

Recognizing a Movement of God Ezra 1: 1 - 11

A few years ago, an interesting story found its way to the news outlets about an elderly woman in Spain who unsuccessfully attempted to restore a fairly famous 19th century painting of Jesus.

We've all seen those before and after photos used to sell this product or that. In 99% of the cases, the photo taken afterward is supposed to look better. Not in this case. Jesus went from looking like the "Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world" to a homeless woman bemoaning the loss of her shopping cart.

This was restoration gone horribly wrong. It was now up to the experts to see if they could somehow reverse the damage.

People love to restore things – old houses, old cars, old furniture – old church steeples. You name it, and I bet you can find someone who's trying to restore it. Why? I suspect for many reasons.

One is that there is a sentimental attachment to the object being restored. Restored items from yesteryear conjure up in peoples' minds happy memories of days gone by. There are also the aspects of pride of ownership and the satisfaction of accomplishing a task that required costly amounts of time, energy, and resources.

Have you ever gone to an antique car parade and observed the owners of the cars? Are they sad and depressed? Hardly! Their buttons are busting as they slowly cruise down the middle of the street, revving up their engines. Why?

They pride themselves in displaying the final outcome of all their hard work.

Perhaps more importantly, restoration carries with it the promise that we still have a connection or link to the past. This is especially important in our age when things seem to change so dramatically and so quickly.

Having something to hold onto from the past can help us navigate what sometimes seems like an uncertain future.

I guess in the end, we could say that the desire to restore things – to bring things back to their original condition - is an innate human desire placed in us by God who himself is in the business of restoration – in fact ...

God has promised to go beyond restoration and make all things new – better than the original! All we have to do is read Isaiah 65:17 to be cognizant of this fact: *“Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth ...be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create, for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy.”*

Think about this for a minute:

God is creating us to be a people of joy. Do you think of yourself this way? A joy to others, and a joy to God? I confess I don't think this way as I often as I should. If I did, maybe the world be a better place or at least my home would be.

Why do I speak about restoration today?

For at least a couple reasons: One, it's God's business to restore, and so by necessity it becomes God's peoples' business as well.

Need I remind us of Paul's teaching in 2 Corinthians chapter 5 that calls Christ followers to be ambassadors for him because he has reconciled us to the Father through his blood and has given us the message of reconciliation?

A message, by virtue of its definition, is something to be shared.

Two, as if my first point isn't enough, I speak of restoration because it serves as a critical clue and goal to any so-called movement of God. We read about the restoration process God has in mind for this world in Galatians 1: 9 when Paul writes:

“He [speaking of God the Father] made know to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment – to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.”

In other words, when God purposes to do something, he will do it and he will do it in his own time and he will do it through his Son Jesus Christ and through his church, and whatever he does, it will progress toward the ultimate goal of making all things right under the righteous Lordship of his Son, Jesus Christ.

So, here’s my point in all this:

I want to ask a very serious question about the status of this church as a whole and that is, is God doing this at First Congregational Church?

Is God moving in us and among us and through us his perfect will to perform?

Is there a sense of expectation that God is doing something wonderful among us even when we’re not exactly sure what that may be?

Is there a sense among the faithful here at FCC that we are in partnership with God’s Son in the high and holy task of bringing glory to His Name by restoring all things to the rightful place? Or ...

Are we just going through the motions, spinning our wheels, and hitting our heads against the wall?

Are we just playing church when all the while the souls of our neighbors are potentially destined for hell?

I know this sort of question can make us feel a bit uneasy as it should. It certainly does me, because if the answer is no, as pastor of the church, I’m the first one to blame.

But we must not fear asking the question, nor answering truthfully, for the answer could very well likely determine the future of this church.

Need I remind us of the resurrected Christ's words of warning to the Ephesian Church in Revelation chapter 2? Christ said, *"I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance... you have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary. Yet I hold this against you: you have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place."*

Did you catch that little phrase that can be so easily overlooked? *"Do the things you did at first."* What are those things? I'm not exactly sure, but I bet it has something to do with the activities the church was described as doing right after its formation at Pentecost: Luke writes in Acts 2:42, *"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer."*

The image of one's lampstand being removed and effectively snuffed out is a ghastly picture of God's immediate and righteous judgment on his church, the worst possible thing that could ever happen to a church because it would render the church useless in carrying out its mission as being God's light to a dark and lost world.

But on the flipside, it might be the best possible thing for those outside the church who would get a front row seat witnessing the fact that God is serious about drawing all men unto himself - restoring mankind's relationship with the Maker of Heaven and Earth.

