

Ezra 3 “Laying the Foundation”
Psalm 102
1 Corinthians 3

January 13, 2019

I want you to notice something about the musical praise in our text.

Israel’s worship had begun at Mt. Sinai – in Exodus 24 – when Israel gathered to worship God.
But the *musical* part of worship did not begin until the time of David.
(Yes, Moses sang a victory song at the Red Sea –
but that wasn’t a worship service!
You only really see music enter the worship service in the time of David and Solomon).

In verse 10 we hear about trumpets and cymbals.
Neither (in those days) were used for *accompaniment* –
the shofar – or ram’s horn – was used to blow a loud blast.
It was used as a call to worship – or as a call to battle.
Trumpet and cymbals would be used to assemble the people –
and as a means of “making a joyful noise to the LORD!”

That’s part of the reason why the early church did not use musical instruments.
In the Greek and Roman world, musical instruments were used to “charm” the gods.
The Greeks understood the emotional power of music,
and so they believed that not only does music soothe the savage beast,
but it can convince even the gods to do what you want!
The early church rejected this “magical” approach to music.
They wanted people to believe the *word* – not simply be enchanted by music!

The first use of musical instruments in Christian worship
can be found around a thousand years after the time of the apostles,
during the middle ages.

Up until that point, Christians had always chanted their psalms and hymns –
and when you chant, you don’t really need musical accompaniment.

But in the middle ages, the monks started developing polyphony (singing in parts) –
and the whole of the western musical tradition flows from that.
(I say “western” because the eastern church has *never* used instruments).
(And contemporary Christian music is just as much a part of this tradition.
The “worship wars” of the 1990s was really just an in-house debate
between two very closely related parts of the same family.)

But for the first thousand years of the church,
the singing would have resembled what verse 11 says:

“and they sang responsively...”

There are a couple ways that this could work.

It could be that the leader or choir would chant a line –
and the congregation would echo it back.

Or it could be the leader or choir would chant a whole stanza –
and the congregation would chant a refrain in response.

(Psalm 136 would be a clear example of this).

And in fact, it is possible that Psalm 136 is what they sang on this occasion –
since the ‘refrain’ of Psalm 136 is “for his steadfast love endures forever.”

There are several other Psalms that begin with this line,
so we don’t know exactly what Psalm they sang –

but we know that they sang it responsively.

I think that it’s important for us to be aware of the fact that *no one* today
is doing music like the apostles did!

Every church in America has embraced some part or other of the western musical tradition.
And that’s not necessarily bad.

I would argue that if we are going to sing in the western style,
then we should take the best of the best the *whole* Christian tradition,
in order to connect us with the whole church.

And by the way, one part of the western musical tradition
that we haven’t done much with, here at MCPC,
is the African-American musical tradition
(one which incorporates a lot of call-and-response in its patterns and rhythms).
I don’t know it very well – but it’s something that might be worth pursuing!

Our Psalm of response is Psalm 102A

Sing TPH 102A
Read 1 Corinthians 3

In Ezra chapter 3 there are two themes:
building a new altar
and laying the foundation for a new temple.

Altar and temple.

It's amazing how often these themes come together in the Bible.
And always in the same order!

Altar *always* comes first (at least, after the fall!).
It makes sense.

The temple – after all – is the place where God meets with his people –
where God *dwells* with his people!

And how can we dwell with a holy God?
The wages of sin is death.
When you look at human history,
it's a pretty ugly story.
We just keep killing each other, hurting each other,
making each other's lives miserable!
How can we come into the presence of a holy God –
when we are such a mess?!

We need an altar!
We need a place for that sacrifice that can atone for our sins.
That's why Paul said in 1 Corinthians 2 –
“I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.”
The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the *whole* point!

And so here in chapter 3, Paul speaks of how,
“like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation... which is Jesus Christ.”

And how he is building (and other pastors are building) on that one foundation.
And what are we building?
A holy temple.
And *you* are that temple!

