



Profiles in Courage: Living and Leading in Dangerous Times

"Ezra"

Wildwood Mennonite Church // May 10, 2020

Worship Leader: Christine // Music Leader: Marni // Sermon: Joe

Welcome to Wildwood

Welcome to the gathering of the Wildwood Mennonite congregation this morning.

We are a family of God. Together or apart. We are many. We are one.

A group of imperfect people seeking the face of God through worship and through fellowship.

We strive to:

Bring out the best in each other and our world by

Preparing space to listen and speak,

Practicing to lead and serve,

Providing support for rest, renewal and growth

And, provoking one another to love and good deeds

As we walk together in the way of Jesus.

We are glad that you have joined us for worship and a time of communing together.

Music For Meditation // [What a Beautiful Name](#) // Hillsong

Call to Worship ~ adapted from writing of Carol Penner and Palmer Becker

And Jesus said, "Come!"

To all mothers and all children: he said, "Come!"

To the motherless and the childless: he said, "Come!"

To all who long to be mothered: he said, "Come!"

Come unto me all ye who labour and are heavy-laden,
and I will give you rest.

Take my yoke upon you and learn from me,
for I am gentle and humble of heart
and you will find rest for your souls."

Jesus said "Come!" To all peoples: he said "Come!"

To all who long to belong and participate: he said "Come!"

To all who long to strengthened, to grow in Christ:
we are invited to place Jesus as the center of our faith,
place community as the center of our lives, and
reconciliation as the center of our work.

Jesus said "Come! Come, let us worship together."



Opening Prayer

Holy One, we gather in your presence to give you thanks and to celebrate the gift of your love; a love that supports, nurtures and challenges us in ways that strengthen and transform us, individually and collectively.

We come together today to offer you praise and thanksgiving for your unfailing presence in our lives and all the blessings that you so generously offer us.

Come, be among us now as your people gather to worship. Amen.

Song // [God Only Knows](#) // For King and Country

Peace Candle

Today, as we recognize Mother's Day, we give thanks for mothers the world over.

We give thanks for all those who have nurtured and cared for us, remembering especially, birth mothers, adoptive mothers, surrogate mothers, aunts, grandmothers, teachers, neighbors and all women who have shared their faith with us.

We pray, compassionate God, for those mothers who have been hurt, disillusioned, or disappointed in their role as mother. We pray for those who have been denied a longed-for chance at motherhood, and for those whose years of mothering have been cut short by the loss of a child.

Holy God, there are missing mothers, and missing children. Mothers who cannot feed their children, and mothers who have no home. Comfort those mothers whose lives are filled with chaos and unmet expectations. Comfort those mothers whose lives are disrupted by violence and fear.

We recognize, gracious God, that you are the giver of life. We ask for your gift of grace as we negotiate this day, Mother's Day, knowing that many cannot hug their mothers, hug their children, or be included in ways they may have wished. Fill us with your love and grace.

Holy Mother and Father of us all, touch us with your healing peace and gentle embrace that we may walk in your ways bringing dignity, justice and peace to all corners of your world.

May the flame of our Wildwood candle burn strong and shine throughout our world. Amen.

Scripture // Ezra 3:1-6ish and James 1:27; 3:13-18ish // Lightly edited from the Inclusive Bible

Ezra 3:1-6ish

[After decades of exile in Babylon, some of the Jews have been given permission from King Cyrus to return to Jerusalem to begin rebuilding their homeland...] When the seventh month arrived—the people having settled in their own villages—they assembled in Jerusalem as one body. Then Jeshua and the priests, along with tribal leader Zerubbabel and his family, began the building of the altar of the God of Israel so that they might make burnt offerings as was stipulated in the law of Moses, the godly one. They built the altar first, for they lived in fear of the peoples who lived around them; and they made burnt offerings day and night. They celebrated the Feast of Booths as was prescribed, making the proper number of burnt offerings each day, and in the same way they made burnt offerings for the Sabbaths, for the new moons, and for all the sacred festivals of YHWH; and everyone made freewill burnt offerings to the Most High. On the first day of the seventh month they began to make burnt offerings regularly, even though the foundations of the new Temple had not yet been laid.

