

“The Trouble with Rubble”

Ezra 3:1-6

Series: Rising from the Ruins Week 1: Foundation

The Rev. Dr. Douglas C. Hogle

The Woodside Church

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Nothing in my ministry, nothing in my life prepared me for what I saw on November 14th. On that day twenty years ago I traveled with Fiona Havlish to Ground Zero. Her husband Don worked in Tower Two of the Trade Center. That day he never came home. Don and Fiona enrolled their daughter in our Preschool. September 11th was little Michela’s first day of school. It was also the day I met Fiona. From that day forward she let me walk with her through the unfolding tragedy of 9/11. When grieving families were allowed to visit the still burning debris field, Fiona asked me to go with her. Wearing yellow hard hats, dusk masks we took a water taxi across to Manhattan.

The famous skyline seemed vacant and orphaned without the two tall parents watching over their smaller children. From the water front plaza, we made a difficult pilgrimage past a wall of remembrance stuffed with Teddy Bears, candles, flowers, letters and pictures. Through the nearly vacant streets we ultimately ascended a staircase to a special wooden deck constructed for the families. And there we stood in that canyon of utter devastation. Thirty-five city blocks destroyed. Desolation in every direction. Massive nets draped fifty story buildings to prevent debris from falling on workers. Nearer the center, charred skyscrapers were compressed into shapeless heaps. Thousands of steel girders looked like twisted spaghetti. And in the center: peaks and canyons of rubble. Large cranes and construction workers gingerly removed the stubborn wreckage as they searched for remains. Orange smoke, rising from the depths, revealed the fires burning below. A piece of Tower One’s outer skin reached up at a severe angle. Tower Two, Don Havlish’s building, was completely gone.

Over the next months, Woodside sent teams to St. Paul’s Chapel. The colonial church where George Washington knelt in prayer on the first Presidential Inaugural Day, became a sanctuary for construction workers, firefighters and police. They needed a rest from clearing the awful debris. We offered food, warm clothing, emotional support and prayer to these servants. They removed rubble from ground that was a cataclysm, a crime scene and a cemetery.

I have heard many compare the last twenty plus months to what happened twenty years ago. The stubborn persistence of Covid has several parallels with the terror of 9/11. Cities and communities paralyzed. Airlines unable to fly. Governments struggling, businesses shattered. Our entire nation under siege. And then there are the names and faces of dear ones lost forever. Both tragedies tell us the world will never be the same. Both disasters leave us with a seemingly insurmountable pile of rubble.

What rubble do you face? What pile looks impossible to climb? A mountain of debt? A diagnosis that resists treatment? A family divided and distant? A business without enough workers or enough customers to stay open? A loved one who rejects your help and refuses to get help? Feelings of depression, stress or anxiety which won’t go away? A disease called Covid which mutates and spreads faster every time we think it’s almost done? Rubble. We all have it. Your pile is different than mine. Some of it was dumped there by others. Some may be caused by what you did. No matter the source it makes you mad, frustrated, depressed, defeated. Rubble is trouble because it won’t budge. It’s stubborn. It stands in your way. It can even cause you to stumble.

Jerusalem is a pile of rubble and God’s people are far from it. Not by their choice. The people of Judah are captives in Babylon. How were the Lord’s holy Temple and city reduced to ruins? Here’s a quick highlight reel. King Solomon builds the glorious Temple in Jerusalem about a thousand years before Jesus.

After Solomon dies his kingdom splits into a northern kingdom called Israel and a southern one named Judah. Then three empires successively sweep over the Holy Land. First, in 722 BC, the Assyrians crush the northern kingdom of Israel, deport the ten tribes into exile and replace them with other ethnic groups. These new people settle near the capital of Samaria and become the Samaritans. Remember this – it will be important later.

Judah, in the south, survives the Assyrian onslaught. They are not so lucky with the next empire: Babylon. In 587 BC, King Nebuchadnezzar burns Solomon's Temple and Jerusalem to the ground and deports the people of Judah to Babylon. For roughly 70 years they settle and live in exile between the Tigris and Euphrates in Mesopotamia – modern Iraq.

