

November 8, 2009
The National Presbyterian Church

Wars and Rumors of Wars

Ezra 1:1-4; Jeremiah 25:4-14

Rev. Earl F. Palmer

This week we honor Veterans in our country. What a meaningful celebration this day will be for us. We think of what happened at Fort Hood and we think of men and women in the armed forces in the United States that put their lives in harm's way on our behalf. I want to salute all of you who have served in the armed forces of our country. This nation needs to be grateful to people that have served in the armed forces.

The title of today's sermon is "Wars and Rumors of Wars." We want to discover what happened to God's people after the fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. They were taken into captivity in Babylon, the ancient Babylonian empire on the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. The Babylonian army literally leveled Jerusalem, Solomon's great temple was destroyed and the people were taken captive. They were marched all the way to Babylon where they were held captive for 70 years, but they survived.

Then after 70 years, a new power emerges in the north called the Persian Empire. Cyrus the 2nd was its leader who called himself 'king of kings' interestingly enough. His empire was immense. It extended from Macedonia, Greece to Egypt and spread east to Babylon. Because of his power, when he showed up at the gates of Babylon, they surrendered without even fighting. That's the immensity and power of the Persian Empire under Cyrus the Great.

Cyrus had a different approach to ruling. Instead of taking prisoners or

people captive like the Egyptians or the Babylonians or Assyrians had done when defeated people were made slaves, he decided to put people groups back into their own lands, allow them to have their own religion, allow them to have their own governance, and then he would tax them.

That began a whole new approach to empire that the Romans will also follow. The people of God are going to be brought back from Babylon; they are going to be brought to their own original land and allowed to rebuild. In fact, that's why Cyrus becomes a hero in the Old Testament. He is one of the foreign kings who was honored in the Old Testament. The book of Ezra honors Cyrus the king of Persia because of this. Cyrus said: let all of the survivors in whatever place they reside be assisted by the people of their place with silver, gold, goods, and with animals beside. He allowed them to return to Jerusalem. They do. Ezra 5:1 tells of this provision. The heads of the families of Judah and Benjamin and the priests and the Levites. (notice their religion is intact) rebuild the house of the Lord in Jerusalem. The neighbors aided them with silver vessels, gold, goods, animals, and valuable gifts. They began to rebuild their city. That's what the books of Ezra and Nehemiah are all about; the rebuilding of the city and the rebuilding of the temple not in the grand scale of Solomon but as fine and beautiful as they could make it. They are back in their land.

But, it will never be the same. They had one great moment of glory under King David and Solomon, but from now on their whole history will be a history of a people surrounded by greater political and military powers. Those great powers will dominate their life. The first would be of course their Babylonian captivity and then the Persians. Following the Persians, another empire arises in the west. In Macedonia a young general, the son of Philip, named Alexander the Great will take his armies and drive the Persians out of Greece. That is a decisive and permanent defeat of the Persian Empire. But Alexander the Great, 336B.C., is not satisfied just to drive them out of Greece. He moves on into their land, which would be modern day Turkey. He completely conquers all of the Persian Empire, even what was the Babylonian Empire, all the way to India. Alexander the Great's troops will go also to the south and conquer Egypt. With that victory, the Greek language will be planted in the ancient world. For that reason, the New Testament is written in Greek. For that reason, the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek 100 B.C. in what we call the Septuagint. The Greek language spread throughout the ancient world. We call this the hellenization of the ancient world, because of Alexander the Great.

Before he died, Alexander did not appoint a successor. He said instead, "Let the strongest lead." Well, when you have a group of generals around you,

that is the invitation to upheaval. All of his generals competed against each other. Alexander's empire was divided. One group got control of Egypt. For our purposes, the Holy Land came under the control of a man named Nicanor Seleucid Antiochus. That's why the city of Antioch was built, in honor of Antiochus, the father of Nicanor. He became the founder of an empire called the Seleucid Empire. They control what is the Holy Land. They will reign in that land for 200 and some years until 150 years before Christ. A Jewish firebrand named Judas Maccabees (we just heard our choir sing an anthem in honor of Judas Maccabees written by George Frederick Handel called *Judas Maccabees*) was a hero of the Jews. He led a revolt. It was a successful revolt against the Seleucids. That revolt was 150 years before Christ. It enabled the Jews to establish for a short time, for about 60 years a small Jewish kingdom that they would have because they defeated the Seleucids. Ironically, the defeat of the Seleucids was mainly because the Seleucids were preoccupied with two other forces; in the south, the Egyptians who had grown powerful, and the north, a new empire called the Parthian Empire, which would be like old Persia.

