

EASTSIDE COMMUNITY BAPTIST CHURCH
SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 15, 2020
SERMON: EZRA 4 – “Attacked from Within & Without!”

I love a good story, especially one that puts its main characters through the ringer. The tension makes for drama. An example of this is found in J.R.R Tolkien’s classic “The Lord of the Rings” trilogy. The story begins in the book “The Fellowship of the Ring” and is the story of Frodo Baggins, a very ordinary Hobbit who lives in a rural setting known as “The Shire.” Life is peaceful for the Hobbit until the wizard Gandalf the Grey shows up on his doorstep needing Frodo’s help to prevent the destruction of their world known as Middle Earth. An ancient evil, thought defeated, has risen once more and threatens life as they know it. An unimpressive group known as the Fellowship is formed to help Frodo carry out his task. Things seem to be going well as they journey towards their goal, when evil rears its ugly head and the Fellowship finds itself in disarray, at odds with each other, and separated. The second book, “The Two Towers,” finds our heroes barely hanging on, facing more setbacks than victories. Evil is advancing at an alarming rate and seems to be winning the battle. The story is concluded in the third book “The Return of the King,” when our group is slowly brought back together. There is a new vision and purpose. Right wins over wrong and evil is vanquished once more.

I suppose that I like this type of story because there is the possibility that everything won’t turn out ok. Possibly even the idea of the realities of the struggles of life.

Today we jump into Ezra 4. So far it has been smooth sailing for the Remnant. Everything seems to be falling into place for their return to Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the Temple. Sadly, conflict is just around the corner...

EZRA 4

The enemies of Judah and Benjamin heard that the exiles were rebuilding a Temple to the LORD, the God of Israel. ² So they approached Zerubbabel and the other leaders and said, “Let us build

with you, for we worship your God just as you do. We have sacrificed to him ever since King Esarhaddon of Assyria brought us here.”

³ But Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and the other leaders of Israel replied, “You may have no part in this work. We alone will build the Temple for the LORD, the God of Israel, just as King Cyrus of Persia commanded us.”

⁴ Then the local residents tried to discourage and frighten the people of Judah to keep them from their work. ⁵ They bribed agents to work against them and to frustrate their plans. This went on during the entire reign of King Cyrus of Persia and lasted until King Darius of Persia took the throne.

Later Opposition under Xerxes and Artaxerxes

⁶ Years later when Xerxes began his reign, the enemies of Judah wrote a letter of accusation against the people of Judah and Jerusalem.

⁷ Even later, during the reign of King Artaxerxes of Persia, the enemies of Judah, led by Bishlam, Mithredath, and Tabeel, sent a letter to Artaxerxes in the Aramaic language, and it was translated for the king.

⁸ Rehum the governor and Shimshai the court secretary wrote the letter, telling King Artaxerxes about the situation in Jerusalem. ⁹ They greeted the king for all their colleagues—the judges and local leaders, the people of Tarpel, the Persians, the Babylonians, and the people of Erech and Susa (that is, Elam). ¹⁰ They also sent greetings from the rest of the people whom the great and noble Ashurbanipal had deported and relocated in Samaria and throughout the neighboring lands of the province west of the Euphrates River. ¹¹ This is a copy of their letter:

“To King Artaxerxes, from your loyal subjects in the province west of the Euphrates River.

¹² “The king should know that the Jews who came here to Jerusalem from Babylon are rebuilding this rebellious and evil city. They have already laid the foundation and will soon finish its walls. ¹³ And the king should know that if this city is rebuilt and its walls are completed, it will be much to your disadvantage, for the Jews will then refuse to pay their tribute, customs, and tolls to you.

¹⁴ “Since we are your loyal subjects and do not want to see the king dishonored in this way, we have sent the king this information. ¹⁵ We suggest that a search be made in your ancestors’ records, where you will discover what a rebellious city this has been in the past. In fact, it was destroyed because of its long and troublesome history of revolt against the kings and countries who controlled it. ¹⁶ We declare to the king that if this city is rebuilt and its walls are completed, the province west of the Euphrates River will be lost to you.”

¹⁷ Then King Artaxerxes sent this reply:

“To Rehum the governor, Shimshai the court secretary, and their colleagues living in Samaria and throughout the province west of the Euphrates River. Greetings.

¹⁸ “The letter you sent has been translated and read to me. ¹⁹ I ordered a search of the records and have found that Jerusalem has indeed been a hotbed of insurrection against many kings. In fact, rebellion and revolt are normal there! ²⁰ Powerful kings have ruled over Jerusalem and the entire province west of the Euphrates River, receiving tribute, customs, and tolls. ²¹ Therefore, issue orders to have these men stop their work. That city must not be rebuilt except at my express command. ²² Be diligent, and don’t neglect this matter, for we must not permit the situation to harm the king’s interests.”

²³ When this letter from King Artaxerxes was read to Rehum, Shimshai, and their colleagues, they hurried to Jerusalem. Then, with a show of strength, they forced the Jews to stop building.

The Rebuilding Resumes

²⁴ So the work on the Temple of God in Jerusalem had stopped, and it remained at a standstill until the second year of the reign of King Darius of Persia.

OPPOSITION ARISES

The Remnant are in Jerusalem rebuilding the temple. Ezra 3 tells us that they were fearful because their home was surrounded by potential hostile enemies and they was no real protection for the people because Jerusalem's walls were destroyed. They were fearful...but still obediently following God's plan for them.

