

Make Jerusalem Great Again

We are back in our series from the Old Testament Books of Ezra and Nehemiah that we are calling *Restore / Rebuild*.

These two books in our Bibles were originally one volume; they contain the record of when God's People returned to Jerusalem after being exiled. As was prophesied ages before, rebellion resulted in suffering for God's People. They lost everything, and many were carried off into exile by the Babylonians (under Nebuchadnezzar). The Babylonians fell to the Persians, and decades later the Persians allowed some of the Jews to return to Jerusalem.

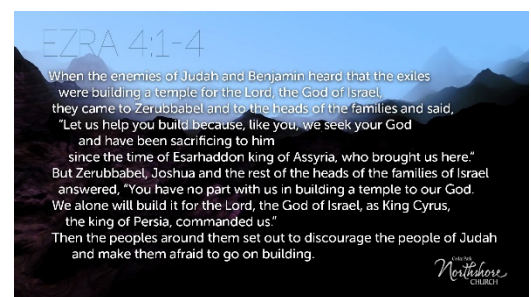
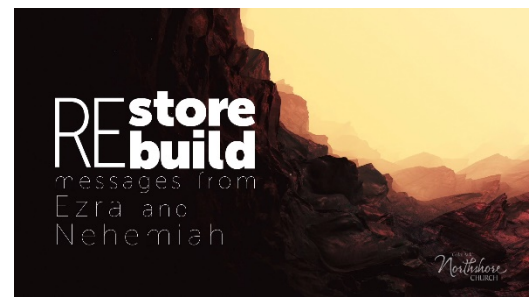
Almost immediately upon getting settled, God's People reestablished worship with an altar at the site of the Temple... the center of worship that was built by Solomon, but then was ransacked and destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar. Here in chapter 4, we see that they started work to rebuild a Temple on that site.

I have a title for today's message; it may be just a bit *too clever*. I'm calling it: ***Make Jerusalem Great Again***. Do you see what I'm getting at? It is supposed to be a bit *tongue-in-cheek*... but it seems that there are parallels between God's people in that ancient context (around 2,500 years ago) and today.

Specifically, there are lessons here about how God's People operate within the realm of *politics*; chapter 4 (as is much of Ezra/Nehemiah) is full of politics.

Let's take a look.

When the enemies of Judah and Benjamin heard that the exiles were building a temple for the LORD, the God of Israel, ² they came to Zerubbabel and to the heads of the families and said, "Let us help you build because, like you, we seek your God and have been sacrificing to him since the time of Esarhaddon king of Assyria, who brought us here." ¹



¹ The New International Version. (2011). (Ezr 4:1–5). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

This is a curious thing, that the enemies of God's People wanted a part in rebuilding the Temple. It is *as curious* as what started this rebuilding project, as it is recorded at the beginning of Ezra, that King Cyrus would decree that God (Yahweh) commissioned him to build a Temple in Jerusalem.

Was Cyrus a worshipper of Yahweh? How about these who lived in the land and apparently wanted to help?

They *said* they were worshippers of Yahweh, sacrificing to Him since the day they arrived. These were apparently those resettled in the land to keep it out of the hands of the Jews. This was the common practice for a conquered land: kill a lot of (or most) of the inhabitants, carry off the remaining ones, and then move in others from the homeland or even from some other conquered part of the realm.

