

SERMON- Proper 23 (A) Stewardship II

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Ezra 7.1-10, 25-28

Philippians 4:1-9

Matthew 22:1-14

St. Timothy's (Herndon)

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Psalms 23

...this Ezra went up from Babylonia. He was a scribe skilled in the law of Moses that the Lord the God of Israel had given, and the king granted Ezra all that he asked, for the hand of the Lord his God was upon him.¹

OPENING:

Ezra was a bureaucrat, as was Nehemiah. Many of you are also bureaucrats!

The name Ezra means “helper”

and that’s what bureaucrats, despite the bad press, do.

On top of that, Ezra was a priest and a scribe, fairly high placed in the government of the Persian Empire.

Our word “Secretary” actually conveys a good understanding of his position:

Ezra was a copyist, a translator, an editor.

But he was also in a cabinet level position—maybe the “Under Secretary for Jewish Affairs”—in the larger bureaucracy.

Last week, we began our Stewardship Campaign for next year 2027, with our theme “Be Thou My Vision”—that beautiful hymn.

I preached about Ezra and the return of the Israelites from captivity, and we explored how God’s Vision, present in Ezra’s story in the Old Testament, has also been present in the history of this Church and indeed present in our very lives today.

STEWARDSHIP

Stewardship is difficult to preach on... you have to find the secret sauce of presenting a vision that is compelling and dynamic that people are inspired and moved by; while also neither being too positive OR too alarmist.

For example, my eight-year-old son asked me the other day:

“Poppy, be honest, is the church broke?”

And I replied: “No... whatever would make you think that?”

And I realized it’s because whenever I am talking about the church at home, I never say: “Gosh, we just have so much money... we don’t know what to do with it all.”

Things are always tight, there is always need, I am always concerned and he picked up on that.

¹ Ezra 7.6

Now, some churches post, week by week, the totals for the previous week's income and expenditures.

St. Timothy's did exactly that, 50 years ago in 1976, in our weekly newsletter. Here is Ralph Bayfield's report from one Sunday, in that Bicentennial Year: *290 in attendance—Rather shocking offertory of (only) \$977, (here's the kicker) Come now we must do better than that.*

I usually try to have more of a positive Vision for the Church, although my son apparently thinks otherwise.

That faithful Episcopalian, George H.W. Bush, when he was running for President in 1988 called it "That vision thing"—lamenting that a distinctive vision seemed lacking for his campaign.

He could have read the consultant's Report that I mentioned last week ("The Lincoln Town Car with a Model T Engine") which quoted the Book of Proverbs: "Where there is no vision, the people perish."²

That's a stark prediction of a church without a vision. Here's another one: after my sermon last week, a parishioner stopped by my office and shared that they had had a dream about St. Timothy's and Stewardship and my Vision for the church. And that in the dream, I was up here preaching and they kept waiting and waiting for my Vision, and finally I said it.... "My vision is to move the church (this is in the dream)... My vision is to move the church..... to Manassas."

Here is an ever starker vision. This is years ago now, I had a former parishioner come into my office, unannounced, and he started talking about the church, long history, this and that. This is the part I remember. He said;

St. Timothy's is full of middle management (bureacrats) who have not progressed enough in their careers working for the government and so they bring those neuroses into their church life and try to run things like that.

You probably thought I threw them out of my office then and there but I did the opposite, I said "Please do go on."

² Proverbs 29.18

Visions can be cloudy, they can be murky and hard to see.

They are always imperfect, sometimes under threat. We have been fortunate here, blessed by the Holy Spirit in our ability to see God's vision and try to execute it, but not without difficulties and hardships.

EZRA:

I realize that I have talked a lot about leaders: Brad, and Ralph, and me. And how indeed the Bible often focuses on the leaders: Moses and Joshua, Ezra and Nehemiah. But a distinctive quality of Ezra's vision was his focus on the community and on the people. Ezra did not want to make it all about himself. You might not think that after hearing the 16-person pedigree that ____ had to suffer through delivering. But the book, in a way that is unique in all the Old Testament, actually focuses more on the role of the people.

