

I've heard it said that every major life event, every significant milestone, is a combination of joy and grief. For some milestones, that's obvious. When you make the big move to a new place, or your firstborn leaves the nest, the emotions are mixed. You expect them to be mixed. You expect to feel joy and grief all jumbled together.

But for other milestones? We don't expect those emotions to be mixed. We focus so much on the joy that we overlook the touch of grief there, too. When parents bring home the new baby, they're usually overwhelmed by joy... but they may also be grieving some things, too, under the surface, even unconsciously. Grieving the loss of some freedom. Grieving the loss of sleep. It's joy, for sure, mostly joy... but there's a bit of grief there, too. When hardworking people finally retire, they're usually overjoyed at the prospect of free time and sleeping in and traveling. Yet they're often grieving a bit, too. A lot of our identity is wrapped up in what we do for a living. When that's done... sometimes we wonder who we are, even grieve who we were. It's joy, for sure, mostly joy... but there's a bit of grief, there too.

Any psychologist will tell you: in order to thrive in the new stage, the new home, the new role, the new season? You have to process the grief as well as the joy. In the midst of the joy, you have to give the grief space and voice so it doesn't fester.

And church, the Bible gets that. God's people get that. Ezra certainly gets that.

We'll be talking about Ezra today, about his story and the book that bears his name, in this final installment of our "Emerge" sermon series. Throughout the past few weeks, as we've found ourselves emerging from this difficult season of COVID-tide, we've been exploring the stories of scripture in which God's people Israel have emerged from seasons of great difficulty. We've sought to glean some wisdom from their stories of

emerging, wisdom that just might guide us in our own story of emerging. We've followed Noah as he emerges from the ark, and the Israelites as they emerge from slavery in Egypt... but today, we follow Ezra (and what's left of God's people) as they emerge from exile.

Ezra's story may be the one that's least familiar to you. Ezra's book may be the one you need to look up in the Bible's table of contents to find. So let me recap about eight hundred years of biblical history in thirty seconds: after God's people wander in the wilderness for about forty years, they finally come to the promised land. However, the promised land is not an empty one... and the Bible recounts a series of battles in which the Israelites take control of the land. Once established there, God raises up a series of judges who will lead and guide them... but the people aren't content with mere judges. They want a king. They want a king so that they can be like other nations.

God has never intended for Israel to be like other nations. God has never intended for Israel to have a king. God is their king. God repeatedly warns them about the abusive, exploitative nature of ancient kings... but the people are insistent. They ignore God's warnings, reject God's rule, and resume their chorus: *Give us a king!* Eventually, God relents.

At first, it's not so bad. Under the reign of the first kings -- Saul, David, and Solomon -- God's people Israel defeat their enemies, establish the capital in Jerusalem, and even build God's Temple, the very place where God's Presence will dwell among them. But after Solomon's death, the nation splits into two kingdoms: Israel to the north, and Judah to the south. The divided peoples are led by a series of largely disastrous kings who do pretty much all the things God once warned about, and who

generally lead God's people away from God and towards their own destruction. Israel, to the north, falls first to the sword of invading empires... and not long after, Judah (and with it, Jerusalem; with it, the Temple; with it, the very place where God's Presence has dwelled) is utterly destroyed. Those who manage to survive the siege are carried off to exile in a foreign land.

The exiles are a conquered people in every sense of the phrase. They have lost their land, their loved ones, their homes, their livelihoods. They are, for the most part, prevented from practicing their religion, speaking their language, and keeping their culture. They cannot return home.

But conquering is a fickle thing. Their conquerors -- the Babylonians -- are themselves conquered, this time by the Persians. Life under Persian rule is by no means easy and carefree (God's people are still a conquered people, after all)... but it does bring one significant change, one we heard about in our scripture reading for today: Cyrus, King of Persia, allows the exiled Israelites to go home, to return to the land, and to begin rebuilding the Temple. After some seventy years, they emerge from exile. After seventy years, they get to rebuild. After seventy years, they get to go home.

Yet the returning exiles soon discover that emerging from exile, returning from exile, is a little more complicated than they might've expected it to be. But then... emerging always is, right? It's complicated. It's not so easy to just... "go back" to the way things were. Sometimes when you emerge (even into something good, something you were hoping for and waiting for and longing for), you emerge with some scars... some trauma... some grief that needs to be dealt with.

We see that in Ezra's story. In the second part of today's scripture reading, the

exiled people are back in the land, and they're beginning to resume their practices of worship. Under the leadership of Zerubbabel (the governor) and Jeshua (the high priest), they rebuild an altar, make burnt offerings, and observe the sacred festivals. They emerge from exile to worship the Lord, the God of Israel. But in the midst of their worship, something's lacking. In verse six, we read: "But the foundation of the temple of the LORD was not yet laid" (Ezra 3:6, NRSV).

