

(Joyful) Noise, Noise, Noise, Noise

Since September we have been moving through the earliest chapters of God's love story with the people of God. From creation to the call to Abraham, from slavery in Egypt to dancing King David, we have walked through the stories of the peoples' wandering ways and God's faithful love. Most recently, we have recalled the divided kingdom and the people's divided hearts. Then came what seemed to be the final blow, the fall of Jerusalem and the exile to Babylon. Last week we briefly heard a promise of peace and the end of exile from the 40th chapter of Isaiah, when the prophet preached about a way home through the desert, the highway for none other than the Lord himself. And now we find ourselves in Ezra, one of the few books that speaks about life after exile. [Read Ezra 1:1-4; 3:1-4, 10-13]

Homecomings can be complicated. When I drive around Nashville now, I often feel like a tourist because it doesn't look like it did when I lived there. Roads are busier, and landmarks have changed. One Thanksgiving a few years ago, we watched our nephew play basketball in the same gym where I watched countless basketball games in high school. The doors to the gym were the same and so was the very loud buzzer, so when I first got there, it could have been 1980-something, but then I walked into the gym itself. The bleachers were different, the home-team fans were sitting on the opposite (wrong) side, and the whole place looked smaller than it did when I flirted and giggled wearing my Reebok high tops and faded Guess overalls. The place has changed in thirty-two years, and so have I.

Things have changed for the returning Israelites as well. Over the course of more than sixty years and three different deportations, most of the residents of Jerusalem had been taken to Babylon to live in exile. Once Persia conquers Babylon, King Cyrus declares that the Israelites are free to go back home, and so the homecoming parade begins winding its way across hundreds of miles of desert wilderness. Not everyone chooses to return. Many had done exactly what Jeremiah had told them to do. They had married and started families. Their lives and livelihoods are now tied to this new place. Even so, scripture tells us that many do

choose to return. We hear their names in the second chapter of Ezra which reads like a ship's passenger log from ancestry.com. Everything is cataloged including donkeys, camels, priests, servants, and singers:

The whole assembly together totaled 42,360, not including their 7,337 male and female servants; they also had 200 male and female singers, 736 horses, 245 mules, 435 camels, and 6,720 donkeys.¹

So the returning exiles have everything they need to start over, except for the one thing they could not pack up and take with them, the one thing that is now only the stuff of dreams—the Temple.

While God had promised time and time again to be with them—even in exile—restoring the Temple, rebuilding God's house is the central reason for the people's return. The Temple is understood to be the place where heaven and earth meet, the sacred space where God promises to be present. Yes, God is everywhere and cannot be contained by any one building, but the Temple is the sacred space set aside at God's direction where God promises to dwell. The Temple serves as a focal point for the community's worship and identity. It is the central place where the community can celebrate and grieve, pray and sing. The Temple is the place where the people of God gather to worship the God who is good, the God whose faithfulness and graciousness toward these stubborn and fickle people lasts forever.

At first, the people return to the rhythms of worship when the Temple is no more than a set of blueprints. We are told that they are fearful of their neighbors, and they respond by worshipping. Rather than allowing their fear to turn them against their neighbors, they get about the business of worship. (That right there is a sermon unto itself!) The people celebrate the Festival of Booths which centers on giving thanks to God for the gift of the law, the covenant promise between God and the people all those years before in the wilderness. They set up a new altar on what remains of the old one, but the return is not yet complete. They ultimately turn their energy and efforts toward the rebuilding of the Temple itself. Once the foundation of the Temple is in place, it's time for a celebration—a loud, noisy celebration.

¹ Ezra 2: 64-67, Common English Bible

The original animated Grinch is still one of my favorite Christmas specials. Dr. Seuss does not tell us exactly why the Grinch's heart is two sizes too small, but we do know that one of the things that he absolutely detests about the Whos' Christmas celebration is the noise. As he plots and he plans, we overhear his grumblings to Max the dog:

'I MUST find some way to stop Christmas from coming!'

For Tomorrow, he knew, all the Who girls and boys,

Would wake bright and early. They'd rush for their toys!

And then! Oh, the noise! Oh, the Noise!

Noise! Noise! Noise!

That's one thing he hated! The NOISE!

NOISE! NOISE! NOISE!...[and after the feast of Who-pudding and rare Who roast beast,]

They'd do something He liked least of all!

Every Who down in Whoville, the tall and the small,

Would stand close together, with Christmas bells ringing.

They'd stand hand-in-hand. And the Whos would start singing!

They'd sing! And they'd sing! And they'd SING!

SING! SING! SING!

And the more the Grinch thought of this Who Christmas Sing,

The more the Grinch thought, 'I must stop this whole thing!'²

So the Grinch decides to steal Christmas, but—spoiler alert—he fails. He can't stop their singing. He can't stop their noise. In fact, it's the noise that eventually gets through to him in the end. He hears them singing—even after he has swiped their Christmas down to the last can of Who Hash. And that's when his heart is changed, that's when his heart grows three sizes and breaks out of its old crusty cage.