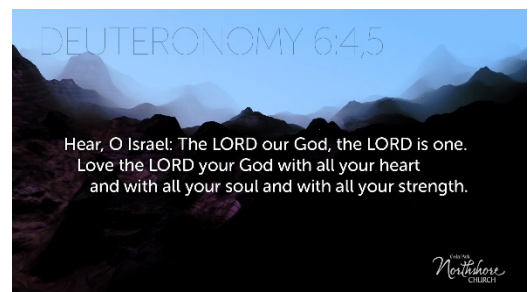
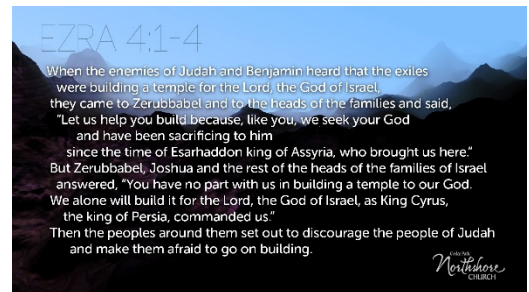
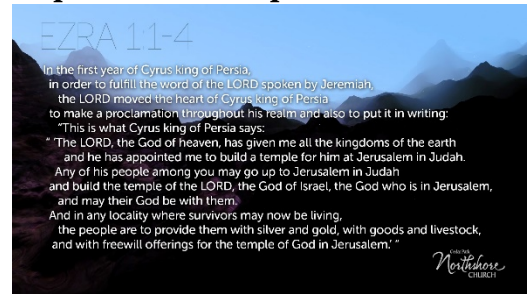
Apparently when they moved in, they started to worship Yahweh... but likely not at all like the Jews once did. When these occupying settlers began to worship Yahweh, it was likely merely a matter of adding *the local god* to their routine. They likely worshipped Yahweh because they thought of gods in a variety of ways, including attaching gods to a land. If these settlers wanted to prosper in this land, in their minds they would, of course, pay some tribute to the local gods or god.

This was likely the mindset of neighbors of the recently-returned Jews, as it was likely the mindset of King Cyrus, the Persian who allowed the Jews to return. This was likely merely a matter of adding a bit of the local culture to the culture they brought with them.

But by merely adding Yahweh to their culture, they violated the fundamental rule of all true worshippers of Yahweh:

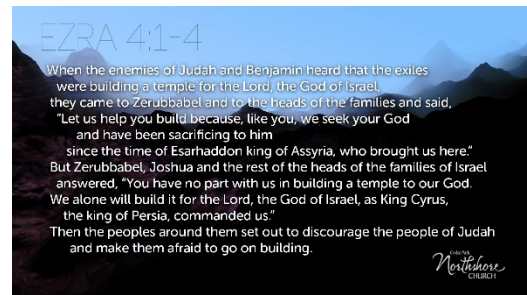
⁴ Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. ^{y 5} Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.²

Yahweh is **one**... not merely unique, but exclusive. Yahweh is not merely a powerful god, or even chief among the gods (like Zeus); **only** Yahweh is God and worshippers of Yahweh must not acknowledge any other.



² The New International Version. (2011). (Dt 6:4-5). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

This is what separated the Jews from their neighbors. It wasn't, as some have supposed, merely a matter of *race* or nationality. Now decades after the Assyrians and the Babylonians had conquered and occupied the land, these settlers were likely *mixed* in race. That is what settlers do; they intermarry... so many of these offering their help likely had Jewish blood, enough Jewish blood to qualify them if it was merely *blood* that was the qualifier.



So here were these neighbors, all with some cultural connection to Yahweh, others likely some Jewish heritage, wanting to be involved in this sacred work.

That sort of *cultural* faith is common today. I suppose we are right in describing our current culture as *post-Christian* in many ways... but it isn't *all that* post-Christian yet. Most in our culture are still at least *nominally* Christian, and even more enjoy, and are even guided by, many aspects of the Christian faith.

I enjoyed many Christmases before I was a Christian, and Easters too.

I even worked in churches, as a *hired hand*. I cleaned their carpets and drapes, working with my dad as a kid, and I even participated in their worship as a hired trumpet player. But I never asked to preach, or baptize anyone, or do any of the *sacred* work of the church. That would have been ridiculous... and apparently that is how the inquiry was interpreted by Zerubbabel and his colleagues.

Zerubbabel, Joshua and the rest of the heads of the families of Israel answered, "You have no part with us in building a temple to our God. We alone will build it for the LORD, the God of Israel, as King Cyrus, the king of Persia, commanded us." ³

Was that the *right* response?

It doesn't seem like a right response from a *social-justice* perspective. If we view this passage through the lens of social justice, it could seem discriminatory, even racist. These *others* appeared willing and able... why, then, would they be disallowed by these few who returned to their homeland? Why discriminate against the *outsiders*?

It doesn't even seem like a right response from a *practical* perspective. It is hard to imagine why they wouldn't gladly receive the help. Sometimes people need to *belong* before they believe. Sometimes they need to be involved with their *hands* before they come along with their *heads* and *hearts*.

³ The New International Version. (2011). (Ezr 4:3). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

These are the kinds of decisions and distinctions we deal with today. We at Northshore have an open door for *most* everything when it comes to joining in the work. There are people involved in parts of our work that don't believe like I do, or many (if not most) of you do. They serve in our food bank or are active parts of our community market, as examples.

