

Making a Beginning
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We continue on our journey through the Bible today, joining the Hebrews as they finally journey home. To understand where the Israelites are in today's story, you need to know where they came from. Nebuchadnezzar had taken over the city of Judah and, for a time, the arrangement was working for both parties. He had taken the king of Judah, Jehoiachin, and a group of his officials to Babylon, appointed a new king, Jehoiachin's uncle, Zedekiah, and left the city intact. Eventually, the Judahites decided to take a stand, refusing to submit the annual tribute payment to Nebuchadnezzar, who, not surprisingly, reacted poorly. "The Babylonians totally destroyed Jerusalem, burning the Temple, the palace, and 'all the houses of Jerusalem.' Even the city walls were pulled down. Some of the residents of Jerusalem were forced to flee, others were led into exile, and still others were executed... 'The captain of the guard left some of the poorest people of the land to be "vinedressers and tillers of the soil."'"¹ For almost fifty years, those who had been sent out remained away.

Then, Cyrus, King of Persia, overtook the Babylonian Empire. He heard a word from God that told him to bring back the people who were exiled. He told them they were to rebuild the temple and gave them supplies to do that, even requiring others to contribute to help the Hebrew people. Not everyone came back – some were comfortable with life in exile because it no longer felt like exile. Others, totaling more than 42,000, about the number of people in Wilmette, Winnetka, and Glencoe combined – a lot now and even more significant back then, jumped at the opportunity to go where they felt they were home. It is after those Hebrews have been back and at work, having already rebuilt an altar so that they might begin sacrifices right away, that we join up with the reading today.

Ezra 3:8-13

⁸ In the second year after their arrival at the house of God at Jerusalem, in the second month, Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and Jeshua son of Jozadak made a beginning, together with the rest of their people, the priests and the Levites and all who had come to Jerusalem from the captivity. They appointed the Levites, from twenty years old and upwards, to have the oversight of the work on the house of the Lord.

⁹ And Jeshua with his sons and his kin, and Kadmiel and his sons, Binnui and Hodaviah along with the sons of Henadad, the Levites, their sons and kin, together took charge of the workers in the house of God.

¹⁰ When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord, the priests in their vestments were stationed to praise the Lord with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, according to the directions of King David of Israel; ¹¹ and they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the Lord,

¹ Frick, Frank. *A Journey through the Hebrew Scriptures* (Wadsworth: California; 2003) 387.

‘For he is good,
for his steadfast love endures for ever towards Israel.’

And all the people responded with a great shout when they praised the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid. ¹²But many of the priests and Levites and heads of families, old people who had seen the first house on its foundations, wept with a loud voice when they saw this house, though many shouted aloud for joy, ¹³so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people’s weeping, for the people shouted so loudly that the sound was heard far away.

The clans “made a beginning.” Not “they began” but they “made a beginning.” What does that mean? How are they different? Things beginning has us passively receiving whatever comes along with the beginning. In Hebrew there is a verb tense for being acted upon and it can apply to not only objects but people, too. That’s what it is like when something begins. When a beginning is made, there is action, activity, accountability, ownership. We acknowledge that we have a part to play in what unfolds. This is the case with the Hebrews today – they had a part to play in the future of their relationship with God, in the rebuilding of the temple, the rebuilding of the city, the rebuilding of their people.

Really, most every beginning we have, small or large, is one that we can make. The question is do we view our beginnings that way? Do we see ourselves as part of the genesis of newness? Or do we just let the newness happen? It’s certainly easier to see ourselves as active participants, even as creators, when such starts come directly out of our own decisions. We can believe we made a beginning when we choose to move to a new home. We can believe we made a beginning when we take on a new hobby. Perhaps most tangibly, we can believe we made a new beginning when a baby is born.

Some beginnings then are chosen – we make the conscious decision to face something new. Others are thrust upon us. A lost job, a diagnosis, death – all signal beginnings, no matter how unwanted. In all of these beginnings, chosen or not, we can be part of making that beginning rather than standing and staring blankly as it unfolds. We hear today that Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and the priests and Levites were all part of making the beginning of the foundation; what we also hear is that they were the ones weeping loudly when they saw the new foundation. They knew going into the project that the Second Temple would not be the First yet they still chose to be active parts of this new start. We can sit to the side as change happens or we can be part of it. Being part of change, even the most painful, does not take away your right to mourn the old, the way things were. As Ecclesiastes 3 reminds us, “For everything...there is a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh.” Sometimes, even, those times are one and the same. Being part of painful change is good, not to say it will feel good right away but it is far better than passively watching and waiting for change to have an effect on you.

Psychologically, being an active part of new beginnings, of change, is empowering; it keeps us from feeling helpless. In the language of those who have suffered abuse, it is the difference between being a victim and being a survivor. I don't come to you this morning as a therapist, though; my responsibility is to help us uncover the God-part of making beginnings. We know that God is all about beginnings, and endings, too, but that is for another day. Jesus tells us in the book of Revelation that he is both the Alpha and the Omega, in Greek the beginning and the ending of the alphabet. In one of God's many beginnings, we believe that God created us in God's image. That means that we are naturally creators, too. Creating, making, is part of who we are as humans. This is obvious among artists and authors but holds just as true for accountants and actuaries. And, although some of us wish it weren't true, change is a part of life. We are presented all too frequently with opportunities to take a role in beginnings, to create, to make. As creators, part of our identity is to claim responsibility in making beginnings.