James 1:27; 3:13-18ish

Pure, unspoiled religion, in the eyes of our Abba God, is this: coming to the aid of widows and orphans when they are in need, and keeping oneself uncontaminated by this world.

If there are any wise and learned among you, let them show it by good living—with humility, and with wisdom in their actions... The wisdom from above has purity as its essence. It works for peace; it's kind and considerate. It's full of compassion and shows itself by doing good. Nor is there any trace of partiality or hypocrisy in it. Peacemakers, when they work for peace, sow the seeds which will bear fruit in holiness.

Children's Story // [Click here for video storytime with Marg!](#)

The book is [Weslandia](#) by Paul Fleischman (illustrated by Kevin Hawkes).

Sermon // "Rebuilding the Center" // Joe Heikman

(If you'd rather watch than read, [click here for the video version on youtube](#))

Our story comes from the book of Ezra, chapters 1-3. Adapted from [The Action Bible](#).

For 70 years, the tribe of Judah had been living in Exile.

For 4 generations, the remnant of God's People had longed for a return to their homeland.

For 70 years, political, economic and social realities said "No."

And then one king said "yes."

After many years living in exile in Babylon and Persia, the Jews still dream of returning to their homeland in Palestine. The different Persian rulers have mostly treated the Jewish exiles well, and when King Cyrus takes the throne, one of his first acts is to issue a decree.



“These are the words of King Cyrus: “The God of Israel commands that a house be built for them in Jerusalem. Any of their people who want to return may do so.”

The Jews rejoice that the King is allowing them to return to the Land God promised them.

“I am too old to make the journey. But here, take these gold plates that my family has passed down for generations. And here is some money and extra food.”

The book of Ezra says that even their Gentile neighbours blessed them with gold, silver and livestock. Gifts of money, horses, mules, camels, food and clothing pour in. At last, the day comes when the great caravan is ready to leave.

On the long road home, the Jews follow the same route that Abraham, the founder of the Jewish nation traveled centuries before when he left his home to make a new life, a new family in Palestine.

“When we left Jerusalem, it was in flames. I wonder what it looks like now.”

No matter how much they prepare themselves for the ruined city, they are brokenhearted to see how little remains of their holy city.

“Solomon’s beautiful temple stood over there.” “With God’s help, we will rebuild!”

“Our family built this home with their own hands. Look at it now--it’s a home for wild dogs.”

“Maybe we should not have come back...”

“Our ancestors built this city; we can rebuild it. Jerusalem will rise again!”

Although the city is in ruins, the exiles begin to rebuild. Their leaders were a priest, Jeshua, and a governor, Zerubbabel. Jeshua--“God is our salvation” and Zerub-babel “a seed out of Babylon.” Once again, God is planting new life in the middle of the destruction of the past.


Jeshua and Zerubbabel start by rebuilding the altar on its old spot in front of the temple.

And in the midst of the ruins, the People of God celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles, the Exodus memorial, for the first time in generations.

A new life, a renewed people, a new journey in the Land of Promise had begun.

If you were rebuilding a ruined city from the ground up, where would you start?





There would be lots of competing priorities for the city planners. I'm sure that practical concerns like decent housing and securing the food and water supply, some nice solid walls, those would be at the top of the list for most people. Though if we took a vote in Saskatoon, at least a couple of people would vote for a downtown arena, and some others would argue that bike lanes should go in first. Or never at all. :)

But when the Jews returned to Jerusalem, the very first thing they did was to rebuild the altar at the entrance to the ruined Temple.

Restoring their lost religious rituals was the most important thing.

That sounds strange to our modern ears, fanatical, maybe superstitious (or at least [a little stitious?](#))...

But on the other hand, when the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris burned last year, it was [only two months later](#) when they held the first mass in the building. The priests and parishioners wore hard hats because of fears that the building was still unstable. The rebuilding had not begun, and the fire inspectors had not even finished their investigation, yet there was something important about making that statement that the rituals of faith would continue in spite of the tragedy.