We don't let just *anyone* do *anything*. For example, working with our kids includes a background check and training before one can *jump in*. But, as best we can, if people want to help, we find a way for them to help.

Even in that ancient context, they were receiving help from those outside of their faith community. Their response, as recorded in the text, indicates that they were glad to receive what Cyrus was providing in his permit and even resources.

So what was different in this case? It seems to be a matter of *intent*.

The text describes these as *enemies*. What we have here is more than merely those who did not believe who wanted to be involved; these appear to be those who wanted to oppose the effort by infiltrating the work. They wanted to be able to *spoil things* from the inside.

I suppose it would be enough to limit the sacred work of rebuilding the Temple to those who believe. In our day there are sacred tasks that are reserved for those who are qualified. I'm an ordained minister, qualified by a number of steps, and held accountable to a high standard. We hold all our pastors and leaders to a high standard.

But it seems more than just *that* here. These had evil intent.

The work of God always faces opposition (until, of course, Christ sets up His eternal Kingdom and sin is no more). I would even go so far to say that if you are doing God's work and there is no opposition, you're probably not doing it right.

There is the opposition of the *flesh*; we humans are wired to serve ourselves, to *twist* things in our favor for our pleasure and power.

And, of course, there is *spiritual* opposition. We have a spiritual enemy, a real enemy with real power. The devil and his demons are at work, opposing God's work.

So Zerubbabel and his colleagues discerned that this work was sacred and important, their work alone.

⁴ Then the peoples around them set out to discourage the people of Judah and make them afraid to go on building. ^c ⁵ They bribed officials to work against them and frustrate their plans during the entire reign of Cyrus king of Persia and down to the reign of Darius king of Persia. ⁴

Some have determined that the *then* that begins verse 4 indicates *cause and effect*... that the neighbors determined to stir up trouble because they were not allowed to participate. Essentially, some could say, the Jews *got what they deserved* because they wouldn't play nice.

But that doesn't seem to be a very good interpretation of the text. There is no indication of **causation**... the *then* is just a matter of sequence. And, again, they had already revealed themselves as enemies. No... it seems that the decision made by Zerubbabel and his colleagues was right and just.

As we read on in Ezra 4, we see that what started as *stirring up trouble* turned into a **political** battle.

⁶ At the beginning of the reign of Xerxes, ^d they lodged an accusation against the people of Judah and Jerusalem.

⁷ And in the days of Artaxerxes king of Persia, Bishlam, Mithredath, Tabeel and the rest of his associates wrote a letter to Artaxerxes. ⁵

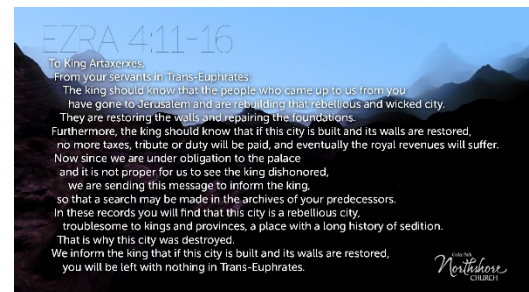
Here's the letter:

To King Artaxerxes,

From your servants in Trans-Euphrates:

¹² The king should know that the people who came up to us from you have gone to Jerusalem and are rebuilding that rebellious and wicked city. They are restoring the walls and repairing the foundations.

¹³ Furthermore, the king should know that if this city is built and its walls are restored, no more taxes, tribute or duty will be paid, and eventually the royal revenues will suffer. ¹⁴ Now since we are under obligation to the palace and it is not proper for us to see the king dishonored, we are sending this message to inform the king, ¹⁵ so that a search may be made in the archives of your predecessors. In these records you will find that this city is a rebellious city, troublesome to kings and provinces, a place with a long history of sedition. That is why this city was destroyed. ¹⁶ We inform the king that if this city is built and its walls are restored, you will be left with nothing in Trans-Euphrates. ⁶



Artaxerxes ruled in favor of the local governors, and the building of the Temple was forced to stop (at least for a time).