So while Nehemiah had declared in his book:

"I built the wall." Ezra, meanwhile, takes pains to focus on the community. We might even call it "Community organizing" or "community building"—so focused is he on the people and *their* role in what they are trying to accomplish.³

The author takes pain to say that it was the PEOPLE who build Yahweh's House in Jerusalem. This is special because you know that the Old Testament loves to list a long series of names, there is a whole book of "Numbers" which does that. Ezra does not, as a way of "democratizing" this process which instead "focuses on the community as the chief human actor." It's always "We" and "Our" not "I" and "Me" and when he does mention the priest, he lists the laypeople first.⁴

Additionally, there is focus on the *torah*, Hebrew scripture, as the ultimate source of authority, not the king, not the priest, but this document which will bind the people. This is a landmark in religious history which predicts the Protestant Reformation and the Bible as the authority, the priesthood of all believers, the enfranchising of 99% of God's people, the laity, as ministers, interpreters, decision-makers of the Church.⁵

COMMUNITY:

Speaking of Reformation, here is another nugget from our friend that came to my office:

³ Nehemiah 6.1, Eskenazi, Tamara Cohn. 2023. *Ezra: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. New Haven, CT: Anchor Yale Bible, 316

⁴ Eskenazi, 125, 129, 313, 314

⁵ Eskenazi, 290, 294, 296

(Recent history) seemed – based on the newsletter and comments from other parishioners -- to be akin to the Reformation-Restoration Wars (and then he added) I strongly supported Brad but the fraction-ness in the parish made me feel I'd rather slug the person sitting next to me than exchange the Peace.

Interestingly word choice: “Fraction” ... Broken.

One year, in the Stewardship Campaign, Brad and the Church, instead of asking for pledges, they asked first for Visions, each person had to share their “Vision” for the Church. They sent these requests out in the mail and handed them out in church.

The justification was this (and I quote): “In the Episcopal Church, ‘vision’, our sense of mission doesn’t come from the clergy, or from the Church staff; it comes from all of us, all the people of God.

Your vision, your inspiration, is critical in determining how we, the people of St. Timothy’s, honor God and serve our neighbors in the name of Jesus Christ.”

I am not going to quite do that, although my door is always open and we might be due a survey one of these days, but I invite you to ponder that question deeply, what do you vision for this Church? How can I contribute to that vision?

As God’s community, as God’s people, we are all invited to participate in OUR vision, to give of ourselves to God’s Church.

I invite, again to join in that process of visioning, in receiving God’s direction, in joining your church in shaping our vision for the future.

Ezra’s vision was a powerful one, the belief that what they were doing was a Second Exodus, an exercise in liberation, and an exercise identity formation by reconstructing the Temple and rebuilding in body and soul who they were.⁶

We don’t face the same sort of threats and drama that beset the Israelites.

And We are NOT broke, and those sorts of visits to my office are fewer and fewer over the years. But doing Church is hard, and not just on rainy holiday weekends like this one.

in the face of that, we have our Vision, and we have our hymn, *Be Thou My Vision*,

⁶ Eskenazi, 289-290. 292

which has an Irish melody, and was originally an incantation, a spell, a charm, if you heard me preach on St. Patrick's Day about another such *lorica*.. they are called.

You can hear it in the lyrics and in the melody. This idea that we invoke God's name to protect us from the evils and challenges around us, and to steel us for the opportunities and unknown in front of us.

*3. Be thou my breastplate, my sword for the fight;
Be thou my dignity, thou my delight.
Thou my soul's shelter, thou my high tow'r;
Raise thou me Heav'nward, O Pow'r of my pow'r.*

*4. Riches I heed not, nor vain, empty praise;
Thou mine inheritance, now and always.
Thou and thou only, first in my heart,
High King of Heaven, my treasure thou art.*

AMEN