

# JOURNEYS' ENDING - RETURN FROM EXILE

## Eastertide

Ezra 1:1-5

A Sermon Preached by  
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Seattle, Washington 98125  
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Scripture – Read by Liturgists  
Listen for the word of God.

### **Ezra 1:1-5<sup>1</sup>**

In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, in order that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, the Lord stirred up the spirit of King Cyrus of Persia so that he sent a herald throughout all his kingdom, and also in a written edict declared:

“Thus says King Cyrus of Persia: The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and has charged me to build the Lord’s house at Jerusalem in Judah. Any of those among you who are of God’s people—may their God be with them!—are now permitted to go up to Jerusalem in Judah, and rebuild the house of the Lord, the God of Israel—the God who is in Jerusalem; And let all survivors, in whatever place they reside, be assisted by the people of their place with silver and gold, with goods and with animals, besides freewill offerings for the house of God in Jerusalem.”

The heads of the families of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levites—everyone whose spirit God had stirred—got ready to go up and rebuild the house of the Lord in Jerusalem.

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Pastor Catherine Foote

Please join me in prayer.

God,  
May the words of my mouth,  
The meditations of our hearts  
Find a home in You.  
– Amen.

Hear these words adapted from the book of Isaiah, chapter 40:1-5

Comfort, Comfort all my people.  
Speak kindly.  
Call out your warfare is ended.  
There is a voice calling:

"Clear the way for God in the wilderness.  
Make a smooth desert in the highway for God.  
Lift every valley.

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<sup>1</sup> The Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), Old Testament. ©1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. .

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Smooth every mountain.  
May the rough ground become a plain.  
May the rugged terrain become a broad valley.  
Then the glory of God will be revealed,  
and all flesh will see it together."

The words of the prophet calling the people home.

I believe every one of us here today has a story of journey and the story of being called home. I'm not sure every one of us has found that home, but I do know when we talk of journey everyone knows what that story is.

So we begin with the story of Ezra. And I do have three stories of finding home for you today. It's actually going to be a tour through your bulletins. So if you have your bulletin handy, just grab it and noticed that the Scripture reading today was from the book of Ezra. Ezra in the Jewish Scripture is the *last* book in that collection. It's the story of finally finding home.

Here's the thing, about 2,600 years ago Babylon was the kingdom that ruled what they called "the whole known world." And Babylon, located right up in the area of Iraq now and that general area, in order to be the ruler of the whole kingdom had to get down to Egypt and up and across to Assyria and Turkey and, in order to do all of that, they had to go through Israel. So at the turn of that century between 700 B.C.E. and 600 B.C.E., Babylon came through Israel and destroyed Jerusalem. The armies carried off the wealthy and educated people in that land and took them to Babylon.

That story of being carried off became a central story for the Jewish religion. What do we make of the fact that we think God called us to this place and made us secure here and let us settle here and had us call this place home? I mean, weren't we doing just fine? Weren't we making progress? Hadn't we come a long, long way? And then here comes this army and they just sweep through and somehow God does not stop them. What do we make of that story? What did we do wrong?

So the Jewish story wrestles with that question. Were we not the people God called us to be? What mistake did we make? They were in exile for 40 years and in their struggle with that exile they decided we just didn't live up to who God asked us to be. So 40 years later when King Cyrus said "You can go home now," Ezra the scribe wrote that story. The people went home to build the temple.

And it *is* a phenomenal story. I used to read it when I was in college, this story of God finally saying, "You've suffered enough. Come home. You've wandered enough. Come home. You're welcome back. Come home."

What I didn't read in college is what happened when that community went home. Because you know when you go home, it turns out there are other people already there who also call it home. Right? And I don't care if that means that you went off to college and you came home to find your bedroom got turned into your dad's den. Or you were in exile for 40 years and came home to find that other people there still worshiped God, still had a place they gathered, still had a community.

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When the people of Ezra's time came home, they found people in the land who are worshiping God who said, "Hey. We're your brothers and sisters if you're back, let's build a temple together." And the people who came home couldn't do it. They said, "No, we have nothing to do with you. We'll build our own place of worship." And the seeds of that sense that our story is our *own* homecoming and not everyone's homecoming, we are still reaping today.

