

21 May 2017

The Fundamentalists
Ezra-Nehemiah; Revelation 20:11-21:1

The Book of Revelation was written to a persecuted church, promising both vindication and, in the end, peace. We read Revelation 20, verse eleven, through chapter 21, verse 1:

11 Then I saw a great white throne and the one who sat on it; the earth and the heaven fled from his presence, and no place was found for them.¹² And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Also another book was opened, the book of life. And the dead were judged according to their works, as recorded in the books.¹³ And the sea gave up the dead that were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and all were judged according to what they had done.¹⁴ Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire;¹⁵ and anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire.

***21** Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.*

One problem that the church faces in each new generation is what to do with the Book of Revelation. Even setting aside the weird symbols and strange creatures that we no longer have the tools to interpret, it just has a vengeful, angry tone about it. Most of the New Testament talks about God's salvation as being all about grace and forgiveness and love. Revelation has that, too – for instance in the glorious vision of a new heaven and a new earth in chapter 21 – but to get there, you have to go through a heavy dose of judgment. It's as if Revelation comes from a different world from the rest of the New Testament. Or from a different kind of religious mind.

I want to introduce you to that sort of religious mind today, but I have to spend some time setting the scene first, so bear with me. As you may remember from our Lenten series on the Book of Lamentations, Jerusalem was utterly destroyed by the armies of Babylon in 586 BCE. Not one stone was left on another. Many died, and the rest were carted off to exile in Babylon. Israel had once been a great empire, under Solomon, including all of what we now call Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, and most of Syria. But now it was a ruin, inhabited only by a few poor people and some immigrants who had settled around Samaria in the north. Those immigrants intermarried with the stragglers of Israel and formed the people called the Samaritans, but that was basically it as far as inhabitants of the Promised Land.

Meanwhile, the Jews taken into exile had to choose whether to abandon their faith and their God or find a new way to worship God without the temple. They found a new way. Instead of animal sacrifice in the temple, the new axis of the Jewish faith became scripture – the Torah, the Law of Moses. Finding themselves a tiny minority faith in a great empire, the Exiles had to come up with a new way to define themselves, to show how they were different from others. They defined themselves and their faith by keeping the laws: observing the Sabbath and keeping the Torah's dietary laws, for instance. And then, just sixty or so years after Jerusalem fell, Babylon fell in turn to the Persian Empire, and the new ruler – Cyrus the Persian – adopted a different policy toward defeated peoples. Instead of keeping them in exile, under his eye, he sent

them back to their homelands. So, a group of Jewish refugees returned to their ruined homeland to start over. This is the background of our story.

Rebuilding a ruin is a daunting task, and for the first few years the returned exiles focused on things like food and shelter, but eventually they turned their attention to the rubble of the temple and started to rebuild. And something interesting happened. Some of those immigrant peoples who had been living in the land while the Jews were in exile came to them and said, “We hear you are building a temple to your God. Let us join you. We have been worshiping your God, the God of Abraham and Moses, ever since we came to this place and learned about him. Let us help you build.”

And the returned exiles said, “You shall have no part in our temple. We, and we alone, will build it. Leave this place now. You defile our holy city.” You can, perhaps, understand their defensiveness. After generations in exile carefully keeping your faith pure so that it would not be diluted by the foreign religious practices around you, you learn to be careful. The result of this rejection, though, was a deep divide between the returned exiles and the people of the land. From this time on, that immigrant population is referred to as Israel’s “enemies.” And they did all they could to live up to their name.

Now we skip ahead sixty years. A small, but serviceable temple has been completed, but the Persian province of Judea is still a backwater colony, and it is still populated by two general groups of people: there are the descendants of those who returned from exile and there are “Israel’s enemies,” made up of people like the Samaritans. Into this province come a new group of returning exile, under the leadership of a man named Ezra. Now Ezra is from solid priestly stock, but he is a new kind of priest – a scribe. His emphasis is on knowing, interpreting, teaching, and enforcing the Law of Moses. Ezra arrives with a new band of faithful exiles with the official support of the Persian king. And the first thing he discovers upon arriving in Jerusalem is that in the years since that first return, things have gotten sloppy. We read from Ezra 9: *After these things had been done, the officials approached me and said, ‘The people of Israel, the priests, and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands with their abominations . . . For they have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and for their sons. Thus the holy seed has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands, and in this faithlessness the officials and leaders have led the way’* (9:1-2).

Ezra is aghast. He tears his robes and spends the day in prayer and fasting. The faith to which he had devoted his life is being corrupted by bringing other religious traditions into it. Even some of the priests, who are supposed to be *holy*, have compromised with the culture. There is only thing to be done. All the people are gathered together in an open courtyard, and Ezra declares, *‘You have trespassed and married foreign women, and so increased the guilt of Israel. Now make confession to the Lord the God of your ancestors, and do his will; separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives’* (10:10-11). The people, trembling before Ezra’s wrath and also (the text adds) because it was pouring rain, agree to a mass divorce. A task force is appointed to go through all the population of Jerusalem and deport all foreign spouses, half-blood children, and any Jews who refuse to give up their unclean families.

