

November 1, 2020 New Beginnings Pt. 7 Ezekiel 11:16-25

It is hard to believe it is 7 months since we celebrated Easter, unable to be in the sanctuary of the church on Mill Street in Stirling. At the time, I participated in my first video service with my daughter, the Rev. Rebekah. She made the technical stuff happen, and we shared in a sermon, she on her couch in Etobicoke, me at the dining room table in Belleville. In that shared message I said it felt as close as we would probably ever get to the Biblical experience of being in exile in Babylon almost 400 years before the birth of Jesus.

I mention that at this point because the language of exile, is the language of Ezekiel chapter 11. And there are numbers of insights regarding our circumstances as we continue to live with Covid-19, the pandemic and the second wave. And yet that said there is also the ring of the joy and freedom of new beginnings in this chapter. I am going to focus on the portion that reads beginning at verse 16 and concludes at verse 25.

Two things are said in verse 16 that we need to deal with and recognize. First of all, the Sovereign Lord says to Ezekiel that he is to tell the people, they are in exile because the Lord God Almighty is in charge, and not Babylon, and not Nebuchadnezzar. "I sent them far away among the nations, and scattered them among the countries." I do not pretend to understand all the ramifications of that claim, except to say this: a tiny little virus, that cannot be seen with the naked eye,

that has caused millions of people to be extremely ill, and millions to die is not in charge of our lives, our nation, or our destiny. Somehow this terrible experience fits into the plan that God has for us in both the present and the future. We cannot have it both ways. Either God is Sovereign over all that is unfolding or HE is not sovereign at all. God's claim, made through his servant the prophet Ezekiel is that God is still God in the bad times. HE has not relinquished control, and HE has not abandoned us to the whim of the viral plague. HIS gracious hand is upon us even now. His hand is upon us in the uncertainty of 2020, and as we seek to cope with the coming winter and 2021. In New Testament terms, Christ is risen and Christ is King!

Hear me when I say this: I do not mean by what I have just said, that any of this is easy. It is not. I haven't seen my daughter since the earliest days of the Fall. We talk to her every night on the phone. It's not the same. My son was with me for Thanksgiving and in some ways that underlined the fact that the circle was broken. Being with you here in the sanctuary and not singing, not shaking hands, not hugging. The circle is fractured. And yet we are doing what we must to keep everyone safe, as safe as we possibly can. The wearing of the masks is so important. And I thank you for the manner in which you have adhered to that reality.

We are still in verse 16. The Lord said to the exiles through Ezekiel, "Yet for a little while I have been a sanctuary for them in the countries where they have gone." This has also

been true of our experience. When the church was closed, and it may happen that we have to close down again, only time will tell, remember this: the church never stopped worshipping the Lord God. The church never stopped serving Jesus Christ. You read sermons and prayed in your homes. I'm sure that you have sung hymns, choruses and sacred songs in the quiet privacy of self-isolating. God has been with us. God has been with you. HE has been your sanctuary as the virus has done its cruel work, and even as people have died. This is what the Lord does. He holds us close to HIS heart wherever we are, and in all the circumstances in which we find ourselves.

We will be coming back to Ezekiel 11:16-25 again next week. But before we leave it this week, I want to deal with verse 17. That verse ends with a promise. It is a promise that God made to the Jews in exile, and it's a promise God has made to us. "I will give you back the land of Israel again." We have a foretaste of that promise in that we are sitting where we are, and worshipping where we are, all be it with restrictions in place. We got to come back into the sanctuary of this church building sooner than I expected we would do. No, we are not singing. Yes, we can only wave at one another across the room and the aisles. But the fact is we have tasted of the grace of the God who keeps HIS promises. We have reason not to grumble. We have reason to thank God for mercy given and experienced.

Our Prime Minister has been telling us for months we will get through this together. The Premier of Ontario has been telling us for months we will get through this together. I

want you to notice in Ezekiel 11:16 God said it first. God said it two and a half millennia ago. His promise is that the time of exile, of suffering, of hardship will come to an end. And what is more embedded in that promise is the implication that we shall not be alone as we strive to cope with the challenges and even the pains of this time. And I will add this point. As we are heading for the end of the year I have been asked what my intentions are come 2021. I have said, "I believe it would be unconscionable to leave you at this time." The acting Clerk of Session is communicating the request that I be reappointed, to the Presbytery. We will get through this. And even now we are tasting the realities of "new beginnings."

Let us pray;

Lord, it amazes us that your word given so long ago, should have the rare ring of truth in 2020, in the midst of this pandemic. We recognize Your sovereignty over us, and indeed over the entire creation that surrounds us, our neighbours and the nations across the seas. Shine the light of YOUR Spirit on the word in the midst of that we are experiencing. Give us a new appetite for living as a people of faith. We look forward to a time when we will praise your name aloud in the sanctuary. May YOUR name receive the glory, the honour, and the praise! Amen