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FCC's Vision: Re-Claim and Re-Commit I. Can You Go Home Again?

(Nehemiah 1:1-3 NRSV) The words of Nehemiah son of Hacaliah. In the month of Chisleu, in the twentieth year, while I was in Susa the capital, 2 one of my brothers, Hanani, came with certain men from Judah; and I asked them about the Jews that survived, those who had escaped the captivity, and about Jerusalem. 3 They replied, "The survivors there in the province who escaped captivity are in great trouble and shame; the wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been destroyed by fire."

(Ezra 1:1-5 NRSV) In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, in order that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, the LORD stirred up the spirit of King Cyrus of Persia so that he sent a herald throughout all his kingdom, and also in a written edict declared: 2 "Thus says King Cyrus of Persia: The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem in Judah. 3 Any of those among you who are of his people--may their God be with them!--are now permitted to go up to Jerusalem in Judah, and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel--he is the God who is in Jerusalem; 4 and let all survivors, in whatever place they reside, be assisted by the people of their place with silver and gold, with goods and with animals, besides freewill offerings for the house of God in Jerusalem." 5 The heads of the families of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levites – everyone whose spirit God had stirred – got ready to go up and rebuild the house of the LORD in Jerusalem."

As many of you know, I spent Friday a week ago in Ft. Worth, Texas, visiting my father. Whenever I go back to Ft. Worth, where I spent the first 22 years of my life but where I have not lived since, I find myself **startled**. I am startled even though I know I shouldn't be. I picked up the rental car at the airport and drove to my father's apartment, mentally thinking that this will be a really long drive and am startled when I am there in 25 minutes. After all, when I was a child, to drive from my parents' neighborhood – in which my dad still lives – to the airport seemed like a long slog. But

it's not, really. And then I drove past all those subdivisions that were built after our house was built, remembering them as new and shiny, the smell of wet concrete and sheetrock in the air, and they are definitely not new anymore but some of them are even rundown and shabby. I drove past the house where I spent almost all of my childhood, the one with that "huge" backyard where we played endless hours of kickball and where we built our clubhouse waaaaay off in the northeast corner of the back yard – and, my oh my, that house and that yard now seem so small. How about you? When I visited with Ken Howard not long ago he told me how when he was young the eastern edge of the Springs was Union Avenue, and that Academy was a one lane dirt-road and what we now know as the jam-packed Powers corridor was the home of cows and prairie grasses way, way, way out there. **Can** you go home again? Well, yes and no.

The Hebrew people, you may recall, spent 70 long years in exile in Babylon, modern-day Iraq. And finally there came a day when King Cyrus decided that they could go home. The prophet Isaiah, or the one who wrote the middle part of the book that now bears that name, described what that homecoming would be like in this way: *"...you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands."* There weren't too many left of those exiles who could remember back to their days in Jerusalem, but there were some. And they – no doubt through the rose colored lenses of longing – thought Isaiah would be proven right: it all would be sheer joy and wonder and beauty to return to that long-ago homeland, to return with excitement and song and applause marking their progress back home to a land that had shimmered so

beautifully, so *unchangingly* in their memories.

But the reality turned out to be very different. Without going into the thousands of scholarly details, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah were written after the exiles returned to Israel, to Jerusalem, and they portray a **very** different picture. There's the chilling line we heard Diane read from Nehemiah: Those who returned from "*captivity are in great trouble and shame; the wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been destroyed by fire.*" No singing, no clapping, no joy, no peace – not at all like Isaiah said it would be – just the hard realities of a place that had changed completely in those 70 years. For just like my memories of my hometown tend to be frozen from thirty-five years ago, so too did those exiles keep a mental picture in their minds of what home was like. And while those images, so lovingly cherished and guarded in memory, helped get them through those three generations of exile, they would prove to be just that – memories, rather than reality. And so, it is safe to say, those returning exiles also found themselves **startled** – even if we know that they should have known that in a semi-desert climate it wasn't going to take long for their houses and towns, their vineyards and pastures, to quickly revert to nature if they weren't tended. Moreover, those houses and towns didn't just sit there, lonely and unoccupied waiting for their return; no, they were taken over by others who had now been there so long that these new tenants thought of those homes as theirs. The proud walls of the city of Jerusalem didn't just silently stand awaiting the exiles' return, but were pulled down so that others could build houses and walls and barns with the stones.