In the book of Ezra, the writer gives the explanation that they set up the altar first, and resumed the ritual sacrifices, "because they were in fear of the neighbouring peoples." To the Jews, vulnerable as they were, rebuilding the altar first was most practical, because their faith was the best form of protection and sustenance that they knew.

Now, obviously, this is a religious book written down and passed on by religious professionals, so there may be just a bit of bias at work. And they did quickly work to build shelter and wells and walls. Those things mattered, too, these were real people doing their best to make a life for themselves.

But this story of the altar is the story that endured. This is what they passed on to the generations that followed. And it's this fierce determination to keep their faith at the center of their identity that is the reason we know about the Jews at all. The empires of Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia and Greece dominated the region, and over time most local religions were simply incorporated into the religion of the Empire or lost to history entirely.

But not the Jews, they made their religion the center of their life, coming and going. And so their stories, their rituals, their worldview and their values survived and shaped the world as we know it. As historian Thomas Cahill puts it in the subtitle to his book [The Gifts of the Jews: How a Tribe of Desert Nomads Changed the Way Everyone Thinks and Feels](#)

What you put at the center matters.



Now, we're not exactly rebuilding a civilization up from the ashes. But I don't have to tell you that we are at one of those watershed moments, where the rest of our lives is going to be divided into "before and after" the pandemic.

What will we carry with us into the new world? Many of you have relatives who had to literally make those decisions not so long ago. For most of us now, that's a figurative question, but the core of it is the same.

What kind of world do we want for ourselves and each other, as we rebuild? What virtues and values will sustain us, what lessons will guide us, what foundations will we choose to put at the center of a new and uncertain way of life?

Y'all are obviously very religious people, I can tell! I mean, you didn't wander into this worship service and make it this far by accident...

So my question for you is, as people of faith, what does it mean to put your faith at the center of life after the pandemic?

(And yes, I agree that it is way too soon to be talking about the pandemic in the past tense. But the conversation is already underway, so as we think about what comes next, what role does our faith play in that?)

For the Jews, keeping their faith at the center was about identity. They practiced politics and economics and international relations and health care. They had families and personal lives, all those things that make up human lives and human societies.


What set the Jews apart was that, on their good days, they did all of those things through the lens of faith, through what they saw as their God-given vision of humility and justice and wisdom.

They practiced a set of rituals and symbols that kept those values in front of them day and night, week in and week out.

What are the values of our faith, and how are we keeping those in front of us as we live through this pandemic?

As Anabaptist Christians, many of us resonate with the way writer Palmer Becker [describes the core of our tradition:](#)

- 1) Jesus is the center of our faith
- 2) Community is the center of our lives
- 3) Reconciliation is the center of our work



I know, I'm preaching to the choir on this one. But I wonder, how do those values fit into the conversation around recovering from Covid-19?

Most of the conversations I hear are about limiting the loss of life, or "restarting the economy" or "following the science" or rebuilding with green energy or protecting our freedoms (that's not just for Americans, ya know...)

Those are important conversations--so how does our faith in Jesus inform our economic priorities? How does the value of community change the way we understand freedom or science or health care? How does the work of reconciliation shape our political views?

I have opinions, of course, and mine are definitely the right ones. But today, my point is that our faith should inform our thinking on all of those things.

But that's not the default setting. Most of the time, the goodness of the economy, or science, or human rights, or whatever, those are talked about as self-evident truths. And in normal times, that is simply evidence that the vast majority of us agree on those things.

But these are not normal times, and the value and purpose of our ideologies are now up for debate. What does it mean to value human rights? What is the *purpose* of the economy? Who gets to decide what is just and true?

Those questions aren't so easily answered right now, for worse and for better.


Those are questions of faith, and it's up to us to do the work of making those connections, to assert our values of faith in Christ into the conversation.

For some of us, that might mean active participation in public leadership, in shaping the institutions of government and education and economics. For some it will mean participation in local community building projects. Or maybe it will mean good conversations with people who may or may not agree with us.

And I know, some of us just want to keep our heads down and get back to some kind of normal, down-to-earth Saskatchewan way of life... and that's good in its own way. But know that the way we define that, and how we get there, those are also questions of faith.

