

# REBUILDING

Series: The “Re” Words  
Ezra 3:7-13 and Matthew 7:24-26  
September 3, 2017  
Rev. David S. Cooney

As we talk about rebuilding today, I have hurricanes on my mind. This afternoon a group of twelve leaves from here to head for Virginia Beach. It is not for a church beach vacation. The Virginia Annual Conference has been hard at work helping folks in their communities recover from Hurricane Matthew. Our team is going to join that effort and will spend the week repairing, flooring, painting, and whatever else is needed. On our vacation a few weeks ago, Robin and I had the opportunity to visit with the coordinator of the Greater New Jersey Annual Conference about their efforts to help the communities there to recover from Hurricane Sandy. Those efforts are just starting to wind down after four years. Churches are still sending teams to New Orleans rebuilding from Katrina. Now Hurricane Harvey has ravaged Texas and damaged other Gulf States. The devastation is mind-boggling. Even with pictures it is hard to imagine. A lot of rebuilding is in the Texans’ future.

Rebuilding is a strong word. It conveys hope in the future. It speaks of putting back together, and of reclaiming. It is a word, though, that also implies pain, hurt, and loss, because something cannot be rebuilt unless it has first been torn down. So when we talk about rebuilding, we are talking about an odd mix of hurt and hope.

There is a great example of this in our lesson from Ezra this morning. The lesson is essentially about the ground-breaking ceremony for rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem. The temple, built by Solomon, had been a magnificent structure, a consecrated holy place, meant literally to be God’s home on earth and the center of worship for all the people. Ah, but one day, the Babylonian army swept through Judah and entered Jerusalem, burning houses and businesses and then leveling the temple. The devastation was greater than Katrina or Sandy or Matthew or Harvey. The entire city and temple were left in ruins. To make matters worse, much of the population was rounded up and taken to Babylon, where the people lived as exiles for fifty years.

This experience, known as the Babylonian Captivity, is the biblical poster child for utter ruin: buildings, lives, dreams, and faith were all shattered. The temple site was ground zero for the total destruction.

After five decades, though, the captivity ended and the people were free to go home. They began the trip back to Judah, back to Jerusalem in dribs and drabs. First just a few, and then more. Leaders like Zerubbabel, Nehemiah and Ezra led the way and guided the rebuilding efforts. Now, at last, they had come to the moment they most

desired. They were going to rebuild the temple. They had already built an altar and were offering sacrifices again after decades of being unable to do so. Now they were in a place to pay carpenters and stone masons and buy materials, and the foundation was going in. What a day it was. The priests were there in their finest robes. The choir and orchestra provided music. People cheered and clapped and shouted and cried. They would have a temple again.

Ah, but even on this most joyous day, there was a mixture of hurt and hope. We see it best described in one verse. "Many of the priests and Levites and heads of families, old people who had seen the first house on its foundations, wept with a loud voice when they saw this house." The old folks, the ones who had been there fifty years before, remembered the temple they had loved so much. Another temple would never be the same. They felt that loss as new construction began. At the same time, the first temple was gone and they did want another one. The rebuilt temple would now be the center point of their faith, the place of their worship. So they cried. Were they sad tears or happy tears? Yes.

And so it is in life. Devastation is not just connected to property. Sometimes it is. Many have lost their homes to fire or flood or tornado or earthquake. Interestingly, when they talk about it, they say very little about mourning over the property. It is a major pain, but houses can be rebuilt. It is the loss of pictures or special items that have no monetary value but great emotional value that represents pieces of life that are more difficult to put back together. More than by the loss of property, we can be devastated by divorce, by the death of a loved one, by a failed business, by a family rift, by a job loss, or by a loss of health. I cannot begin to list all of the things that can shatter us, that can leave our lives in ruins that can make us feel as if the Babylonians have run roughshod over us. Sometimes the one we most closely identify with is Humpty Dumpty, who had a great fall, and all the king's horses and all the king's men could not put Humpty together again. It can be hard to imagine the pieces ever going together again. Even the thought of rebuilding can be overwhelming.

How, then, do we rebuild when a Harvey has washed everything away? I think it requires certain understandings followed by some positive steps.