That was Ezra. Now we move to another hero of the faith, the man Nehemiah, whose time overlapped somewhat with Ezra's. Nehemiah was a good Jew who had stayed in Persia and had even risen to a place of prominence in the Persian court. He was the personal cupbearer – or butler – to the king. But as every devout Jew was supposed to, he also prayed for the well-being of Jerusalem, and one day word came to him that even after some 70-80 years of resettlement in Jerusalem, much of the city still lay in ruins. In particular, the city walls had never been rebuilt. Nehemiah is aghast. How can the holy city keep itself holy without walls? He spent the night in weeping and prayer. The next morning his prayers were answered. The king, noting that his butler was unusually glum, asked the reason why. Nehemiah explained, and the king promptly appointed Nehemiah the new governor of Judea and sent him off with a guard and a blank check.

Nehemiah appears to have been a brilliant organizer, and shortly after arriving in Jerusalem he inspired the inhabitants with his dream of rebuilding the walls. He used something like an “adopt a wall” strategy, and people just started building on the section of wall nearest their homes, then volunteering to work with each other, until soon the whole city was at work. The separate sections were joined together and started to rise. Meanwhile, the people of the land – the Samaritans and Jordanians – tried to do everything they could to hinder the work, but Nehemiah simply armed his laborers and kept building.

Nehemiah faced some other challenges, too. He discovered that there had been a great injustice done to the Jews, not by foreigners this time but by their fellow Jews. The injustice was a practice that had been banned in the Law of Moses called “lending money at interest.” Certain wealthy people had been charging interest on loans and, when loans went into default, repossessing homes and farms. Nehemiah summoned the moneylenders, forced them to return all forfeited properties and began a program of lending to the people at zero interest.

At last the wall was complete, and Nehemiah summoned all the people to a great festival. They gathered within the walls in the no-longer-filled-with-rubble streets, and when they were assembled Ezra the Scribe rose to his feet and read the law to them. The whole thing. All day. From this time on, the message was clear, the Jews would be faithful, diligent, and holy. They reestablished the festivals described in the law – the Feast of Booths, Passover, the Day of Atonement – and they banned all buying and selling on the sabbath. Nehemiah was able to return to Persia content. He had transformed Jerusalem.

The price of purity, though, is eternal vigilance. Some years later, during a second term as governor, Nehemiah would again have to take drastic action. Like Ezra before him, he found that certain Jews had intermarried with foreigners. Some of the children from these mixed marriages didn't even speak Hebrew! Nehemiah is aghast! In Nehemiah 13 we read his response: *I contended with them and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out their hair; and I made them take an oath in the name of God, saying, 'You shall not give your daughters to their sons, or take their daughters for your sons or for yourselves (13:25).* The Book ends with a prayer: *Thus I cleansed them from everything foreign, and I established the duties of the priests and Levites, each in his work; and I provided for the wood-offering, at appointed times, and for the first fruits. Remember me, O my God, for good (13:30-31).*

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What are we supposed to do with this stuff? As with Revelation, it is impossible to read the stories of Ezra and Nehemiah without feeling uncomfortable. Both men, I believe, were of unimpeachable integrity. Both men were wholly devoted to God. And yet their devotion took the form of identifying those who believed or thought differently, or even just spoke a different language, as enemies and building walls against them. Their faith was deeply felt, followed with complete commitment, and entirely exclusive. They seem to have made no distinction between having the correct faith and belonging to the correct race. And even those of the correct race had to be kept in line by a strict observance of scripture, regarded as an infallible book of rules. The faith we find in these two biblical books, and exemplified by these two men, is a harsh, demanding faith that is always ready to condemn outsiders, already ready to judge the sinner among their own.

Even if the title of my sermon hadn't given it away, maybe you would have made the connection between these men and certain strains of our own faith. Fundamentalist Christians are just as rule-based, just as rigid, just as sure of their own rightness, just as judgmental. They also, like Ezra and Nehemiah, are particularly susceptible to confusing their faith with their racial identity and culture, and just as willing to condemn to hell anyone who is different. And, I should add, fundamentalist Christians very often display the same utter integrity, personal consistency, and unmatched commitment to their God.

The faith of Ezra and Nehemiah is not my faith. But here it is. In our Bible. Next week we'll see a contemporary of Ezra and Nehemiah who had a very different attitude, but these guys are still here. And maybe their rigid approach was what was needed in those precarious days of rebuilding. Maybe there is a time for separation and exclusion. And maybe there are some people whose minds just work this way and for whom faith will always take a rigid form. I don't know. All I know is that, I have to acknowledge that the faith of Ezra and Nehemiah is real, even if I'm not sure they would say the same about mine.

Because it's possible that Ezra and Nehemiah would look at the way I live my faith and be aghast. I hope so.