Because of the altar – because of the sacrifice –
because Jesus Christ has dealt with sin once for all on the cross –
therefore we are made right with God – our sins are forgiven!
and we are brought into a new relationship with God – we have *peace* with him –
we are being transformed into his likeness!

The foundation of the temple can only be laid *because* of the sacrifice of the altar!

So let's take a look at the new altar in verses 1-7,
and then the new foundation in verses 8-13.

1. A New Altar: Worship Begins with Sacrifice (v1-7)

a. The Altar Built in the Seventh Month – the Renewal of the Law (v1-6a)

When the seventh month came, and the children of Israel were in the towns, the people gathered as one man to Jerusalem.

First, we should pay attention to what time it is!

It's the seventh month – and in verse 4 we are told that they kept the Feast of Booths.

When we think about the Old Testament feasts, we tend to focus on Passover

(which was in the first month),

because Passover was the feast when our Lord Jesus was crucified;

and we sometimes think about the second main feast, Pentecost,

because the Holy Spirit was poured out on the church at Pentecost.

We tend to overlook the feast of Tabernacles – the feast of Booths – in the seventh month.

But in the OT, the Feast of Booths was the Great Feast

(as John's gospel refers to it).

Indeed, the seventh month had three feasts in it –

First was the Feast of Trumpets on the first day of the month –

commemorated by the blowing of trumpets

announcing the arrival of the 7th month.

Then came the Day of Atonement on the 10th day of the month –

a day of fasting and humiliation –

the only day where the high priest could enter the Holy of Holies,

as he sprinkled the blood of the sacrifice before the mercy seat.

Finally came the Feast of Booths – an 8-day feast from the 15th to the 22nd.

The Feast of Booths was the great harvest feast,

where all Israel would gather at the temple,

bringing the tithe of their produce

to have a great celebration of God's provision for them.

They would make "booths" for themselves –

and live for a week in these booths –

to remember how God had provided for their fathers in the wilderness –

even as they rejoiced in God's provision for them in the Land.

If you think about how the three great feasts fit together – Passover, Pentecost, and Booths –

Passover was the feast of the Exodus –

it was the feast where Israel remembered how God had delivered them from Egypt through the death of the firstborn.

But when Passover was over, Israel was still in Egypt –

yes, they had been redeemed from Egypt –

but when Passover was over, they still had to cross the Red Sea

and head out into the wilderness!

Pentecost came 50 days after Passover –
you counted seven Sabbaths from the Sabbath of Passover week,
and then on the day *after* the seventh Sabbath –
in other words, on *Sunday* – the first day of the week –
you would celebrate the Feast of Pentecost.

Passover is incomplete without Pentecost –
Pentecost is the feast of the firstfruits of the wheat harvest –
the feast of entry into the Promised Land –
it also happens to coincide with the giving the Law at Sinai.

Passover is a seven-day feast that is completed by the fiftieth day at Pentecost.

Booths is also called a seven-day feast, but with holy convocations – sacred assemblies –
on the first and *eighth* days of the feast!

You might wonder what happened to Booths in the Christian calendar?

Passover has become Easter
(as we are redeemed by the death – *and resurrection* – of the firstborn).

Pentecost is still Pentecost!
(as the Spirit of God has come as the firstfruits of the inheritance)

What about Booths?

Think about what Booths meant to Israel:

God had come and dwelt with Israel in the wilderness.
God himself had lived *in a booth* (it's the same word translated “tabernacle”).
God himself had come and lived in a tent with his people.
The altar in the tabernacle was essentially an over-sized grill,
as God ate and drank with his people.

(In Exodus 24, the elders of Israel had gone part-way up the mountain
and they ate and drank before God.

Then in Exodus 40, the glory of the LORD leaves the mountain
and fills the tabernacle –
God himself will now travel through the wilderness,
camping with his people!)

So what happened to the Feast of Booths?

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us –
and *tabernacled* among us!

You can very easily see how the Feast of Booths became Christmas.