One understanding is that rebuilding rarely can start immediately. There is no set time or predictable time or expected time. That will differ with each person and each circumstance. In all circumstances, though, there is a proper time and we often have to wait for it. People in Houston and the surrounding areas are going to have to rebuild. First, the waters have to recede and the shock has to wear off. No one is reaching for a hammer or saw just yet. One of the worst things to say or hear right after the funeral for a loved one is, "Well, now that the funeral is over, you can have some closure and move forward." What? A loss like that completely changes life and you do not get over it and

rebuild a life immediately. Indeed, rule-of-thumb advice in heart breaking occasions like that has always been to make no big decisions for at least one year. In other words, do not rebuild too quickly.

A similar understanding is that rebuilding takes time and it may take a long time. Patience is needed. The Israelites were in exile for fifty years, and it was a good twenty years after it ended before the foundation was laid for the new temple. An illness can take a long time to get over. A lost job can take a while to replace. Hurricane Matthew came through last year, Sandy four years ago, Katrina twelve years ago and rebuilding continues. If you are in a place now where you feel ready to rebuild, praise God, but understand it can be a long haul, or at least will not be quick. If you do not understand this, you will become frustrated and discouraged and stop rebuilding.

Maybe a more difficult understanding is that what is rebuilt will not be exactly the same as what was lost. Oh, a house or building could possibly be rebuilt to the same specifications, but even then codes may have changed or materials used will differ. The older I get the more I discover that when I hurt something, it takes longer to heal, and when healed, it is not exactly what it was before the injury. If you marry again, the marriage will be different. If a divided family finds a way to make peace, the relationships will be different. If you get moved to a different part of the country, the new circle of friends will never be just like the old circle. I'm not saying it will be good or bad or better or worse. It could be any of these things. I am saying it will be different. Rebuilding is not remaking. It is building a new way of being. Consequently, rebuilding means letting go, not forgetting, but letting go what was lost and embracing that which is new. This is critical, because, if we do not, we will never be happy or content or satisfied.

Mostly, successful rebuilding requires the understanding and belief that God is in the process. When it doesn't happen as quickly as we want; when it doesn't happen in exactly the way that we want, and notice I am not saying if, but when, it is easy to think that God has abandoned us or forgotten us or is ignoring us. We need to trust and have faith that the Lord is with us and is busy gathering all of the pieces necessary for putting life together in a new way.

When we understand these things, it is time to get working. We can be confident God is doing God's part. We want to remember that we also have to do our part. If we move away from our friends and lose a great support group, do we make any effort to make new friends, to rebuild a new support group? If we lose a job and with it our identity and security, do we look for another with an open mind, maybe ending up doing something a little or a lot different, rebuilding a secure base? If we have had surgery or joint replacement or have been in an accident, do we go to therapy and do the exercises and adjust our habits to rebuild our bodies? It is common and understandable that when

we have had a devastating experience, we feel numb and immobile and powerless. Again, it is not helpful to prod someone with a quick, "Get over it."

Sooner or later, though, after the water recedes and the shock wears off, the good folks in Houston are going to have to get out the scrub brushes and cleaners and clean out the houses and dry out the walls and throw out what was ruined and piece by piece rebuild. Sooner or later we all have to roll up our sleeves, grab whatever tools we need and start rebuilding. The Israelites built an altar right away, then did nothing. Finally, they realized they needed to get laborers and materials and a plan if they were ever going to have a temple again. And here is the thing. God was ready to bless their efforts, but they needed to make the effort. Rebuilding is done one piece at a time, and we cannot add the second piece until we put up the first.

What I really want you to hear today is that rebuilding is possible. It can be hard to begin, and it can be slow and it can take a long time. Again, I am not here to suggest a quick-fix solution. But with all that, the point is that it is possible. The temple lay in ruins for seventy some years. But it got rebuilt. Texas is not ready to begin and is a long way away from being whole again. But the devastated areas will be rebuilt. Your life, or parts of your life, or maybe one part of your life might be in ruins today. It may be really hard, nearly impossible, to see a way forward. But you can rebuild. Understand it is a process, and it may take a while, and it will take some work, but you can get there and, while what is rebuilt will not be exactly what was, it will be good, maybe even amazing. God is ready to bless your efforts and others are willing to help. I saw a picture of a highway in Houston backed up for miles – not with people trying to get out, but with people trying to get in. In the picture you could see that most of them were towing boats. There were thousands of people all wanting to help. What a great picture.

Be open to God's blessing and be open to help from others. Build on the solid rock of Christ and not the sinking sands of the world, and have confidence in the future. Whatever you have experienced, you can rebuild. God makes it possible. Thanks be to God.

Amen.