

**WATERVILLE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
WATERVILLE, MAINE
December 15, 2019
9:30 a.m.
Third Sunday of Advent - Love**

Seeking to walk in the Way of Jesus, we are an Open and Affirming church, faithfully using who we are and what we have to serve those on the margins of our community. No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here.

Scripture Lessons: Ezra 1:1-4, 3:1-4, 10-13
Luke 2:25-32

- ~ If you are a guest or visitor with us this morning, WELCOME. We thank you for worshipping with us. We invite you to sign our guest book, and include your mailing address.
- ~ Everyone is welcome to join us for coffee following the worship service.
- ~ Children age five up to 8th grade are welcome to attend our Church School, held from 9:30 a.m. to 10:45 a.m.
- ~ The offering envelopes on the table are for your convenience. If you would like your contribution credited toward your pledge, please print your name and number on the outside of the envelope.

- ~ Deacon of the week is Sally Melcher-McKeagney.
- ~ Deacon for December 22 is Lora Downing.
- ~ Liturgist this morning is Gail Morris.
- ~ Liturgist for December 22 is Steve Meyerhans.
- ~ Ushers this morning are Regina & Herb Oliver.
- ~ Ushers for December 22 are Betty-Jane Meader and Bethany Oliver.
- ~ Fellowship time hosts are Cindy & Chet Manuel.

NOTES ON THE TEXTS

Ezra

There is a considerable chronological gap between our weekly Advent readings. On Advent 1, God spoke to Jeremiah in the midst of an embattled and besieged Jerusalem. On Advent 2, Jerusalem has fallen, and God spoke through Isaiah to the grieving people who fled or were exiled to Babylon (roughly modern-day Baghdad, Iraq). The hopeful tone of Isaiah's words have led some scholars to believe that Isaiah knew or could sense in the political climate an end to the exile and a return home. He may have known this because of the arrival of King Cyrus in Babylon, a person we meet right off the bat in Ezra 1:1.

Cyrus was the king of Persia (ancient Iran, roughly), and he arrived as conqueror in Babylon with a very different concept of empire. While the Babylonians dominated other nation-states through violence and exile, Cyrus and the Persians conquered, but then gave great freedom to their vassals. He encouraged them to live life as normal—outside of a pesky little annual tribute and obeisance, now and then. (Fun fact: Cyrus is the only foreigner in all of Scripture to be called “Messiah, Anointed One” by God [Isaiah 45:1].) His policies were welcomed by the exiled Judeans, who, according to the first part of Ezra, were eager to return home, to restore their community, and to rebuild. The story of their rebuilding, especially Ezra 3, is one of the most poignant and moving texts in all of Scripture.

Exegetically, the story of Ezra begins with a powerful punch in Ezra 1:1, but it raises an immediate question: which word of Jeremiah was fulfilled? Most likely, the point of Ezra 1:1 wasn't to link Cyrus to a specific text, but to the Jeremiah tradition in general, especially its promises of hope, return, and rebuilding. Cyrus is the one that makes the proclamation, but only after his spirit is stirred up by God, the ultimate Actor and Agent in this process.

And what a proclamation it is! It's the kind that refugees don't even dare dream about: go home. Go home, loaded with blessings. Go home, loaded with blessings, and rebuild. And when they do, Ezra 3:1 tells us that "the entire people assembled as one in Jerusalem." In the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, the priestly office begins to bleed out towards the people, such that the congregation takes on a greater and more significant role in the worship of YHWH. Be careful not to over-simplify: democratization is too strong of a word, and we're nowhere close to Martin Luther's concept of the Priesthood of All Believers. Yet there is a distinct shift in the role of the people that starts to happen in books like Ezra and Nehemiah. We will hear echoes of this shift in next week's text from Luke: As the priest Zechariah goes inside the holy sanctuary to offer the incense offering to God, it says that "the whole assembly of the people was praying outside" (Luke 1:10).

After returning, the first thing to do, of course, is to build the altar, so that proper worship of God can begin as soon as possible. But what good will a proper altar be if exposed too long to the elements? Thus the second move of the leaders is to appoint Levites to supervise the building of the House of God, a task described beautifully in the NRSV as "making a beginning" in Ezra 3:8. (For anyone starting any sort of significant transition in your congregation, this is one text you're going to want to milk for all it's worth.)

Ezra 3:10-13 are some of the most poignant in all of Scripture. First, they describe a glittering festival, held in the ruins of the First Temple: priests arrayed in vestments, trumpets proudly proclaiming, Levites with clanging cymbals, and scores of people lifting up songs of praise. As builders laid the foundation, the people raised a great and joyful shout. Finally, their dream had come true; finally, their hopes were realized; finally, the promises of God made in the times of Jeremiah and Isaiah were fulfilled. But along with this rejoicing sounded another cry: a mournful cry from those who had seen the First Temple on its

foundations. It was a weeping for the lostness of what once was, a grief for the pain of what had been.

The story casts no judgment on those who mourn. In fact, in a moment of sheer humanity that cuts to the core of what it is to live on this side of the eschaton, Scripture records that the sound of the joyful shout *could not be distinguished* from the sound of the people's weeping. Ultimately, this is a story of redemption, but painful redemption; of return, but a return marked with grief; of rejoicing, but of a joy that is inextricably linked to the losses that came before. It is a story of ambiguous joy—and are not our lives? For that matter, is that not the core of Advent itself? On this day, preachers would do well to allow their congregants space to honor the pain of what is lost as we await the fulfillment of the Messiah. That pain is woven together with the joy of love that has been, and the hope of redemption to come. For most of us, in this life, we exist never fully in one state or the other, the sounds of our joyful shouts can never be easily distinguished from the sounds of our weeping.