² Dr. Seuss, *The Grinch Who Stole Christmas*

When the community gathers in this morning's text, it's noisy. There are joyful shouts, there is music, **and** there is weeping. We are not told what makes the old-timers weep, but we can guess. It isn't that the color of the walls is different or that the furniture arrangement has changed—we're not there yet. This thing they're building—or rebuilding—is in its earliest stages. Today's text tells only of a celebration for the laying of the foundations. Maybe they weep because of all that has been lost; maybe they weep because the day they dreamed of for so long has finally come. Maybe they weep for those who did not live to see this day; maybe they weep because *they* did. Maybe they weep because it's just not the same Temple they remember. We don't know; we aren't told, but this we do know:

No one could distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people's weeping, because the people rejoiced very loudly. The sound was heard at a great distance.³

Joy and weeping are all mingled together within the gathered crowd, and it's loud. So loud that they and their noise can be heard from miles away.

When I think about the noises we hear at a great distance today, I think of sirens, trains, and our neighborhood's dog choir that howls together when the mail is being delivered. Others around the world might think of explosions, gunfire, or helicopters. The noise in today's text is different, because it comes from the people of God who have gathered to worship that God. It's messy; it's complicated; and it's loud.

2001 was a year unlike any other for me and my family. My mother died in June; we lost a child to a late miscarriage in August; and then came 9/11. I was serving as an associate pastor at a church in eastern North Carolina, a church that had grieved alongside me even as they had grieving of their own to do. Our head of staff had resigned abruptly just ahead of Easter that year, so we were making our way through the fog with the help of an interim pastor named Jim. They really liked Jim. He had grown up just a few miles up the road. He came from a lovely family, and they had known his mama, so to speak, so they trusted him to help get them back on their feet. I on the other hand wasn't so sure. My heart had shrunk more than a few sizes over

³ Ezra 3: 13, CEB

the course of that year, and he and his exuberant ways were an easy target for my sadness and grief and anger. He was doing all sorts of things to right the ship and change how we functioned for the better, and I was scared and sad and frustrated. And like the Grinch, I grumbled about just about everything—to my sweet husband and faithful dog. I was also a loyal associate (at least on the outside), so I bit my tongue and played along. But then he had the nerve to change Christmas Eve. He insisted that the only way to end our candlelight service was to march out of the sanctuary, candles in hand, and sing “Joy to the World” in the parking lot. I pictured a mutiny. What about dripping wax on the carpet? What if it’s cold? I came up with all sorts of reasons why it was a bad idea, and I grumbled about them to myself (and Dave and our dog Boo). Well, Christmas Eve rolled around, and the service went along as planned. Then came the time for us to move outside. Like the Pied Piper, Jim led us out the glass doors and into the dark parking lot, and everyone happily followed, candles in hand. And together we sang “Joy to the World.” And at least one among us wept. And we were loud, and it was holy. I don’t remember much about that Christmas, but I do remember the stars in the sky and how our voices carried on the cool night air. I don’t know how far the sound carried, but I do know that it made its way to the deepest corner of my tired and sad heart, because that is the only real memory I have of Christmas that year. The noise did not erase my grief. But that determined noisy joy at the birth of one tiny child cradled my heartbreak and refused to let me or the larger world believe that death or grief or sadness was the end of the story.

The larger world would tell us that there is very little to be joyful about these days. Our nation is fearful, weary, divided, and angry, as is the entire planet. And yet, we show up here to worship in the midst of the darkest days of the year, and we sing. We shout and we weep and we sing about this God who has been faithful to us throughout the ages, the God who promises to bring us home, the God who makes his home with us in Jesus Christ. There’s a lot of noise out there these days. There is a lot of shouting, a lot of weeping, and very little joy. We in the church could be silent or keep our noise politely cordoned off in here, but I think it is high time that we make a joyful noise out there, too. I’d say it is our job; this joyful noise-making is our holy calling as the people of God. “In a broken and fearful world,” what would it look like and sound like if we

lifted our voices and shouted this joy for everyone to hear?⁴ We polite Presbyterians tend to shy away from being too noisy, from being too loud, from making too much of a ruckus. Maybe it's time that changed, because the world needs to hear a different noise, a holy noise, a joyful noise right about now, and so do we. When we make even a little noise of our own, we claim and proclaim this holy joy. This joy does not erase our grieving or anyone else's. This joy is not sugar-coated or superficial. It is a deep joy that is woven through with weeping. It is a joy born out of exile and loss, a joy that is well acquainted with darkness. And by the grace of God, our joyful noise, noise, noise, noise points beyond us to the One who makes some joyful noise of his own, the One who shouts love for the world through a baby's cries, the One who faithfully and tirelessly sings unfailing love into the saddest and most broken of hearts.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁴ From *A Brief Statement of Faith*, <http://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/101/brief-statement-faith/>