

Prayer of Preparation (responsive)

Leader: May the words of my mouth,

People: and the meditation of our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

All: Amen.

Rebuilding is hard work. Take a minute and think about that. Rebuilding is hard work. Most of us have never actually built anything before; we call professionals to do the work and, if you're like me, you write and check and enjoy.

But the physicalness, the actual work, of rebuilding is backbreaking, bone jarring, and just downright dirty. You can't rebuild without breaking something. You can't rebuild without getting dirty. You can't rebuild without either tearing down and removing the stuff left behind or marking the lines of where and why things used to be. You can't rebuild without arguing with somebody...or many bodies.

You can't rebuild without the materials, people, and a plan. Rebuilding is not for the faint of heart and the folks who want things done quickly. Rebuilding shouldn't even be considered without some serious, serious prayer.

It's the prayer part that is the most important because rebuilding requires we have a vision; and when we are in sync with God's plan that vision slowly unfolds. It may take some time, but the vision unfolds and as we faithfully pray, we see it clearly.

As we enter our texts today, we realize that Ezra and Nehemiah finally get to meet each other. The one sent to rebuild the walls and gates of the city is with the one sent to rebuild the people. When we take a closer look, what we find is that one can't work without the other. Because the people feel secure, they are willing to put down roots in Jerusalem: to build homes and businesses, schools, roads, restaurants, and everything else the people needed and wanted to live. Now they can begin living in Jerusalem; better yet, they can begin worshiping in peace. So now, Ezra the scribe, can begin the work of rebuilding the people who gather within the walls of Jerusalem.

Hear what happened in Jerusalem that day with a fresh ear: Ezra gathered all of Jerusalem together in the early morning. He brought those who were skilled in interpreting the law. Then, he looked toward heaven, he blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered, “Amen, Amen.” What happened next? The people followed the law.

The people, under the interpretations of Ezra, Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiyah, Maaseiah, Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hash-baddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam, the people listened to the scriptures and began to follow the law. And when they heard the words of the law and immediately began celebrating the festival of booths. They confessed their sins, they recited their history so they wouldn't forget it, they prayed together, and they pledged their lives and loyalty to Israel's God and God's teachings in the Torah.

You know what else they did...they sang. They took up their instruments and they sang! The singers were back and I can only imagine how loud and how proud they were to sing in Jerusalem again. Can you imagine the songs of praise and thanksgiving they sung to the Lord, the great God that day.

And the musicians brought out their instruments. They brought their cymbals and raised a great noise. The sound of the bells in Jerusalem that day must have been heard throughout the country.

They brought out their harps and lyres and plucked the strings to make gentle music to accompany the psalms, their hymns, petitions, and thanksgivings to God. The musicians gathered sang and danced and played music to the God of heaven because of joy.

They were home...finally home. Not the, “oh, I’m glad to be home from vacation” home, rather the “Look where He brought me from” home. I don’t know because I wasn’t there, but I believe they may have sung something like this song from the Mississippi Mass Choir. It goes something like this:

Look where he brought me from
Look where he brought me from
He brought me out of darkness
I’m walking in the light
Look where he brought me from

I’m going to praise his name
I’m going to praise his name
He brought me out of darkness
I’m walking in the light
Look where he brought me from

I’ve got a hiding place
I’ve got a hiding place
He brought me out of darkness
I’m walking in the light
Look where he brought me from

The book of law called for a time of celebration. A time where those gathered were to take some time to remember...to look where God had brought them from. Out of a time of darkness to walk in God’s light.

The book of law was read and interpreted within the hearing of the entire congregation and after hearing, they praised God. They praised God with a time of celebration, a time of worship, a time of prayer and fasting and a time of feasting and giving. All that was found in the law, they did.

Rebuilding a people takes work. It takes a lot longer. It isn’t physical; it’s spiritual. It requires reading and interpretation. It requires preaching and teaching. It requires wrestling with God. It requires Sunday School and Bible Study. It requires we sit and talk and debate and we question and we make each other accountable, and we walk in each other’s shoes. Rebuilding a people takes work. We are blessed because we don’t do that work alone; the Spirit guides us...it’s the light of God.

Our spiritual journey will take a lifetime...and we still won’t be done. We will gain new understandings daily. One day we too will look back and say, look where he brought me from. But today is a day of celebration because no matter how central work may be in serving God, this is a day of celebration and Sabbath rest. Today, we are called to enjoy and share the fruits of our labor. In this case, 125 years of labor.

Prayer: Spirit of light and life, meet us as you met those who gathered with Ezra and Nehemiah. Shine your light upon us and change us into the disciples you would have us to be. Amen.