⁴ The New International Version. (2011). (Ezr 4:4–5). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁵ The New International Version. (2011). (Ezr 4:6–7). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁶ The New International Version. (2011). (Ezr 4:11–16). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

This was a clash of politics. King Cyrus deemed it legal to *Make Jerusalem Great Again* (from the federal government, if you will). The local governors saw things differently and lodged a formal complaint.

Each of the parties, the King, the Governors, and the People of God in Jerusalem all had interests, different interests, and there was political conflict.

The federal government and the local government at odds with one another, and the People of God caught in the middle... sound at all familiar.

The truth is, sometimes the People of God find themselves caught in the middle... but there are other times when it seems like the People of God **put** themselves in the middle.

Sometimes the People of God align themselves with a side, or even a political figure, and fail to see the complexities or consider the entire issue. Sometimes the People of God abdicate our responsibilities to think and pray and act with righteousness... taking the easier route to just align with a side or person. Sometimes...

Sometimes this taking of sides puts the People of God at odds with culture, or the government... **or even each other**. That is what concerns me most, when the People of God are divided over politics.

Let's never allow politics to divide us;
it is not politics that unites us.

Here we are, a congregation in Kenmore, diverse in so many ways, including politics. It turns out that there are Democrats and Republicans, Conservative, Liberals, and Libertarians right here in our midst.



Allow me to be specific. These days we have a President who is a controversial figure. I know that we have some who wholeheartedly support the President, and others who are opposed to everything about Donald Trump (I read it in the news... and by news I mean *Facebook*).

May I suggest that not everything the President does is bad... and certainly not everything about his is good. It appears that there are some solid steps forward these days (both domestic and foreign)... and there are some really clumsy, wrong-headed, and crude steps. Let's keep our heads about all of this, affirming the good and standing up for what is right. Let's not blindly support any politician, nor automatically hate any either.

Christians should be wary of putting our faith in politics; remember that the Founder of our faith was crucified by politics.

Here's how we find it in Psalm 20:

⁷ Some trust in chariots and some in horses,
but we trust in the name of the LORD our God. ⁷

We don't trust in governments, nor the power of governments in laws or military might... and we certainly don't place our ultimate trust or faith in **politicians**. We trust in the **Lord**.

We will face opposition. And maybe there are political solutions or other ways to conquer opposition... but ultimately our weapons are not of this world.

³ For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. ⁴ The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. ⁸

We have prayer.

We have the Holy Spirit working in us and through us.

We have divine power, in us, guiding our hearts and minds.

We have the Spirit giving us discernment and wisdom.

We have the Spirit empowering our good work and right actions.

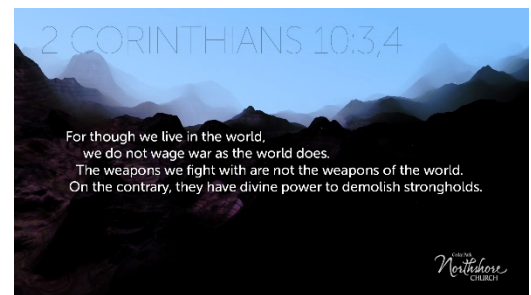
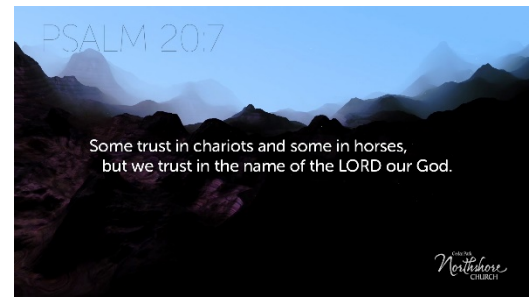
We pay our taxes and bring our votes to the process. We may even get involved, as activists or even candidates. But that is not all that we bring. We bring our faith and trust in the Lord.

Let me say it again:

Let's never allow politics to divide us;
it is not politics that unites us.

We are the People of God,
or today you can join us.

We are the People of God, with opposition,
opposed by the culture and even government
from time to time.



⁷ The New International Version. (2011). (Ps 20:7). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁸ The New International Version. (2011). (2 Co 10:3-4). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Let's be the People of God, united together, under One Great God. Filled with the Holy Spirit working in us and through us.

Father, forgive us when we trust in ourselves, our resources, and our systems above You. We confess that our trust is in You. And we commit ourselves to be Your People in Your world. Give us gifts of courage and faith to be Your People, filled with Your Spirit.

