You can’t just drop him or put him on a shelf and say to yourself, “Eventually I will get back to you and start making you a priority in my life.” Don’t even think that for a second. It is not a possibility. You see God is alive, and if you think that you can put him on a shelf for a month, or until the next decade, or until you get this job out of the way, or the kids are grown, or you retire, you are sadly mistaken. God’s message to you today is that he is either the big thing in your life or he is nothing. If you put him on a shelf, then you can prepare yourself for sixteen years when nothing will quench your thirst or satisfy your hunger. Prepare yourself for sixteen years when no clothes seem to keep you warm, nothing satisfies your hunger and nothing seems to work. This may seem like a stern message, but the great thing is that it is never too late to come back to him. This morning Jesus calls out to you: “Give careful thought to your ways. Come back to me and make me the big thing in your life.”

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