The Jews kept their faith in focus through the visual of the new altar at the center of the city, the constant billow of fire and smoke from their sacrifices always in view.

What symbols and practices will we use to keep the values of Jesus, community and reconciliation at the center of our participation in the re-opening of Saskatchewan?



I'm grateful to Eileen for the nudge to celebrate the communion ritual again today. That's the kind of centering practice that allows us to be intentional in shaping ourselves in the way of Jesus.

What other rituals and practices will we keep at the center of our lives?

Regrettably, there was also a dark side to the rebuilding of Jerusalem. As I said, the Jews were afraid of the people who lived in the area. The history isn't exactly clear (and I may not have the details correct), but forced migration was common practice in the Empires that dominated the region. When they conquered the nation of Judah and exiled most of the Jews to Babylon, the Empire likely forced a different group of conquered people into the region. An effective way of destroying cultures and forcing minorities to assimilate into the broader empire.

Anyway, long story short, while the Jews were in exile in Babylon, the area around Jerusalem was settled by a combination of refugees from the northern tribes of Israel, immigrants from other parts of the Assyrian or Babylonian empires, and the remnant of those Jews who had been allowed to remain in Judah. These groups intermarried and maintained a form of religion fairly close to the Jewish religion. They became known as the Samaritans. You may have heard of them.

So when the Jews returned to Jerusalem, these neighbours saw that the Jews were resuming the sacrifices to YHWH and starting to rebuild the Temple. So the neighbours came over and said, "Hey, we worship YHWH like you do, this is so great, let us help you rebuild the Temple!"


But Zerubbabel and Jeshua said no. "You will have no part with us in building a house to our God; but we alone will build to YHWH, the God of Israel." Our God, not your God. It's our story, our ancestors, not yours. We are the faithful ones, not you.

That religious identity that kept the Jews centered now became a boundary that separated them from others. And the story of the Exile became a story of us against them--the Jewish prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos... the prophets said that the Exile was the result of sin, selfishness, injustice, empty religion.

But here at the return to Jerusalem, the priests rejected that call to personal and collective repentance and instead pointed the finger--it's their fault, we let ourselves be corrupted by marrying those heathens, that's why all the bad stuff happened, because we let our pure religion be influence by those people. Well, not this time, we'll keep to ourselves.

And so fear turned to rejection, and neighbours became rivals and enemies.

That's the danger of making religion the center of a worldview. Like any ideology, faith can get wrapped up in the project of *preserving* faith, rather than living it. For 500 years, that was the story, that God was with the Jews and not the Samaritans.



That's why it was so shocking when Jesus told the story about the Good Samaritan, whose kindness and hospitality exposed the false piety of the Jewish religious leaders. That's why it was revolutionary when Jesus talked with a Samaritan woman, stereotypical sinner that she was, and told her that where and how one worshipped did not matter, that what God wanted was those who pursued the Spirit of Truth wherever it could be found.

Jeshua and Zerubbabel made enemies of the neighbours that God saw as their people, too.

Whatever it means to keep faith at the center of a rebuilding world, the call of Jesus is to make that about substance, not about ideology or ethnicity or denomination.

As always, the call of Jesus is to go beyond ourselves, to expect to find God already at work beyond the borders we set up.

Again, I'm preaching to the choir here at Wildwood. That combination of a faith centered on Jesus, community, and reconciliation leads most of us to embrace the value of inclusion:

We're glad to welcome everyone to worship and participate with us! Wildwood Mennonite Church is a community of followers of Jesus Christ that invites into membership all who wish to join us in the journey of faith. With God's help, we will not discriminate in regard to race, ethnic background, age, gender identity, sexual orientation, income, education, ability, and other factors that may give rise to division and marginalization.

Amen! I miss seeing that in the bulletin every week. And that's my point:

In the pre-pandemic world, inclusion as a church mostly meant being welcoming and friendly to newcomers who made their way through our church doors, making space for all people to grow and lead and be fully part of who we are at Wildwood.

But what does it mean to be an inclusive church in the days when the church doors are closed? How can we practice inclusion when our government rightly warns us to keep our social circles as closed as possible? Who are the "Samaritans" who need our help, and who *want to help us* in shaping a new way of being, together?