But, the most important threat came from the west. That is the threat of an emerging Roman Empire. The Romans will come. They will destroy the Seleucids, destroy the Parthians and completely conquer Egypt. Cleopatra will surrender to the Romans in 63 B.C. and then they will sweep throughout the entire Mediterranean world with an empire that will last for 450 years. The Roman Empire. The whole of the New Testament story, the life of Christ, the New Testament church will all be lived out under that steel foot of that Empire.

I want to ask you one question. How do the Jews, the people of Judah that are brought back to their land, how do they keep their sanity through all of these years of wars and rumors of wars? How do they keep their culture alive? Think of all the forces that are raging around them and the upheaval and great powers that are surrounding them, crossing over them, defeating them, and controlling them. How do these people keep their own faith alive, their own national people identity alive, and their hope alive? How do they do it? They do manage to do it with ups and downs. I have four reflections on how they did it. Four clues. Those clues might be helpful for us.

I ask the same question of your life and my life. How do you keep your sanity when everything is in flux around you? We don't have armies marching across our town, but what do you do when there is flux, when there is turmoil or when everything seems to be happening around you? How do you keep your sanity? How do you keep your faith, your hope, and your integrity to know who you are? Here are four clues we can learn from the

Jews in this period following the destruction of their city in 586 B.C. up until the time of the first century.

First, they went to church every week. I'm not making a joke about it. The Jews saw their life in terms of seven days. You must understand that. It's in the fourth commandment. Six days thou shall labor, one day thou shall rest. That is an amazing way of looking at life. The Ten Commandments looks at life in terms of seven days, not a month, not a year, seven days. In effect, the Ten Commandments are saying in the fourth commandment you must make sense of seven days. You must invest into seven days all the things that make you human, all the things that make you a real person. How are you going to keep track of your culture? You have to do it in seven days. How do you keep track of who you are? In seven days. How do you keep your relationships with the people who mean the most to you? In seven days. How do you keep your health in good shape? It needs to happen within seven days.

It's still a great principle for you and me today. If you can keep seven days rhythmic, you can keep your sanity. In fact, I have a definition of burnout. It's when every day looks alike and when you don't have a rhythm in the seven days of your life. The Jews had a rhythm and it was built around the Sabbath. On the Sabbath they remembered who they were. They worshiped God. They focused on the great truths of their life and they listened to the texts read from the Law and the Prophets and the Psalms. The key to the worship in the synagogue, the key to the worship on the Sabbath day is that on that day ceremonies were done to remind them of who they were. Ceremonies were done followed by the reading of the text of the Law and the Prophets and the songs. Then the rabbi interpreted the text as a teacher of the people.

This is what our Lord did in the Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon on the Mount is an example of a rabbinic sermon where Jesus as the teacher interprets the Law, explains it. That's what they did. They kept their sanity that way. Every Sabbath, they worshiped God, focused upon what was the center of their life, they expressed their thanks to the Lord and that's what worship really is, and then they learned from the text. They learned and grew intellectually. The Jewish people from Abraham onward are literate. They read. They write. They keep their poetry and they keep their songs. They keep their law and they know it. They did it on the seventh day.

Secondly, they remembered who they were and the history of their journey and this enabled them to build traditions of memory. The traditions of memory are so important to keeping intact who you are. The Jews did this. Just take a look at a Jewish year. It's very interesting. The most solemn ceremony of the whole Jewish year would be Passover. Passover interestingly

enough is on the 14th day after the fourth month of the year, after April the 14th day is Passover. They used the lunar calendar to mark their days. Notice the use of sevens. All of these traditional observances are going to be sevens. The 14th day after the first moon of April would be Passover. In Passover, they would remember the exodus out of Egypt. They would remember that God redeemed them with an outstretched arm. They remembered being set free on Passover.