Now the intrigue begins! A face is given to the fear. It is an story that we all deal with over the course of our lives. Life is going well, ministry is going well and suddenly there is opposition that attempts to disrupt our goals and plans.

The Hebrews are in the midst of their work when they are approached by a group of people who live in the area around Jerusalem. They offer to help the people rebuild the temple and state the reason why. They are foreigners who were resettled to the region of Samaria by the Assyrians (read about it in 2 Kings 17). They claim that they wish to "seek your God as you do!" Their claim is that they worship the one true God. GREAT!!! Who couldn't use more help from like-minded individuals? BUT there is a PROBLEM!

We can fill in the whole story when we look at 2 Kings 17. It was true that they sought out the God of Israel, but they worshipped God along with many other foreign, false gods. It is what is called "syncretism." Syncretism is still a temptation today often masking itself as "interfaith dialogue." It is within this setting that others will attempt to persuade Christians that "we all worship the same god – just different names."

The Hebrews didn't fall for the offer – in fact it seems that faith and religion didn't really play a part in the refusal of the offer. They did not accept help from strangers because "they" were commanded to rebuild the temple...those who were sent back to Jerusalem by Cyrus.

LETTER WRITING CAMPAIGN

When the first attempt to infiltrate the Remnant did not work, their adversaries jumped to plan b. Their enemies hired “counsellors” meaning they bribed Persian officials to continually harass the people of Judah. This harassment started to have the desired results and the work on the temple began to slow down.

Then we have an interesting occurrence. The writer uses a technique called “prolepsis.” Have you ever watched a movie or tv show that will start with a future event, the hero badly wounded, or some devastating calamity has taken place, and then the next screen says “3 days prior?” Prolepsis is the literary term for jumping to a future event before returning to the current timeline.

Starting in verse 4, we jump ahead by approximately 30 years. Cyrus is no longer king of the Persian empire. Now the king is Ahasuerus (also known as Xerxes). The adversaries play on the paranoia of the Persian king to ask him why he is allowing these “historic troublemakers” the freedom to rebuild an “evil” city (Jerusalem) that has historically stood as a mighty foe of the countries. They don’t seem to get the answer they want, so they wait for the next king Artaxerxes and write the same letter.

Artaxerxes researches their claims and finds them credible and issues a decree that the letter writers take a copy of the new decree that they should stop their labours – and they may use force if necessary!

After all of the amazing acts of God, after seeing God’s plan fall into place...we read in the very last verse these words:

²⁴ So the work on the Temple of God in Jerusalem had stopped, and it remained at a standstill until the second year of the reign of King Darius of Persia.

WHAT HAPPENED?

Why would God allow such a thing to happen when He had gone to such great lengths bring the people back to Jerusalem? It once again can be summed up in one word...DISOBEDIENCE.

Ezra-Nehemiah doesn't tell us the whole story but rather gives us a glimpse of the problem. To get the whole story you must go to the words of the prophet Haggai to once again get "the rest of the story."

The persecution of the Remnant is their own fault. WHY? Because they were disobedient again. All that stuff we talked about last week – deciding not just to be good but wanting to be GREAT! God's people flushed it down the proverbially toilet! They succeeded for a while, but then they succumbed to the temptation to put themselves first instead of God. At some point they ceased building the temple in order to rebuild their own homes. And Haggai 1:3 tells us that "God rebuked them!" As a result of their disobedience, God chastised them with economic hardships and drought. The people faced these hardships, faced the harassment of the enemies around them, and turned away from the work God gave them to focus on their personal needs. Year after year passed and it became easier and easier to put off resuming work on the temple. Ezra 5 will show us how God had to motivate the people once more under the reign of Darius.

FOR US TODAY

In John 15:20, Jesus tells his disciples:

^o Do you remember what I told you? 'A slave is not greater than the master.' Since they persecuted me, naturally they will persecute you. And if they had listened to me, they would listen to you.

For some reason we are still surprised by persecution! Persecution still comes to us the same way. It sometimes sneaks up on us. Not that we live in paranoia, but we must have discernment when the world approaches us to be our friends. This is the way syncretism...compromising our beliefs in the name of unity. Interfaith dialogues can slip into compromise very easily for the simple reason that we don't want to be seen as closed minded, unloving, exclusive.

As much as the world will harass us, a far more destructive, painful, and heartbreaking persecution is when it comes from within! Disobedience! We are our own worst enemy. Baptists have a long history of being contentious and nasty to one another. I have heard stories and lived through experiences of member vs. member to the point where God ordained, God blessed, thriving ministries are torpedoed because of the lack of unity from within. Once again, this is the message of 1 Corinthians 13. We are to be longsuffering, forgiving, loving, patient, kind, and we are not suppose to keep a record of wrongs...yet we fight, and argue, and mumble, and polarize. I have heard of church members starting petitions to get their own way. In the news today I can tell you about churches suing other churches because of perceived competition and rivalry.

The Remnant gave up their calling to be a royal priesthood and were punished by God. We cannot expect to go forward with ministry if we are disobedient to God's calling. Most disunity in churches will be because we base our decisions on personal preference rather than God's will. We have a hard time looking at the greater good, we have a hard time with change.

We must remind ourselves of our true calling to be a royal priesthood. We have been created to glorify God and be Jesus' hands and feet until he returns.

May we live out these words from Philippians 2:1-2:

2 Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, ²then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. ³Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, ⁴not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

Let's pray....