The scripture, again, from the book of James: (James 1:27; 3:13-18ish)

Pure, unspoiled religion, in the eyes of our Abba God, is this: coming to the aid of widows and orphans when they are in need, and keeping oneself uncontaminated by this world.

The wisdom from above has purity as its essence. It works for peace; it's kind and considerate. It's full of compassion and shows itself by doing good. Nor is there any trace of partiality or hypocrisy in it.

The purity James is talking about isn't purity from *them*, but purity from the self, from ego, pride, hypocrisy. The purity of the Good Samaritan, actually, who didn't care about the credit, who saw a need and did what they could.

Peacemakers, when they work for peace, sow the seeds which will bear fruit in justice.

This is indeed a time for building altars and for planting seeds.

May God give us the courage and wisdom to walk in the way of Jesus, together as a community, in pursuit of the work of reconciliation and justice. Amen.

Song // [You Are the Centre](#) // Margaret Rizza

Communion

I hope you have all found something which can serve as communion elements this morning!

As we prepare for communion on what I think must be the 7th or even the 8th Sunday of being unable to worship in our own sanctuary, I want to share the words of one of my resources which said, "The brokenness of our world is lifted up in the bread broken. The bloodshed of our world is remembered in the cup shared. In the gathered grain we are brought together and grounded in God's good earth. In the fruit of the vine we are united with the groaning of all creation. We do this at the table to remember our identity as a covenant people of God. We receive, and are sustained as, the body and blood of Christ. This is our eucharist, this is our thanksgiving".[1]

The eucharist, the sharing of communion is our thanksgiving because it reminds us that Jesus is at the center of all that we are and all that we do. Jesus is the anchor, as an old gospel hymn reminds us, that holds us in the storms of life. The chorus of that hymn, if you recall, encourages us with these words:

We have an anchor that keeps the soul
Steadfast and sure while the billows roll,
Fastened to the Rock which cannot move,
Grounded firm and deep in the Savior's love.[2]

Rituals give us a sense of stability in a changing world – and Communion is such a ritual. Yet it is more than a ritual; it is a reminder that Jesus died and rose, and lives among us, uniting us together as one family in God. Jesus lives among us – giving us purpose even in times of struggle, maybe *particularly* in times of struggle. Jesus is our anchor, the one who grounds us. Jesus is our peace. Jesus is our center.



Although apart, we come together, remembering that Jesus is the head of the church and we will observe communion now while we wait for the world to be rebuilt. It is where we come to center ourselves.

[Communion Service](#)[3]

And so, you are invited to the table of our Lord Jesus Christ, where Jesus sits as head of this table.

We do not partake of communion as sacrifice, In that it is not something we do for Jesus as much as it is a reminder of what Jesus has done for us and continues to do for us.

Here we have a feast for the people of God, a sign of Jesus' body and blood given in love to save us.

Everyone who is a follower of Jesus is welcome to take the bread and juice to sustain them on their journey of faith.

Please take your bread and hold it as I continue with these words of scripture. [*pick up bread*]

On the night he was handed over,
our Lord Jesus Christ took bread,
and after giving thanks to God,
broke it and gave it to his disciples.
He said, "Take, eat;
this is my body which is given for you.
Do this in remembrance of me."

Let's pray together:

God of grace, we give you thanks for this bread,
and your son Jesus Christ who came to save us.
The love of Jesus shines through the years,
his death on the cross, his broken body
has become the bread of life which sustains us.
As we eat this bread,
remind us that we are part of his body,
living for him, giving for him. Amen.

My brothers and sisters.....The body of Christ, broken for you. Let us eat the bread.

Now I'll invite you to take the cup and hold it. [*pick up cup*]

After supper Jesus took the cup of wine; and after giving thanks,
gave it to them and said,
"Drink this, all of you;



this is my blood of the new covenant
which is shed for you and for many
for the forgiveness of sins.

Whenever you drink it, remember me.

Let us pray;

Thank you Jesus for loving us to the end of your life.
We drink this juice remembering your sacrifice for our sins,
your love which never ends,
your love which sustains us still. Amen.