In this story of emerging, getting back to the land is step one. Resuming worship of the Lord is step two. Step three? Step three is rebuilding the Temple. In the book of Ezra, rebuilding the Temple -- rebuilding the place where God's own Presence will dwell -- is a high priority. So they get to work. They collect the offerings and manage the money, secure the workers and acquire supplies. Finally, it is time for the foundation of the Temple to be laid.

And this is not just a time for construction. It is a time for celebration! In the scripture, we read:

[Ezra 3:10-11, NRSV]

¹⁰ When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests in their vestments were stationed to praise the LORD with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, according to the directions of King David 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 responded with a great shout when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid.

As they come to this moment, this milestone in their story of emerging from exile, the people celebrate and rejoice and make a holy and joyful ruckus that can be heard for miles.

Yet not everyone is feeling so festive. As we continue reading, we find:

[Ezra 3:12-13, NRSV]

¹² But many of the priests and Levites and heads of families, old people who had seen the first house on its foundations, wept with a loud voice when they saw this house, 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 so loudly that the sound was heard far away.

It's a day of great joy. But those in the crowd who remembered the original Temple, who perhaps watched as it burned and crumbled, who so deeply felt its absence over these seventy years... they don't shout for joy. They weep with grief.

There is something in this part of the story, something so familiar, so human. The sheer pathos of this part of the narrative is what makes this, by far, my favorite story in the book of Ezra. We're watching them contend with their memories, process their trauma, and deal with their grief. We're watching them grieve, even as they try to emerge and move forward and rebuild their lives and faith and Temple.

Do you know what we're *not* watching? We're not watching any condemnation of their grief, any minimizing of their trauma. There's no: *What are you carrying on about? This is a joyful day. Snap out of it.* We don't see that here, and that's important. Biblical scholar Rachel Wrenn writes, "The story casts no judgment on those who mourn."¹ The scripture doesn't condemn the mourning, and we shouldn't either. Laying the foundation of God's house, after so many years of exile -- it's the fulfillment of deep hope, a sign of true restoration, a source of great joy. Yet it's impossible to entirely separate that joy from the pain and grief of what they've endured. Scripture tells

¹ Rachel Wrenn, "Rebuilding the Temple," in *Working Preacher*, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/rebuilding-the-temple-2/commentary-on-ezra-11-4-31-4-10-13-2>

us that the very sound of all this grieving cannot be distinguished from the sound of all that rejoicing. They are connected. Wrenn continues: “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.”² In short: this is a story of a moment of joy that also dredges up a whole lot of grief.

Church, I love this story. I love that no one thinks to shush the mourners. I love that no one tries to make them be happy. I love that the scripture is authentic to the mixed emotions of the moment, and doesn’t try to just put a positive spin on all of it. I love that this scripture expresses the people’s grief as well as the people’s joy. I love that this scripture includes both, makes space for both. I love it... because in doing so, I think the scripture invites us to include both, deal with both, make space for both. I think the scripture invites us to authentically express grief *and* joy.

As we emerge from COVID-tide, I am rejoicing. Gathering, maskless, with family. Sitting around a fire with my friends. Watching my kids play with their friends. Going to a baseball game or taking a vacation. Going out for a cup of coffee without running through a risk assessment. Hearing you pray the Lord’s Prayer with me. As we start to emerge from COVID-tide, it feels like the world is coming back to life, and that makes me rejoice.

But I am also grieving. I’m grieving the missed celebrations, the postponed weddings, the quarantine birthdays, the moments we’ll never get back. I’m grieving the loss of jobs, the loss of businesses, the loss of security that comes from a loss of livelihood. I’m grieving the all-too-familiar reality: the pandemic’s greatest burdens were often borne by the most vulnerable. And I’m grieving the loss of life. I’ve stood over the

² Ibid.

COVID coffins, church. I've led the shocked families in the final prayers. When I think about that, and then start to multiply it by the thousands upon thousands... I'm overcome.

Even as I emerge from COVID-tide, rejoicing, I know there's grief somewhere in there, too. I know whatever joy I'm feeling is (in the words of that same biblical scholar) "inextricably linked to the losses that came before."³ And I have to make space for that. I think we have to make space for that. I think that's what it looks like to be authentic in the complex fullness of this time.

So church, as we emerge from COVID-tide, may we do what this scripture does. May we be authentic in what we're feeling during this season of emerging. May we make space -- in our own lives, in our relationships, in our conversations -- for celebration *and* for grief. May we face whatever grief might be lingering within us in order to move forward in joy. May we resist the urge to choose one over the other, to sideline the grief in favor of the joy we've longed for. May we feel both, fully feel both -- so that we can truly and authentically emerge from this season, healthy and whole.

³ Ibid.