

March 10, 2021

Lectionary Passages:

Psalm 84

Ezra 6:1-16

Mark 11:15-19



Selected Verses:

For a day in your courts is better
than a thousand elsewhere.

I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God
than live in the tents of wickedness. – Psalm 84: 10

It was in Ecbatana, the capital in the province of Media, that a scroll was found on which this was written: “A record. In the first year of his reign, King Cyrus issued a decree: Concerning the house of God at Jerusalem, let the house be rebuilt. – Ezra 6: 2-3

Then they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves; and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. – Mark 11: 15-19

Devotional:

When Israel returned from 60 years in Babylonian exile, King Cyrus decreed that the Temple could be rebuilt. The Persian King Cyrus had conquered Babylon and allowed the Israelites to return home and rebuild. Israel was still controlled by Persia, but were allowed to return to their home and customs. Yet, the neighboring nations hindered them from rebuilding the temple. While Cyrus had allowed the rebuilding, he did not offer protection or resources. So, the temple remained in ruins.

Twenty years later, King Darius (image above) found the decree hundreds of miles from Israel. Instead of just issuing a decree, Darius provided the resources needed to rebuild the Temple. Out of the treasury he offered the gold to cover the temple, he paid for the timbers and stone needed, he returned the gold and silver vessels from the original temple. More importantly, he paid the wages of the construction workers and guards to protect hostile neighbors.

Finally, after years of delays, discouragement and disappointment, the people were able to return to worship. For the first time in over eighty years, the people were able to celebrate Passover. Celebrate the High Holy Days as well as regular weekly worship in the Temple. Was a smaller Temple; and the people missed those who were missing. Still, they gathered and worshiped God.

Years later, the ability to gather and worship were hindered from within. Instead of the Temple being a place to gather, worship and offer sacrifices, it had become a marketplace for obtaining wealth. Jesus gave a rebuke by turning over the tables and stating, “you have made it a

den of robbers.” Even though the building was standing, the purpose had changed. Now, Jesus was in Jerusalem to offer himself as the sacrifice that would allow people to worship God in truth and grace.

Throughout history, both enemies outside and enemies within have hindered people from worshipping God. According to *Open Doors*, in just the last year: over 340 million Christians live in high levels of persecution and discrimination; 4,761 Christians were killed for their faith; 4,488 churches and other Christian buildings attacked; 4,277 believers detained without trial, arrested, sentenced or imprisoned. The enemies that kept the Temple from being a place for God in biblical times continues today.

In a different way, the pandemic this past year has closed many places of worship. As there are many businesses that will not reopen, there are churches that will not recover from the pandemic. As a community of faith, we strive to remove the barriers that hinder people from worshipping God. While technology has allowed us to provide worship experiences at home during the pandemic, I long for the day when we can all gather as the family of God in the house of God. Full worship is when we can worship together.

Yet, like the times of Ezra, there are delays, discouragements and disappointments. It is important to have the new cases of coronavirus decrease. Single digit numbers in Umatilla County over the past week is encouraging. The science of vaccinated people being able to not wear masks around other vaccinated people is encouraging. Hopefully, the encouraging signs will continue.

During this time, we need to be diligent to come together as a community of faith. If this cannot happen physically, we can work toward unity by phone calls, letters and outside visiting. We also need to remain diligent in prayer. Paul tells us to pray without ceasing (1 Thess. 5:16-18). Hold one another in prayer. Pray for the persecuted church. Pray for those who are dealing with depression, loneliness and health issues. In prayer, listen to God and His guidance.

Finally, keep the larger picture in focus. While we long for the day to fully return to worship at Faith Presbyterian, we should keep an attitude of the Psalmist. “I would rather be a gatekeeper in the house of my God, than live in the tents of the wicked.” That house is in the kingdom of God in the heavenly courts. May we live to be a gatekeeper.

Prayer:

Almighty God, we humbly come before your courts. Lord, in your grace, hear our prayer. We pray for our brothers and sisters who are being persecuted for their faith in you. Keep them strong, be with them. As a mother hen gathers her chicks, gather your children under the protection of your wings. Come alongside those we know dealing with isolation, depression and loneliness. We pray for those dealing with health issues and death itself. Lord, bring an end to this pandemic. Give us faith to trust you in the midst of the delays, discouragements and disappointments. Lord, hear our prayer. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.