But also, the other feature of the Feast of Booths

was the importance of *going to Jerusalem* and living in booths.
In the New Testament, we come to the heavenly Jerusalem *every Sunday*.
Even in Ezra's day,
 when the province of Judea was around the size of the Michiana region,
 Jerusalem was too far away for the average Jew to go there every week!
But we can gather together at the heavenly Jerusalem
 whenever we come together in Jesus's name!

But here in Ezra 3,
 we see the people of God gathering in the seventh month – as they were commanded:

² Then arose Jeshua the son of Jozadak, with his fellow priests, and Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel with his kinsmen, and they built the altar of the God of Israel, to offer burnt offerings on it, as it is written in the Law of Moses the man of God.

Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel was of the house of David.
 He is not a king – he is but the governor of Judea –
 but he plays the role of Solomon in the rebuilding of the altar.
Jeshua leads the priests –
 and together the heir of David and the heir of Aaron
 build the altar of the God of Israel.

“as it is written in the Law of Moses the man of God.”
 The book of Ezra-Nehemiah is all about *Temple* and *Torah* –
 the Law of Moses is referred to quite often
 as the standard by which Israel lives.

During the time of the Judges and during the time of the Kings
 Israel had not done well at obeying God's Law.
That's *why* they had been sent into Exile!

Verse 3 gives an interesting reason for their actions:

³ They set the altar in its place, for fear was on them because of the peoples of the lands, and they offered burnt offerings on it to the LORD, burnt offerings morning and evening.

They are afraid *because of the peoples of the lands* –
 in other words, in the past, Israel had been led astray by the nations.
There is always a danger that the people of God will be drawn away from the LORD.

What is the solution?

Worship.

Daily worship – morning and evening!

It's the same principle that Moses had articulated.

The Law had said that the priests were to offer sacrifices morning and evening.

But of course, the point wasn't just going through external rituals!

The point was training the heart.

That's why Moses had said in Deuteronomy 6,

“Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one.

You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart

and with all your soul and with all your might.

And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart.

You shall teach them diligently to your children,

and you shall talk of them when you sit in your house,

and when you walk by the way,

and when you lie down, and when you rise...”

How do we train our hearts?

By words and deeds.

The rhythms and practices of daily devotion to God

are crucial for training our hearts.

Sure, words and deeds can be hypocritical!

Just look at the Pharisees!

They (sort of) said all the right things – and (sort of) did all the right things –

but they had lost their focus on the things that mattered most!

So how do we do this right?

Bernard of Clairvaux points out that we *start* by loving ourselves for our own sake.

We are selfish – and that is how we all start out.

I want my way and I don't like it when I don't get my way!

So how do we start to learn to love *God*?

Well, when we begin to love God, we generally love him for our own sake –

we love God because of what he does for us.

And again, that's normal.

We did not first love God.

He loved us, and sent his Son to die for our sins!

But if we only love God because of what he does for us,

then our ultimate allegiance is still to ourselves!

We need to learn to love God for his own sake!

But if you are doing the right thing for the wrong reason,
don't stop doing it!
Keep doing the right thing!
Keep praying – keep reading – keep obeying!

Bernard goes on to say:

“But then when we begin to worship God,
and to keep coming to God because we need him,
God gradually begins to make himself known to us
through our thinking, reading, prayer, and obedience.
By this growing familiarity God causes us truly to feel his sweetness.”
(On Loving God, 204)

And thus we begin to love God for his own sake –
not just because of what he does for us – but because of who *he is*.
Bernard suspects that in glory we will then advance to the point
where we only love ourselves for God’s sake –
but he doubts that anyone will fully attain that in this life!

How are we doing at being devoted to God – loving *him* above all else?

We begin down this path of love by devoting ourselves to God –
beginning and ending each day with *him*.

I don’t know about you – but *I* need to work on this!

It is so easy to begin and end the day with social media – with TV – with games –
but when we do that – we are saying that these things are the things that we love –
the things that matter most to us.

This is why the returned Exiles are “afraid...because of the peoples of the lands.”
They realize that *their hearts* are easily drawn away from the LORD!