Why remove people from their land? The Assyrians and Babylonians both believe the best way to control subjects is to disconnect them their homeland and get them to intermarry with other nations. In this way they will lose their identity and become loyal subjects. This policy works with the northern kingdom of Israel. Those ten tribes intermarried, assimilated and disappeared. Yet the southern kingdom of Judah refuses to blend in. In 539 BC when the Babylonians fall to the third great empire, the Persians, the people of Judah, the Jews, are still standing.

What is not standing, however, is God's Temple and Holy City. For seven long decades Jerusalem is a mute pile of charred rubble. Now comes a powerful yet often overlooked moment in Bible history: The Restoration. This period from 538-432 BC tells the courageous story of captives set free by God. They take the soot covered stones and restore the Temple, the city and the walls. God uses great leaders such as Zerubbabel, Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther, to raise His people up from the ashes. As we launch into this New Year already filled with rubble, we will learn from them how to Rise from the Ruins. The key question is: **How Big is Your God?**

The book of Ezra opens with an absolutely astounding announcement.

In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah, the Lord moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm and also to put it in writing: "This is what Cyrus king of Persia says:

"The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. Any of his people among you may go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple of the Lord, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem, and may their God be with them. And in any locality where survivors may now be living, the people are to provide them with silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with freewill offerings for the temple of God in Jerusalem." Ezra 1:1-4

When the Persian Empire comes to power, the first emperor Cyrus the Great completely reverses the policy of the Assyrians and Babylonians. He sends exiled peoples back to their homelands and commands them to rebuild their destroyed temples. This compassionate policy is confirmed by the Cyrus Cylinder uncovered in Babylon by the British in AD 1879.

To understand why this reversal is so shocking we have to get into the mind of ancient people. While some today serve multiple gods, the majority believe there is either one God or no god. The ancient world is the opposite. Everyone believes in multiple gods. Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Egyptians and Greeks are sure the world is ruled by a family or committee of gods. Even the Jews, the only ones then to worship one God, are not sure if their God Yahweh is the only God or just one of the gods alongside Baal, Asherah, Marduk, Bel, Ra, Osiris or Zeus.

What's more, in those days, the power of a god is measured by the power of the empire that worships him or her. So if the Assyrians or Babylonians destroy Israel and Judah it must mean their gods are more powerful than Yahweh. (Just as I now lament that the coach and players of Georgia are stronger than those of Michigan.) Add to this the ancient belief that gods are not just tied to a certain people but also to a certain piece of real estate. Some think Yahweh can't leave the Holy Land. In exile some Jews are not sure God is with them. Psalm 137 laments,

By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. There on the poplars we hung our harps, for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land? Psalm 137:1-4

Maybe God can't hear them or help them so far from the Land. Finally, some are not even sure God wants to help them. After all, many believe He sent the Babylonians to punish them for their sins. So some of them believe they have a small god – He is just one of many gods in the neighborhood, not the biggest god on the block, not able to reach beyond the borders of the Holy Land. And He may still be mad at us.

Then, in an instant, they suddenly discover they have a great big God! The truth is revealed by a foreigner. Cyrus, the new Emperor, declares Yahweh, the God of Israel is the one and only King of heaven who places all nations in his hands. What's more Yahweh orders Cyrus to send His people home to rebuild His Temple in Jerusalem and to start offering sacrifices again. Cyrus commands Jews everywhere to contribute gold and silver to the project and, to show he has skin in the game, Cyrus gives back all the sacred gold and silver treasures the Babylonians stole from Solomon's Temple before they burned it down. Cyrus, who is not an Israelite and does not worship Yahweh, gives the most powerful testimony to the almighty power of Israel's God. They are not the children of a lesser god. They worship the One and Only God, the God who rules not one tiny patch of real estate but heaven and earth, the God who changes the course of history. Our God is not small. Our God is a mountain mover and this time He moves a monarch. He does not want to harm you but give you hope. He is not working against you but for your good.