- Rachel Wrenn, Ph. D. candidate, Laney Graduate School at Emory University

The Ezra-Nehemiah story is one book in Judaism, Christians separated the two. It was written around 400 BCE, documenting the period of Jewish history from the freeing of the exiles from bondage in Babylon to the rebuilding of Jerusalem, roughly 538 to 444 BCE.

"The first year of King Cyrus of Persia" would have been 538 BCE (Before the Common Era, formerly known as BC, or Before Christ).

"The seventh month" (Hebrew *Tishri*) is roughly September/October. Zerubbabel ("A stranger at Babylon") is among the last known descendants of David in the Hebrew Bible. In other places he is called the "governor" of Israel (Haggai 1:1). Jeshua (akin to Joshua, "to rescue, to deliver") is the priest (also Haggai 1:1). This dual leadership model - civic and religious - mirrors that of Ezra (religious) and Nehemiah (civic) themselves.

The "Festival of Booths" (or "Tabernacles," and, in Hebrew, "Succoth) is held on the 15th of *Tishri*, and commemorates the journey of Israel in the wilderness, when they had to live in temporary structures as they wandered in the desert.

The "Sons of Asaph" are said to be descendants of Asaph ("Who gathers together"), either physically or spiritually. The original Asaph was a descendent of Levi, the third son of Jacob and Leah, and the grandfather of Moses and Aaron, the founder of a priestly caste in Israel. Traditionally, Asaph was a long-serving member of the singers in the Temple in Jerusalem, like a hymnodist and choirmaster, and the author of Psalm 50 and Psalms 73-83.

Luke

The "Song of Simeon" ("Listening") is one of those passages so famous that, in Latin, it has its own name, the "Nunc Dimittis," for "Now you dismiss." Simeon was an old man waiting in the Temple for the baby Jesus. When Mary came to be purified, or declared ritually clean, after childbirth (see Leviticus 12), 40 days after the birth of her son, Simeon was there. The fact that Mary and Joseph couldn't afford a sheep, but instead had to purchase "two turtledoves" (yep, that's probably where the song gets 'em from) or "two pigeons" to offer in the Temple, is a clue to their socio-economic status. Simeon says a lot more than what we read today. Attention should also be paid to Anna, the prophetess, who was also in the Temple, "praising God and speaking about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem."

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Numbers Served last week: 123, Year-to-date: 11,423

Congregational meeting today, after worship. The purpose of this meeting will be to discuss and vote on a change to our By-Laws and to discuss and vote on the proposed 2020 Budget.

Christmas Eve Choir – A few of us are planning to sing one piece as a choir on Christmas Eve at the 7 o'clock service. Will you join us? We would love to have a few more singers on that holy night. We will plan to rehearse again on December 22nd at 8:15 a.m., before worship. Just show up if you would like to sing!

Christmas Eve is coming soon! We will celebrate our 191st Christmas together Tuesday, December 24th with two services: the "Yankee" classic, family candlelight service at 7 p.m. with old Pilgrim Hymnal carols; and a quiet, contemplative communion service in the Chapel at 11 p.m.

Annual Reports Due – If you are the Chair of a Committee or the Leader of a Ministry Team, your annual report is due, in writing, to the office on or before **Sunday, January 5, 2020**.

Music that Makes Community: You are invited to Waterville UCC's very first Music that Makes Community practice group! MtMC is a national singing practice that builds community through the singing of chants, rounds, calls and responses, spirituals, religious and secular songs, and more. We speak and explain as little as possible. Perfection, competition, or performance are not our goals. Please come, bring a short song to share, or simply enjoy singing in a community of old and new friends. And invite family members and friends! January 16th, 2020 at Waterville UCC 6:00 PM-7:30 PM.

Coffee Hour Volunteers Needed – Please consider hosting coffee hour after the 9:30 worship service on Sundays. There is a sign-up sheet on the table near the windows. Please do sign up to be a host.

Items such as coffee, tea, and sugar are stocked, along with tableware, etc. You would provide any snacks and half and half. Teaming up with others is encouraged so that expense, setup and cleanup becomes easier. Thank you in advance for your help.

Our Church Life: This Coming Week
December 15, 2019

Today, December 15 **8:15 a.m. Christmas Choir**

9:30 a.m. Morning Worship

9:30 a.m. Sunday School

10:45 a.m. Congregational Meeting

Monday 16 3:45 p.m. Yoga in Sanctuary
 4:00 p.m. Weight Watchers
 5:30 p.m. Weight Watchers

Tuesday 17 9:00 a.m. Weight Watchers

Wednesday 18 **9:00 a.m. Essentials Closet**
 5:30 p.m. Yoga in Sanctuary

Thursday 19 **5:00 p.m. Essentials Closet**

Friday 20 **9:00 a.m. Essentials Closet**

Saturday 21

Sunday 22 **8:15 a.m. Christmas Choir rehearsals**
 9:30 a.m. Morning Worship
 9:30 a.m. Sunday School
 10:30 a.m. Fellowship Time

CHURCH STAFF and OFFICERS

Rev. Mark D. Wilson – Pastor and Teacher

Rev. Maureen Ausbrook – Minister of Visitation

David Dean – Organist/Pianist

Nancy Flynn – Administrative Assistant

Sarah Mills- Sunday School Teacher

Sally Melcher-McKeagney – Diaconate Chair

Carl Daiker – Treasurer Jackie Dalton – Assistant Treasurer

Mike Seavey – Financial Secretary Mike Muir – Moderator

Mary Lou Ogden – Clerk Bill Flynn – Custodian

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