And so:

⁴ And they kept the Feast of Booths, as it is written, and offered the daily burnt offerings by number according to the rule, as each day required, ⁵ and after that the regular burnt offerings, the offerings at the new moon and at all the appointed feasts of the LORD, and the offerings of everyone who made a freewill offering to the LORD. ⁶ From the first day of the seventh month they began to offer burnt offerings to the LORD.

Israel seeks to love God
by organizing their lives according to his word.

I am more and more convinced of the usefulness of the pattern that God gave us in creation:

six days shall you labor and do all your work – but the seventh you shall rest.
In our crazy world of 24/7 busyness – always on the run! –
we need to organize our lives around the word of God
and the practices that he calls us to!

Sabbath is God's gift to us!

The Lord's Day is the Christian feast day –
where we celebrate God's goodness to us –
and where we develop the rhythms and patterns
of a life that reflects the One who made us.

b. Before the Foundation Was Laid – Tyre, Sidon, and Cyrus's Grant (v6b-7)

But the foundation of the temple of the LORD was not yet laid. ⁷ So they gave money to the masons and the carpenters, and food, drink, and oil to the Sidonians and the Tyrians to bring cedar trees from Lebanon to the sea, to Joppa, according to the grant that they had from Cyrus king of Persia.

But the foundation of the temple of the LORD was not yet laid.

The altar is there – but not yet the temple – nor even the *foundation* of the temple.

It is really interesting to note the parallel between this and the NT.

Christ's sacrifice comes first.

The altar comes first.

Then Paul talks about how the apostles are “laying a foundation” –
for what?

For God's dwelling place – the temple – that is, the church!

And then subsequent pastors come along
and build on that foundation.

Altar and Temple go in that order.

That was also true at Mt. Sinai.

The *blood of the covenant* – the sacrifices at Sinai in Exodus 24 –
came first.

Then came the directions for building the tabernacle.

Why is this important?

Because in order to dwell with God,
we must first deal with sin.

Our sin must be covered – atoned for –
so that God can come and dwell with his people.

You see this in what Jesus did.

He died for us – he paid the price for *our* sin –
offering his blood on the cross – and at the heavenly altar –

(as Hebrews 9-10 says).
And then he sent his Holy Spirit to fill us –
to constitute us as a Holy Temple – a holy dwelling place for the Lord.

And that's very much at the heart of verses 8-13:

2. The Foundation of a New Temple (v8-13)

a. Priests and Levites: Renewing the Work of the House of God (v8-9)

⁸ Now in the second year after their coming to the house of God at Jerusalem, in the second month, Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak made a beginning, together with the rest of their kinsmen, the priests and the Levites and all who had come to Jerusalem from the captivity. They appointed the Levites, from twenty years old and upward, to supervise the work of the house of the LORD. ⁹ And Jeshua with his sons and his brothers, and Kadmiel and his sons, the sons of Judah, together supervised the workmen in the house of God, along with the sons of Henadad and the Levites, their sons and brothers.

Notice that we are in the second year, in the second month.

In other words, we are now six months after the altar has been laid.

These months have been spent collecting the cedar from Lebanon (v7),
negotiating with the masons and carpenters.

Now they are ready to move ahead with laying the foundation.

And so Zerubbabel and Jeshua “made a beginning.”

Like David and Solomon 500 years before,
they have gathered the needed resources.

Tyre and Sidon are helping again (like in the days of David and Solomon).

But now Cyrus the King is a prominent benefactor!

Cyrus – the King of Persia – has freely contributed to the building of the temple!

The riches and glory of the Gentiles are beginning to pour into Jerusalem!

If only in a token way!

Let's be clear – Cyrus spent *far more* on other gods
than he spent on the temple of Yahweh!

But let's also remember that *those who bless the Seed of Abraham
will be blessed!*

It may only have been a token –

but that token is better than any king since Hiram, King of Tyre,
had given to David and Solomon!

And Cyrus has done *far more* than Hiram –

because Cyrus has returned God's people to their own land –
he has initiated the *second Exodus*
without a series of plagues to convince him!