The first group that was rejected, they were called the Samaritans, and we know in the time of Jesus the story of the conflict there. But that sense of a Promised Land we *can* come home to is still a struggle in the Middle East. We, we hear the stories *this week* of fighting between Palestinians and Israelis. Where do we find home?

The second story I want to tell you is the story of the poem that you've been reading all season as we've talked about homecoming. It's a poem by a Hindu scholar named Rabindranath Tagore. He was born a Brahmin in Calcutta. He was in a wealthy family. He was well educated. He was educated in India and also in Europe. And in 1913 he became the first non-European to win the Nobel Prize for literature for his collection of short stories and poems. In India he's got a reputation very similar to the reputation of Shakespeare. He is a profound writer. And the poem that you've been living with during this season of homecoming is his poem. He was a traveler. He was a wanderer he traveled the whole world through his lifetime and so he wrote,

The time that my journey takes is long and the way of it long.

I came out on the chariot of the first gleam of light, and pursued my voyage through the wildernesses of worlds leaving my track on many a star and planet.

In the most distant course that comes nearest to thyself and that training is most intricate which leads to the utter simplicity of a tune.

The traveler has to knock at every alien door to come to his own, and one has to wander through all the outer worlds to reach the inmost shrine at the end.

My eyes strayed far and wide before I shut them and said, 'Here art thou!'

The question and the cry 'Oh, where?' melt into tears of a thousand streams and deluge the world with the flood of the assurance 'I am!'

In 1913 Rabindranath Tagore won the Nobel prize for literature. In 1915 he was granted a knighthood by the British Empire. And in 1919 he renounced that knighthood after a British slaughter in India of pilgrims who had gathered in a religious celebration. He knew where home was, but there were other people there who did not recognize that home as his.

Now I want to take you to a story from four years ago. It's on the front of your bulletin. It's a story from the Kawargosk [refugee] Camp near Erbil, Kurdistan. It's the story of Muhammed Selim. Muhammed Selim was a doctor in Aleppo [Syria], a Muslim, and also a Kurd. And when Aleppo was falling and bombs were bursting everywhere, he kept his private clinic going as long as he could. It was one of the few places in Aleppo anyone could come for help and for healing. Even with bodies all around him in the streets whoever came to him he served. Until finally word came that his clinic would be a target, and he had to leave. So he escaped Syria and he came to Turkey. But as it occurred, he wasn't welcome there either. As a religious and ethnic minority, he was suspect

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everywhere he went. The first refugee camp he arrived at, he got a job as a painter just painting buildings. This doctor, this surgeon: painting buildings! He was in such despair ,he didn't know what he would do. Then he heard of a need in Kawargosk in that refugee camp. They had a clinic and they needed a doctor. And he applied and he got that job that's where he is still, maybe somewhere in this picture with three boys looking for home.

Three faith traditions, three stories of seeking home, of being turned away, and maybe of something more.

There's one more story, of course, that we have. And it's our story, the story of the *Christian* faith. Boy! Don't we know how sometimes we as Christians can get so focused on our little piece of home that we turn everyone else away! Don't our own stories reflect those journeys that sometimes seem *like* home cannot be found or when we find it there are those already there to say, "You don't belong." Maybe those who even share our own faith. Here's the thing I'm struck by, however, in every one of those stories:

There is a Jewish tradition of welcome.  
There's a Hindu tradition of welcome.  
There's a Muslim tradition of welcome.  
There's a Christian tradition of welcome.

In every journey home what we might finally discover on this journey with God is that in *this* home there's room for everyone. And finally I am not home until *everyone* is home. I'm not home till these three boys are home. And as a Christian and as a person of faith, finally, I know where my dwelling place, where my home is.

Amen

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Transcribed by Beth Bartholomew from [www.universityucc.org/Sermons/2018/06/28/2018](http://www.universityucc.org/Sermons/2018/06/28/2018)