Then 49 days later, notice the sevens, they would celebrate Pentecost. Pentecost would be the ceremony to celebrate the giving of the Law to Moses on Mount Sinai. They would remember the covenant of the Law where God shared with the people his will for their life. Then the 14th day after the seventh month of the year, Tabernacles. That's a seven-day celebration in the fall. Tabernacles plays a big part in the ministry of our Lord because he went to the Feast of Tabernacles and gave some of his most important teaching during the Feast of Tabernacles. They would light four great candelabras on the Feast of Tabernacles. They would pour water through the silver funnel in the middle of the courtyard. They would sing the *Hallel* (Psalms 113-118) during the Feast of Tabernacles. They would celebrate what they called the booths, the tabernacles. The people would make little picnics with their family on Feast of Tabernacles to remember that during the 40 years in the wilderness God provided and they survived. Tabernacles celebrates their survival. We made it.

Then the Rosh Hashanah, the beginning of the year and then the Yom Kippur, a one-day solemn worship event that thanks God for forgiveness where the high priest would take the blood of an animal and put it on the ark to remember the covering of their sins, the forgiveness of sin, the Day of Atonement (literally "covering"). Then there would be a feast that was a later feast, the Feast of Hanukkah, about the time of Christmas for us. The feast celebrated the Judas Maccabees' Revolt, the one this anthem was about that our choir just sang. Judas Maccabees' Revolt is celebrated on Hanukkah, the revolt when the temple was cleaned and dedicated because the Seleucids had put an image of Zeus into the temple. That caused the Judas Maccabees' Revolt. They celebrate that victory on Hanukkah.

Finally one last celebration, Purim, which is again the 14th day after the first month of March. Everything is sevens. On that 14th day after the first moon of March would be Purim. The book of Esther is read on that day. Again, that celebrates the fact that in the midst of all of captivities, God preserved his people. He preserved by his providence. These feasts, these celebrations together with the ordinary ones that every family would have like the weekly Sabbath, the circumcision of the boy on the 8th day of his life, the marriage ceremonies, and the celebrations of the way families would remember the death of relatives, all of these give them their traditions. With

those traditions, they remembered the providence of God, his goodness, his faithfulness and who they are.

Let me ask you, do you have traditions? As a Christian, you certainly have traditions we treasure. As an American, we have traditions. Thanksgiving Day, Abraham Lincoln established by Presidential Proclamation that tradition for us. We have the tradition of the Fourth of July. We have the tradition of Advent as Christians, the celebration of the birth of Christ. The celebration of the death of our Lord on Good Friday, and his victory on Easter. Do you have celebrations in your family? It's what keeps your sanity. It's what helps you keep culture alive in your family. I'll tell you one thing, ~~children will create most of your traditions in your family.~~ You go to open house at school. I remember when we went to open house with our kids. We went to see the teachers and they gave us a picture of what was going to happen in school that year. While we were driving home that night I just said, "Hey, let's go to Fenten's and have ice cream cones." We went to Fenten's and had ice cream cones. Now let me tell you what will happen. The next year when you go to open house at school, you are driving home and one of your kids will say, "Hey Dad, we always stop at Fenten's and get ice cream cones after open house." What you have now is a tradition that's come into your family. Your kids sometimes create and help preserve most of your traditions. Believe me, from then on you'll stop at Fenten's and get ice cream cones after open house. Traditions give you a unique and distinctive identity as a family. They are very important and you keep your sanity. The Jews had traditions.

Third, they had a ministry to perform. They had a job to do. The Ten Commandments gave them a mandate. I love the way the fourth commandment says you shall remember that you were once a slave, therefore you should reach out to the people who are sojourners and servants in your house. The fourth commandment tells us to preserve the animals, who are not to be worked on the Sabbath. Even the foreigner in your house should not be worked. The beginning of social justice and all those great commands that flow out of the Ten Commandments, thou shall not murder. That means you shall honor the life of people around you. You shall not steal. That means you shall be generous to the people around you. All the grand positives in the Ten Commandments become ministry obligations of the people to reach out to those who are poor, to care for the widow, and to care for those who are orphaned. That's the mandate that gives them a job to do. If you want to keep your sanity, you have to have a job to do. You have to have something that you have to do, that you need to do. They did.