And so they gather to lay the foundation for the temple of the LORD!

b. The Praise Sung at the Laying of the Foundation (v10-11)

*¹⁰ And when the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests in their vestments came forward with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, to praise the LORD, according to the directions of David king of Israel. ¹¹ And they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the LORD,
“For he is good,
for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel.”
And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid.*

You see again the focus on being faithful to the Word of the LORD,
as they set things up “according to the directions of David king of Israel.”

But the *point* here is that we *ought* to sing praise to God for the foundation that has been laid!

Hebrews 13 follows the same pattern of altar to temple/city – and concludes with praise!

As Hebrews 13:10 puts it,

“We have an altar from which those who serve the tent have no right to eat.
For the bodies of those animals
whose blood is brought into the holy places by the high priest
as a sacrifice for sin
are burned outside the camp.

So Jesus also suffered outside the gate

in order to sanctify the people through his own blood.

Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured.

For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come.

Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God,
that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name...” (v12-15)

We offer up a sacrifice of praise – the fruit of our lips –

as we sing for joy because the foundation has been laid in Jesus Christ!

because the Spirit has been poured out upon us –

building us into a holy temple in the Lord!

Of course, for us, there is an already and a not yet.

We are already *being* built into a holy temple.

But we are not yet finished!

And we have a long way to go.

And that is where our text leaves us in verses 12-13

c. Weeping and Joy: a Partial Restoration (v12-13)

¹² But many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers' houses, old men who had seen the first house, wept with a loud voice when they saw the foundation of this house being laid, though many shouted aloud for joy, ¹³ so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people's weeping, for the people shouted with a great shout, and the sound was heard far away.

Ezra doesn't really explain *why* there is weeping mingled with joy.

You might think at first that they are weeping tears of joy!

And perhaps, in a way, they are.

But at the same time, the old men who had seen the first house –
who had seen the temple of Solomon before it was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar –
when they see the foundation of *this* temple –
they realize that it is *not* going to be anywhere *near* as glorious as the first temple!

It's going to be a little dinky temple.

Remember what we saw last time?!

When David was preparing for Solomon's temple,
the leaders of the fathers' houses gave 5,000 talents of gold.
When the heads of families in Ezra two make their offerings,
they give 50 talents of gold.

This temple is going to be 1% as glorious as the last one!

Haggai 2 and Zechariah 4 will both talk about this same time period –
how people were lamenting their little dinky temple –
“the day of small things.”

And when the temple is completed (as we'll see in a couple chapters)
the Holy Spirit does *not* get poured out!
The glory of the LORD does *not* fill this temple!

Is God really with us?

If this is the great restoration – the “greater Exodus” –
then how come it seems so dinky!?

Have you ever felt that way?

If the church is the bride of Christ – the holy dwelling place of God –
how come she's so dinky!?

How come *we* are so screwed up?

It can be tempting to look for a big flashy answer!

But the lesson of the book of Ezra – and indeed, the lesson of the return from exile –
is that we should not despise the day of small things (Zechariah 4:10).

The whole message of the Bible – Old and New Testament alike –
is that God uses weak things, despised things, foolish things –
to shame the strong, the proud, the wise!

This dinky little temple will be the place where Joseph and Mary bring the baby Jesus.
No, the glory of the Lord did not get poured out in Zerubbabel's day.
Rather, the Word became flesh and dwelt among us –
and we have beheld his glory – the glory of the only begotten Son of God,
full of grace and truth.

It may seem as though the church is losing –
as though the gospel is failing –
and certainly there have been times in history where the church has lost!
But we shouldn't be surprised by that!
A religion whose founder was crucified by the powers of this age
should never expect any other way to glory – except the way of the cross!
The way of humiliation and suffering!
“In this world you will have trouble” – Jesus told us –
but then he added, “But take heart, because I have overcome the world!”

The altar – the sacrifice – must always come first.
But don't be afraid!
The temple comes next!
The heavenly Jerusalem – when God will wipe every tear from your eyes –
is coming next!
We are being built into that holy dwelling even now –
and when he returns, we will be made like him!