And if it means taking out churches, removing churches so that they are no longer obstacles preventing his will to be done, then so be it. Remember the account of Ananias and Sapphira in the book of Acts? Luke writes that *"great fear seized the church and all who heard about these events."*

This leads me to the text of Ezra chapter 1.

We see restoration happening in Ezra chapter 1:

Worshippers are being repatriated.

The Temple is going to be rebuilt.

Sacred temple artifacts are being brought out of the dusty storage rooms to once again see the light of day!

What a glorious and awe-inspiring day that must have been for the Israelite exiles when the temple articles gilded with gold found their way into the broad daylight to be counted, polished and more importantly to shine hope upon the exiles who were witnessing, after nearly 70 years of displacement and captivity, the fulfillment of God's promise that they could finally go home.

Isaiah 45:13 recounts this promise from God: *"I will raise up Cyrus in my righteousness: I will make all his ways straight. He will rebuild my city and set my exiles free."*

Now if this isn't the beginning of restoration, I don't know what is. And As I tried to clarify earlier, the activity of restoration is one of the key signs that God is moving among us, and I'm not necessarily referring to building maintenance and remodeling projects though these projects have their place too.

What I'm talking about is ...

restoring hope in the soul

restoring broken relationships - horizontal and vertical ones

restoring a sense of purpose and unity by serving one another and reminding each other of the high and holy calling we have to make God's name famous among the nations and believe it or not, the nations begin with our neighbors.

But restoration, as important as it is, is only one clue that God is moving among us. Here are some others:

When the goal or objective of the movement aligns itself with scripture

When the ultimate purpose is to bring glory to God's name.

When the people of God are exhorted to and willingly invest in the cause.

When there is a sense of unity and hope among the people.

And we clearly see all these things taking place in Ezra chapter 1.

For example, we see how the Israelites' return to Jerusalem is in accordance with God's Word: This return migration was prophesied by Jeremiah. In Jeremiah 29:10 we read, *"This is what the Lord says, "When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to this place."*

So, it's not surprising that the book of Ezra opens with a reference to the prophet Jeremiah. Ezra wants his readers to know that what is occurring is not a coincidence or pure happenstance.

It's happening because God declared it would happen. And when God says something is going to happen, you can bet all your marbles that it will. The Lord once asked Moses, *"Is the Lord's arm too short?"* And then He answered his own question: *"You will now see whether or not what I say will come true for you."*

God then caused the wind to stir up to bring quail from the sea so the Israelites could have their fill.

So, we recognize a movement of God when things happen according to His word.

Second, we recognize a movement of God when the purpose and objective is to bring glory to God. The honor and glory of God's name is really the motivation behind all the activity and hustle and bustle that is now taking place in Babylon under King Cyrus.

Even King Cyrus' proclamation makes this abundantly clear: *"The Lord, the God of heaven has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah."*

How often can we say like King Cyrus, that we're putting a majority if not all our resources and time and energy behind God's mission?

Sadly, probably never. And we don't, because quite frankly, we're too committed to honoring ourselves than to honoring God. Our priorities are often turned upside down, and we're so focused on propping up our name and our circumstances that we forget God's name and his mission.

But we can see here in King Cyrus' proclamation, that his intended goal is honor the name of God. It is God's temple that he will help build and he will do so by letting the Israelites go and take with them the necessary supplies to begin the work.

What a far cry this is from the time of Pharaoh when he finally gave in and let the Hebrews go only after all the plagues had ravaged his people and his country. Hopefully, we'll be more like Cyrus than Pharaoh when it comes to honoring God.

Another clue to help us recognize a movement of God is when the people of God are exhorted to and willingly invest in the cause.

King Cyrus says to the people go and may God be with you as you return to your homeland to build God's temple. And take with you this free-will offering of gold and silver and livestock that will be needed to meet your needs and the needs of the restoration project.

Finally, another clue that helps us recognize a movement of God is the hope and unity that the people of God and the surrounding community experience.

In Ezra chapter one we see how the heads of families, priests and Levites and even the neighbors worked together, and pitched in to gather what was needed not only for the journey, but for the many articles needed to supply the temple. Ezra says that in all, 5,400 articles of gold and silver were collected.

Was all that necessary? Who knows? But it was a good start, and it surely confirmed in their hearts and minds that what they were experiencing was something much greater than themselves. This experience of unity and cooperation undoubtedly brought hope to many.

Would it mean that there would be no difficult times ahead? Hardly!

All we have to do is read further into Ezra to learn about the opposition they would face – and some of those hardships took them to the brink of giving up. But they didn't, because they recognized what they were engaged in was a movement of God that could not and would not be derailed or denied.

I'm reminded of what Jesus said to Peter after he acknowledged Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the Living God: *"I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not overcome it."*