My sisters and brothers...the blood of Christ was shed for you. [Let us drink together]

Let's pray in thanksgiving:

God of grace,
thank you for raising Jesus Christ from the dead,
to live among us - our anchor, our peace, our center,
and our hope for life eternal.

Holy Spirit, in these times, fill us with your strength
to be the body of Christ on earth,
Give us strength to do the work you would have us do,
to be the people you would have us be.
And most of all, give us hope
as we wait together to see Jesus again.
Amen.

[1] United Church of Canada. Celebrate God's Presence: A Book of Services for the United Church of Canada. United Church Publishing House, 2000. (p. 239)

[2] https://library.timelesstruths.org/music/We_Have_an_Anchor/

[3] <https://carolpenner.typepad.com/leadinginworship/communion-service/>, slightly adapted by Eileen Klaassen. Carol Penner says: *Words for this and the other communion services on this blog are not entirely my own. Obviously some of it is scriptural, but I have adopted and adapted phrases from communion services from many different traditions.*

Song // [Communion](#) // Third Day

Sharing Time // ["Hey Wildwood..." online sharing](#)

Not hearing from one another in person through the Sharing Time is a significant loss for many of us. It's not the same, but one way to express your grief, anxiety, prayer requests and gratitude is through the "Hey Wildwood" link above. If you're able, join us for our Sunday Morning Zoom gatherings, or check your email for the sharing items from last Sunday. Or maybe now would be a good time to pause your reading to call someone from church or elsewhere that you haven't heard from this week.



Congregational Prayer

Loving God,

This morning, on a day when we celebrate mothers,

we thank you for creating each mom

with their own unique combination of gifts and talents.

We pray you give each mom strength and wisdom in this monumental task.

We remember moms who stay at home and seldom get a break,

we pray for those who struggle to juggle parenting with work outside the home.

We especially pray for moms raising children on their own,

for stepmoms and women who have become surrogate parents,

and for those longing to become mothers.

We remember mothers who grieve the loss of children,

and those who grieve the loss of a mother.

Lord Jesus,

when you walked with us on earth

you spread your compassion and your healing power wherever you went.

You taught us to be and do as you did, coming to the aid of those who are in need.

As we remember those who have been ill,

we are grateful for medications that have eased symptoms

and for treatments that have brought healing!

For this we offer our thanks and praise!

This morning we again place in your loving care

all who are affected by Coronavirus.

Keep us strong in faith, hope and love.

Bring relief to our sick, console our bereaved, protect those who care for us.

God, we confess that this virus has brought to light

more of the divisions that divide our human race.

Help us to live with humility and wisdom,

with may we, with kindness and consideration,

be peacemakers in our broken world.

Grant us courage for the living of these days.

We lift our prayer to you Lord, and trust in your infinite mercy,

as we wait for the daybreak. Amen.

Offering Prayer

We are invited to respond to God's call to share our abundance. We share through our gifts of time, treasure and wisdom, generation to generation.

God of hope and wonder

God of earth and sea

God of love and glory, we give you thanks for all the ordinary wonders of each new day.

We give you thanks for the countless forms of beauty that tell us of your abundant love.



*Because Christ is always risen,
We give our thanks, our gifts and our praise to you
Aloud and in the silence of our hearts.*

Song // [Together](#) // For King and Country

Benediction

HOPE – a poem by [Jennifer Pratt-Walter](#)

See how the winds
have shaped her hands to
hold hope?
So tenuous, it trembles
like a hummingbird's heart.

She gently carries hope
to a nest in the midst
of the maelstrom and tilts it
into the bowl of tiny feathers and mosses.

Hope is so hard to cup.
She might need your help
when it seeps through the cracks
of her fingers. Place your hands
like this around hers. Together
it can be done.

When it hatches, when the nest
is no more, watch the wind pick up hope
and lay it softly into the welcome
of upraised palms.

May God, who gave birth to all creation, bless us:
may God, who became incarnate by an earthly mother, bless us:
may God, who broods as a mother over her children, bless us.
May almighty God bless us,
now and forever.

Amen.