Just how do we do that? The word "beginning" is deceptive for it implies a single moment. Once something begins, the rest is just the middle, until the moment of the end. Right? Well, the Hebrews understood it differently. Following God's example, they recognized that beginnings take time and steps along the way. When we commit to making a beginning, we commit to the start point, to the steps along the way, and even to the end. The Bible offers the perfect example. From Genesis to Revelation, we know that God was there at the beginning of the world and will be there when the world as we know it is no more. We also know that God is there at each step, seen so clearly in Genesis.

We read that the world was created in seven days but we don't read that God said so and seven days later it was done. No, "Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good." God didn't rush on to the waters and the sky and the dry land and the stars and the sun and the moon and the creatures of the water and the creatures of the sky and humans. God made something, paused, and celebrated it. And so did the Hebrews for we know a foundation is just an early part of a building. It's certainly no occasion for a housewarming party. We might have taken photos as our own homes were being built but we definitely didn't contact caterers. And yet we read, "When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord, the priests in their vestments were stationed to praise the Lord with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals...they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the Lord...And all the people responded with a great shout when they praised the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid."

When was the last time you stopped mid-project to celebrate a step being done? Besides college, when every little accomplishment, every paragraph of a paper, felt like a reason to take a "well-deserved" break – to be honest, really less of a celebration and far more of an excuse to stop working for awhile – can you name a time when you celebrated steps along the way? I know I cannot. So what

holds us back? Perhaps inexperience – in general, we don't view parts of our daily lives worth celebrating so we're not sure how to go about it. Or perhaps because such celebration seems frivolous, even childish. The goal is the final product; the in-between is nothing to get excited about. Maybe such celebrating simply seems inefficient. Unlike the more laid-back nature of our Caribbean counterparts in Cuba, we live in a society where the goal is to be finished with as many things as soon as we can. Stopping to celebrate is a waste of time that could be better spent getting things done. Maybe fear of failure holds us back. If we're not sure our endeavor will succeed, isn't it better to quietly go about the steps so as not to draw attention to what we're doing, lest we suffer humiliation when our efforts don't pan out?

These reasons all feel very legitimate. And yet, safe is not what is modeled for us – after all, nothing ventured, nothing gained. And so God creates and declares *each* step good. The Hebrews built a temple that was not the same as the First Temple and yet they celebrated its foundation with trumpets, cymbals, and loud shouts. We go to an ultrasound and celebrate the life we see, even if it might look like an alien. So why not celebrate completing our résumés for their power to start down a new career path? Anyone who has struggled with weight loss surely has heard the admonition to celebrate the little steps along the way; for every five pounds, choose a small reward. That goal weight may seem like the new beginning but the beginning has truly been begun on that first step to a new lifestyle, that first choice of a walk over a bowl of ice cream. Creating at every step of the way feels good and is worthy of a celebration. Jesus desires for us to have life and have it abundantly. What better way to live abundantly than to do it with joy and celebration in large *and* small ways.

In your life, what beginnings have begun that you can actively be a part of? Perhaps your household has just taken it as fact that someone is going to college soon. How might you celebrate the little steps that remain in the time before school starts? More challenging might be being part of a household facing a diagnosis. As difficult as the reasons may be, have you come to appreciate life differently? What is it you notice about life? Making time or space to more fully appreciate these things is worth celebrating.

This past Tuesday, I joined my home congregation in burying a 21-year-old young man. Joey joined the Army the August after graduating from high school, in 2007, just before I began here. He set the goal of becoming a Ranger and made his way through the training with flying colors. He went on to serve a tour in Iraq and two tours in Afghanistan. In this last tour, he was killed while doing an ammunition inventory when a grenade exploded. His death has rocked his parents and his younger brothers, his pastors, the congregation of which he has been a part since he was born, his high school youth group advisors, his youth group, his Scout troop, his swim team, his teachers, and so many more.

There is much pain, much sorrow, much lamenting. And yet, in it all are new beginnings being made. The family has been embraced by the Army families in their community and new, loving relationships are forming. The community has rallied in support of the family in unexpected ways. The bar neighboring the church asked its patrons to walk on Monday and Tuesday so the church could have extra parking for the visitation and funeral. Scouts from other troops joined in the procession welcoming Joey's body home. A member of the Patriot Guard who was part of the procession and the funeral was so moved by the youth group's ways of celebrating Joey's life that, as you are listening to me, she is speaking to the youth group to share her reflections on how touched she was. It will undoubtedly inspire them toward a new vision of who they are as a youth group. Few who have been part of this loss can say they have not been changed, that something new has not begun within them. And what better way to honor Joey than to celebrate his life and affirm it was not for naught by making new beginnings.

The last part of these celebrations, as we hear in our text, is to do them loudly so that all can hear. "For the people shouted so loudly that the sound was heard far away." There is a commercial running now for a financial institution which shows one person helping a stranger and their kindness being noted by someone else. That someone else goes on to help a stranger and their kindness is noticed. This goes on for the length of the commercial. We do not celebrate loudly in an effort to be noticed but because we cannot help it – it feels like the right response to things so good. If we let it, it is our natural response in thanks to a God who loves us so and who is present in all things. And maybe in our celebrating loudly, others might see that God indeed is good, and might come see what all the fuss is about. So make a beginning and celebrate it loudly along the way, without fear or doubt or insecurity for each of us is called to join in this creation.