Then finally, they had a songbook. They knew their songs. Next week Doug Learned will preach on the great Old Testament songbooks. That's another

great marker in the story before the grand story. Did you know that the most quoted part of the Old Testament by the New Testament writers, including our Lord, is the book of Psalms? Not the Law or the Prophets, but the Psalms. The songbook. Do you have a songbook? Do you memorize songs? You should so you can sing the songs of your faith.

I had to have an MRI, you know where you go into that machine where it's like going into a coffin when they put you in there. I had one because I had a back operation four years ago. They said you have to do an MRI. I went in there and was in there for 35 minutes. I made the mistake of opening my eyes when I went in. I realized there was only about 2 inches of space between my face and the shell. Then this clanking of these weights and everything while I was in that MRI. You know how I kept my sanity? They first said, "Do you want earphones?" I said, "No, I don't want to hear any music by the yard. I don't want that." They would probably be playing songs I don't even like. I said, "No, I'll just close my eyes." Do you know how I protected myself from claustrophobia? I sang hymns and numbered them. I said okay I'm going to sing hymn number one as much as I could remember. Then I sang hymn number two. Then hymn number three. I went through my whole repertoire. It took me 25 minutes. If you memorize songs, the great songs of faith, also the songs of your country, the songs that mean a lot to you, they keep your identity. They help you keep your traditions. They keep your sanity. The Jews had a songbook. An amazing songbook, the book of Psalms.

Best of all, they did their best to go to church every Sunday. They did their best to observe their traditions. They did their best to do their job. I'm so glad this week, we received a stewardship letter. I read that letter. It was just a very inspirational letter for me to read -- David Daniel's letter. I guess you'll all get it this week too. I like what he said at the beginning because he's my kind of guy. He said, "At this time of year your mailbox is full of appeals to various charitable organizations and all. Well, this is not going to be that kind of letter" he said, "but don't misunderstand me." This part I like. "It is absolutely an appeal for giving, this letter is just that. So, if you don't want to read further, you don't have to. This is an appeal for giving, but the emphasis is on investing the financial resources and all the other resources that God has given us, investing them in the work of the kingdom of God of what is happening in this church by the grace of God and what is happening in people's lives. It's investing toward the work that God is doing in our midst." I love this letter. He won me over for sure. I hope every one of us will invest like the people did that Ezra tells about when they were brought back to their land and they built their city. They built their church. They made things happen. They had a job to do and that job to do keeps your sanity. It keeps you healthy. It keeps your hope. That's what we get to do in this church too.

There's something even better. It's not that just we have a job to do. It's not that we try to keep memories and traditions alive, but that God watched out for them. You heard that grim text from Jeremiah where he told about the fact that they were going to be imprisoned. Right after that comes a better text. Jeremiah later writes this, speaking for the Lord:

'For I will restore health to you and your wounds. I will heal,' says the Lord, 'Because they have called you an outcast, it is Zion. No one cares for her. That's what they say.' But thus says the Lord, 'I am going to restore the fortunes of the tents of Jacob and I am going to have compassion on his dwellings and a city will be rebuilt upon its mound and a citadel will be set on its site and you will come in thanksgiving.' (Jeremiah 30:17-19)

"A righteous branch will grow up. The branch of David." (Jeremiah 33:15)
That's the prophecy of the coming of Jesus Christ. God kept watch over them. That's why they survived. He keeps watch over us. He keeps our hope alive.

Heavenly Father, thank you for these texts and how they help us to know that you are faithful and that we can hold onto good traditions and we can worship each week thankful for who you are, your grace and your faithfulness. Lord, bless us as we live in that grace and faithfulness. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

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*Sunday Worship at 8, 9:15 & 11 a.m.
Classes for Adults, Youth, and Children at 9:15 a.m.*

THE NATIONAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

4101 Nebraska Avenue, N.W.

Washington, D.C. 20016

www.NationalPres.org 202.537.0800