Before you sink the first shovel into your rubble ask yourself, "How big is my God?" Some believe the debris is higher than their deity. Some try to clear the pile on their own power. Many turn away from the One True God and settle for lesser gods. Do not fear people who doubt or deny God exists. Pray for them, for they are falling down before feeble and false gods who cannot help them and often hurt them. Here is the way to face your rubble with God's help:

Show Up. All the Jews exiled in Babylon can go to the Holy Land. Yet only a few do.

Then the family heads of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and Levites—everyone whose heart God had moved—prepared to go up and build the house of the Lord in Jerusalem. Ezra 1:5

After seventy years, God's people are comfortable in captivity. Why leave what's familiar for a land that lies in ruins? Babylon offers a settled, civilized life. Jerusalem only promises hard work on a huge rock pile. Yet those who open their hearts are moved by God to join His great mission.

I fear people are getting comfortable with the captivity of Covid. It's important to be cautious about social gatherings including worship. I support what you are doing to keep yourself safe. That's why we offer multiple ways for you to worship, do Growth Groups and serve in person and online. My concern is not whether or not you're in the building for worship or Growth Groups. I'm concerned for those not worshipping, meeting in Growth Groups or serving at all. Don't get comfortable and complacent with Covid captivity. Show Up and help God move the rubble.

Look Up. By this I mean your relationship with God must be your first and top priority. When the Exiles returned to Jerusalem their first step is extraordinary. Today, we might first build walls of protection, then build homes, then build the church. Security, settlement and sanctuary in that order. The Jews do the opposite. First they built the Altar of God so worship can resume, then they lay the foundation of the Temple, restore God's Covenant, reestablish their faith and finally rebuild the walls. It's sanctuary, settlement then security. While this seems crazy to us, they know they cannot move the rubble without the power of their Mountain Moving God. Put God first in your life. Worship Him. Pray. Read His Word. Follow His Spirit. Rely on His people. Fix your eyes on God not the rubble. You'll see the Lord's so much bigger than the load.

Look Forward. After the people lay the foundation of the Temple it sparks two completely opposite reactions.

And all the people gave a great shout of praise to the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid. But many of the older priests and Levites and family heads, who had seen the former temple, wept aloud when they saw the foundation of this temple being laid, while many others shouted for joy. No one could distinguish the sound of the shouts of joy from the sound of weeping, because the people made so much noise. And the sound was heard far away. Ezra 3:11-13

When the last foundation stone is laid some shout for joy while others cry for the old days. It's not wrong to cherish memories and keep traditions. Customs, rituals and traditions helped the Jewish people keep their identity during seven decades of captivity. It's not bad to look back to the past. We just can't live there. Maybe you wish you could go back to the way it was in 2019 before Covid. Yet we can't. It's never going to be the same. Yet with God's help it can be wonderful. When the people laid the foundation of the Temple they did not know one day, through Jesus Christ, God would make a Temple of people that spreads around the world, down the ages and includes you and me. It all started with a tiny tree of believers growing up from the rubble.

One month after 9/11 a cleanup worker at Ground Zero found her, smashed and pinned between blocks of concrete. She is a pear tree. In the early 70s she stood near Building 5 of the World Trade Center. On that clear September morning she disappeared under the avalanche of girders and glass. Her crown was gone, her roots broken, the surviving eight feet of trunk was charred black. There was only one living branch.

At first, she seemed beyond salvation. But the cleanup workers persuaded a Parks Department employee to give the tree a chance. Once her roots were deeply planted in good rich soil, the tree survived. And so they named her: Survivor. She depended heavily on the tender care of many and on God's healing power. In 2011 Survivor was replanted near the footprint of the South Tower. On the tenth anniversary of 9/11, when the memorial opened to survivors and family members, they covered Survivor's branches with ribbons. In 2015, I was among a team from Woodside who planted 18 saplings, the children of Survivor, at the Garden of Reflection in Lower Makefield. Her resurrection proves that rubble is no trouble for our Big God.