

The Rock: 03-01-20

First reading: 2 Timothy 2:1-2

Title: Life together

Scripture: Ezra 3:8-13

Theme:

Life is better when it is done in community. In doing life together, God proves Himself faithful always, even when we sometimes are not.

Introduction:

I happened to sit down this week and look at some pictures that had been taken over the years here at the Rock.

Most around celebrations and special days, and the ones that struck me most were the ones showing youthful exuberance of the generations which built this place.

I missed the very first project in 1983-1984, but came shortly after. A young Roland Ludlam and Rob Rainville, digging the first bit of dirt out.

Symbolically "laying the foundation" for the church. The part we know today as Fellowship hall.

All the way to the pictures of the last building project here with, once again,

Roland Ludlam (not quite as young), but this time with Lee Phanstiel, his son and a couple of kids I don't recognize.

Once again, digging the first bit of dirt, symbolically "laying the foundations".

And we are here today, some having been here for a very long time, and some of you are here for the very first or even second time.

For various reasons, and because of different people inviting us, we have decided to do life together, seeking the LORD for what He has for us to do as individuals and as a community of believers.

And in the midst of that, you might even find yourself struggling a bit with transitions. And perhaps not just the one here at The Rock, but in life.

Trying to figure out God's plan and purpose and just what it is he wants you to do in the months and years ahead.

You aren't alone -and honestly those struggles are not confined to a particular "time of life".

Young, old, and those who are middling - we all struggle at times.

But remember, we have God's providence as a soft pillow to rest our heads on. We may not know the end from the beginning, but we do know that God can be trusted along the way.

The Story:

The people of Israel found themselves in a similar place almost 2,500 years ago. God had brought them out of Egypt and into the Promised Land, their new home.

Eventually they built a huge temple that honored God and became the center of life in community.

Part of Solomon's dedication prayer from Second Chronicles, he asks a question and prays that God will not only hear, but listen:

"But will God indeed dwell with man on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, how much less this house that I have built! Yet have regard to the prayer of your servant and to his plea, O Lord my God, listening to the cry and to the prayer that your servant prays before you, that your eyes may be open day and night toward this house, the place where you have promised to set your name, that you may listen to the prayer that your servant offers toward this place. And listen to the

pleas of your servant and of your people Israel, when they pray toward this place. And listen from heaven your dwelling place, and when you hear, forgive.”

-2Ch 6:18-21 ESV

Over time, however, they forgot what God had done. Each generation, with the exception of a few, forgot about God's faithfulness and His promise to His people.

They ended up in exile in Babylon, foreigners in a place not their own, with their Temple destroyed.

Strangers in a strange land, trying to figure out how to function, not understanding how or why the Babylonian culture thought as it did. Asking the question: “Where do we fit in as exiles?”

Maybe today, that is you. Maybe you are a long way into your Christian journey and are trying to navigate all the change and the culture you find yourself in.

We are no longer the prevailing cultural story, in fact being a Christian today seems harder than it ever has.

Or maybe you are on the other end and you have just begun that journey with Jesus, or are still considering this Jesus of Nazareth.

Trying to figure out how this all works. We are all in different places, and dealing with different things, but we are here together -and that is how it's supposed to be.

The writer to the Hebrews makes this statement when it comes to life together and community:

"Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near."

-Hebrews 10:19-25 ESV

Life, in all of our diversity, is much better together than it is alone, but back to our story or we will never finish.

It's been 70 years since the temple was destroyed and the people taken away. But God, in His faithfulness promised that he would bring them back home and continue to work through them. Jeremiah tells them:

"For thus says the Lord: When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you, declares the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, declares the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile."

-Jeremiah 29:10-14 ESV

How many of you knew that our Jeremiah 29:11 verse on our front door is actually an exile verse? It's good to know, because it shows God's faithfulness to His people, even when they are having a hard time being faithful to Him.

His providential care for His people has been fulfilled, but when it came time to rebuild the temple, they didn't just dig a scoop of dirt. No, they had a party.

"And when the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord, the priests in their vestments came forward with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, to praise the Lord, according to the directions of David king of Israel. And they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the Lord, "For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel."

-Ezra 3:10-11 ESV

And it is the reaction here that seems most striking to me as we move on.

"And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid."

-Ezra 3:11 ESV

Why? Because God is always faithful - ALWAYS- I know that sometimes we doubt and worry and wonder, and try to sort things out our own way.

But God is always faithful, and because of that, the new foundation, built upon the old, begins.

But... There is always a but, isn't there? Those who remembered the glory days of the old temple, cried. Why? Because they remembered how big and beautiful that old temple was. And this one, well it wasn't that.

"But many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers' houses, old men who had seen the first house, wept with a loud voice when they saw the foundation of this house being laid..."

-Ezra 3:12a ESV

But the younger ones, "The many" who had never seen the old temple, never had any map for what had gone before, cheered:

"...though many shouted aloud for joy, 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 with a great shout, and the sound was heard far away."

-Ezra 3:12b-13 ESV

They had never seen their homeland, these were the ones who had been born in exile, but now, by faith, they were home and seeing God's promise fulfilled.

The one thing I believe they were in agreement on, even as one generation grieved and another cheered, is this:

God was once working among them, in them, and through them to bring about His promises to the world through His people.

He was doing the same old thing, in a brand new way. Bringing the generations together once again to rebuild on the foundations of His promises in order that they be prepared to be sent out into the world, being His people in His world.

I thought at this point that I was going to go into Nehemiah to talk about the rebuilding of the wall.

Talking about how important it is that we each understand we have a section of that wall right in front of us that we are responsible for.

And then talk about how important it is to know that each generation working together as a community to interlock that wall, is the most important thing.

The Biblical fact that we need each other, from the oldest to the youngest, in order to be the complete and healthy community God designed us to be.

But I'm not going to do that. Instead, in the amount of time we have left I want to

talk about the challenge of transition,
and why it is better to do life together,
why we need each other.

We decide if we want to journey together
-building on the foundations of those who
have gone before us. Remembering the
pictures I showed you.

Learning to grow forward in a way that
validates those people and glorifies God,
who has always been faithful, even when
sometimes we are / were not.

You see, we inherit the blessings of
those who have struggled, sweat, built
and celebrated over things we simply
enjoy.

But that is ok. We will have our own
assignments in the months and years
ahead. A "Babylonian" culture that we
must engage with in a way that lifts up
and glorifies the name of Jesus.

We will have our struggles, we will make
mistakes, well maybe not you, but I
promise that no matter how hard I try as
your pastor, I will make mistakes.

I am after all just a broken clay pot, a
vagabond wanderer journeying toward the
Son. I have found that the journey is
always best together.

These promises were entrusted to me years ago, when a group of men prayed over Lisa and me, commissioning us for ministry.

They entrusted to me, as Paul entrusted and challenged young Timothy:

"You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus, and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also. Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to please the one who enlisted him."

-2 Timothy 2:1-4 ESV

With all of the ups and downs of that journey over the years, even when I was unfaithful and struggled with what God was doing, He was always faithful.

Never letting go of me, never letting me forget the charge and prayer. I don't have much to offer to you except myself.

I shared Wednesday evening at worship practice that I take very seriously the charge of being a shepherd. That those whom God puts under my care, I am responsible for to pray for to journey with and most importantly, to open this book up for us all in order to teach you

about who Jesus is and what he has for us to do.

My promise to you, is that in God's goodness, through His faithfulness, I will serve as I have everywhere, with my whole heart, seeking what is best for us as a community and helping you to grow in the knowledge and grace of the Lord Jesus until he tells me I am finished.