THE STORY - CHAPTER 19: THE RETURN HOME

RECAP

1. Since we’ve begun The Story we’ve talked about how there is an upper story and a lower story, and we’ve used the image of railroad tracks to make sense of that. The Upper Story runs along two major rails the entire time, [slide - tracks appear] Q: Can anyone tell me what the [slide - zoom in] first rail of the upper story is?

   1. God's [slide - answer appears] desire is to DWELL with his people in his creation… Q: And what’s the second rail of the upper story?

   2. [slide - answer appears]...and his design is to WORK with and through people to make God’s good rule real in the world...

   3. ...for the FLOURISHING of all of creation is the goal of the story all along.

2. The Lower Stories are the individual stories that carry the upper story and give it shape, and today’s story [slide: move up] in today’s chapter we will see that God’s faithfulness to his promises and to his people continue this Upper Story, while continuing to point to a greater victory God longs to accomplish in the world.

3. God’s people, who were living in [slide: Israel Map] the land God had promised Abraham, and had given his descendants as they became the nation of Israel before that kingdom split, have lived in Exile in Babylon [slide: Persian Gulf Map] for roughly 70 years as punishment for serving other gods and neglecting justice in the way they’ve treated people economically and politically.

4. Which is a problem because Israel was suppose to be the nation through which God blessed the world by putting God’s love and justice on display for the world. Israel was God's chosen vessel to work out the flourishing in creation that he’s desired from the beginning. To live in idolatry and sin, however, provided a perverted image of God in the world.

THE JOURNEY BACK

1. King Cyrus 538 BC - God moved King Cyrus of Persia to send people back to Jerusalem in order to rebuild the temple.
1. God had left the temple before it was destroyed; it was a sign of his judgement on Israel. But God’s spirit had traveled with Israel into exile.

2. Now we see God working through a pagan king, in order to once again set up his dwelling place among his people, so that he can work through them again for the sake of the world.

2. [slide: Journey Back Arrow] Today we will be journeying back with the people of Judah and Benjamin who head back to Jerusalem.

3. New Hope on the Journey back to Jerusalem. While we have not been in exile as punishment for sins (don’t hear me framing our situation this way) we are, in once sense, seeking to move into a new season or a new era of New Hope’s future. Just as the Jews returning to Jerusalem were seeking to move forward as the people of God in a changing world, we are seeking to be the faithful church in the midst of a changing world around us and with that in my head, I’ve noticed a number of parts to the story from which we can glean wisdom.

1. [slide: pt. 1] Returning home is not returning to life as it was. [slide: zoom to white] The people are celebrating, [slide: people] but the folks who remember the “good old days” see that the temple is smaller, and they mourn the loss of the greater, more impressive structure, and the freedom the people once knew.

1. The victories of the past can never be diminished

2. The success of the past can never be duplicated [slide: zoom out]

2. [slide: pt. 2] Perceived enemies can quickly become real enemies. [slide: zoom to white]

1. When the enemies of Judah and Benjamin heard that the exiles were building a temple for The Lord, the God of Israel, they came to Zerubbabel, and to the heads of the families and said, "Let us help you build because, like you, we seek your God and have been sacrificing to him since the time of Esarhaddon king of Assyria, who brought us here."

2. 2 Kings 17 - imported Assyrians who worshipped other gods, and then also worshipped YHWH
3. [slide: people appear] The assumption is that Zerubbabel and the leaders were sniffing out a plot to undermine the efforts or the faith of Israel, but the text doesn’t seem to indicate this.

4. Who are our assumed enemies as we seek to be the faithful people of God in the neighborhood?
   1. Other churches?
   2. People who are not like us?
   3. People in our own church?
   4. When we begin to assume to know the motivations of others, be it churches, be it neighbors, or even people of New Hope, we turn our perceived enemies, into real ones. [slide: zoom out]

3. [slide: pt. 3] Resistance and difficulty will come, they do not indicate an automatic closed door to the will of God in our lives. [slide: zoom to white]

   1. The people assume that if they are coming under years of resistance, then they must have misunderstood the situation, and it’s not yet time to rebuild the temple.
   2. God says, this resistance is something to be over come, so stop turning inward and caring about yourselves, and get the temple built. [slide: image appears]

      1. How do we tell how to respond to resistance? Prayer, and looking to see where does the resistance lead us, outward or inward?
      2. Does leaving this alone, open the way for God to dwell more richly with others? [slide: zoom to white]

4. [slide: move to track] because God’s desire is to DWELL with his people...in order to WORK through his people...and rebuilding the [slide: temple appears] temple is a way for God to reassure his people that he has not ceased to be at work toward this end, and he has continued to be faithful to his word.

5. In calling God’s people to rebuild the temple, he also reminds them of their calling to be a light to the nations. [slide: move down]

   1. Through the prophet Zechariah, God paints a picture of a flourishing Jerusalem, alive with his presence once again, and then he says this, “Many peoples and the inhabitants of many cities will yet come, and the inhabitants of one city will go to
another and say, 'Let us go at once to entreat the LORD and see the LORD Almighty. I myself am going.' And many peoples and powerful nations will take firm hold of one Jew by the hem of his robe and say, 'Let us go with you, because we have heard that God is with you.'"

2. God speaks of a day when the nations, the Gentiles, those outside the people of God, will seek God's will and God's presence in their lives. The presence of God is for the sake of others, in order that God can work to bless those who do not have his presence in their life.

3. We cannot assume that our goal is to simply grow closer to God, or to have God's Spirit in our lives as if that is an end unto itself. We are meant to be filled with the Holy Spirit for the sake of the flourishing of the world, and the people around us!

4. Though the temple is built and people celebrate, God's work is not done. He speaks now in the future tense. He tells the people how one day he WILL enter into the temple again, and he will DWELL in their midst again, even while his Spirit is with them already.

1. Solomon and his temple.

2. There is no wooooosh.

3. God is at work to do more than just bring his people back from physical exile. God is at work, as he revealed through Daniel's visions, to undo the sinful and evil nature of the things of this world, and to defeat death and evil once and for all. The presence of God is for the sake of others, in order that God can work to bless those who do not have his presence in their life. God's presence will enter the temple again in the form of an 8 day old baby boy, to the songs of rejoicing by the old men and women of that day. God's presence will enter the temple again in the form of a 12 year old boy who astonishes the priests and the teachers with his wisdom. God's presence will enter the temple again in the form of a man in his 30s declaring that the season of the temple is over, and recalling the words of the prophet Zechariah promising to undo the very system in which those in power hide out in their den after robbing and oppressing the people they are meant to be leading to the one true God.

4. Through his people, through the temple, through the prophets, God continues to point forward toward the day when he accomplishes all the he must to bring about the flourishing of creation once again. It is to this end that
God calls us to as a church. To turn our lives to him by putting our faith in Jesus as Lord, and through his very Spirit dwelling in us as individuals and as the church, so that we can work as his ambassadors to the world, and be a part of his work in the world that is meant to bring about the flourishing of the neighborhood in anticipation of the flourishing of the world.