Can you go home again? Well, yes and no. Those Hebrew people could go

back to that holy place, that place where resided a thousand memories, that place where the Temple had stood as the sign and symbol of their relationship with God – but when they went back, they also found that everything had changed. There were new people in the old places, the scenery had changed, and instead of simply walking back in and taking up where they left off they had much, much work ahead of them – first, to simply **understand** how things had indeed changed, to avoid the temptation of simply lamenting or complaining about how things had changed, and then to figure out how to re-establish themselves, re-establish their witness to God in a homeland that had indeed changed so much in their absence. They had some choices to make, but crucial to understanding what those choices were was to first understand – and accept! – ***how things had indeed changed so very, very much.***

My friends, that is our job too. To understand how things have changed. Not just because that is of intellectual curiosity, but because if we don't truly understand our situation and how it has changed, we will find ourselves frustrated and our efforts to serve God will be increasingly less effective. For you see, we too are ones who have been in exile. Not a physical exile like those ancient Hebrews, not a heart-rending and evil-induced exile like so many of the world's refugees, but an exile nonetheless. Numerous scholars, writers, and preachers have put it this way: America in the last two or three generations has been exiled from what was once what has been called "Christendom" – where the whole society was at least culturally Christian and where the mainline churches had the largest say over what happened in the culture. But that has

changed. And we need to understand some of those changes. For we have indeed been exiled from what used to be and will never be that way again. In 1960, the population of Colorado Springs was 39,000. It's 360,000 today. In 1967, Dr. Hile reported worship attendance for a September Sunday at 657 with 330 in Sunday School. Through the 1960s and even into the 1970s, the Springs was a very culturally homogenous place, where most folks counted themselves as Christian, and where there was very little ethnic and racial diversity. That has changed. Under the lead of the military, the most successful institution in our country at seeking to eradicate the evils of racism, the Springs is now well over a quarter non-white. And, in a fact that may shock you, given the Springs reputation for religiosity and its locus for so many of the more conservative para-church groups, almost 60% of the population claims no formal religious affiliation even though, like the rest of the United States, 85% of the population counts themselves as "religious." But that very fact itself betrays just how much the culture has changed, just how little Christendom is still alive – for up until 10 years ago, 95% of the American population consistently claimed to be religious; in ten short years the number of folks who have counted themselves out of claiming any faith has tripled.

Or let's come at these changes, this exile from what used to be, from another direction. Even as late in 1970 in the Springs, there simply wasn't much on a Sunday you could do other than go to church! What were called "blue laws" – the classic sign of how the culture and the mainline church were wedded – made it illegal for even grocery stores to be open on Sundays. There were no malls to go to. There were 13 channels, at most, to watch on tv. No internet, no Facebook connecting, no text

messaging. And if a coach or superintendent had suggested Sunday soccer leagues he or she would have been run out of town. Because nothing was open on Sunday, bosses couldn't make their employees work on Sundays either. It was pretty much only the church that was open for business on Sundays and therefore that cultural support of Christianity meant that the church would default, if nothing else, to being THE locus and focus for social life for so many.

The "Ministry and Vision Statement" of First Christian Church, a statement that you excitedly adopted two years ago and which guided your search for a senior pastor, says this:

"We seek to be a congregation where spiritual growth is the norm, where growing in faith is expected, and that expects and respects a diversity of opinion. We will be a community of faith, radical in hospitality, outrageous in generosity and joyful in service to God and neighbor."

During this month, after discussions with the Elders and the Board and many members of the Vision Team and with many of you, I am going to be focusing on the topic of how we can indeed re-claim and re-commit to this wonderful vision and ministry statement. Using the Hebrew peoples' experiences upon their return from exile both as a guide and a mirror – and sometimes a caution! – we will look at the choices before us and the changes we will need to embrace, not just tolerate but embrace, if we are to re-build, as it were, our own Temple. Some of the questions we will look at will include: what habits of mind and action will we need if we are to truly welcome new people in such a changed context from what used to be? Are there habits we have now that hurt that

effort? What will be the gains and the losses for us as we succeed in growing our church back to 300, 350, even 400 in worship attendance? What are the pitfalls we can expect and how can we not trip and fall into those pits?

For you see, I need to let you in on a secret. Change is coming to First Christian Church whether we like it or not. The question is whether we will cynically and sadly say with American writer Washington Irving "I have found traveling in a stage coach, that it is often a comfort to shift one's position and be bruised in a new place," or whether we will see the changes that have happened around us and will continue to happen as new signs of what God would have us joyfully and expectantly do? Will we let events carry us along, bruising us here and there, as we shrink in numbers and in spirit? Or will we say, with the hymn writer, "new occasions teach new duties" and seek to be in front of the change, seeing it as opportunity. As I re-learned in the continuing education event that I went to earlier this year on the challenges of growing a church to 300+ in worship attendance, there are enormous pressures on congregations that are exactly our size to **not** grow in either numbers or in spiritual depth, but instead to shrink to the number that is "comfortable," to come to see the church not as a mission station where we are equipped to lead people to God but as a retreat from the world where the most important tacit value is enjoying fellowship with one another. Now, here is the good news for us: this idea of 300-plus in worship, the idea of a congregation that has so many missions and activities going on that no one person can ever keep up with them all, the idea of a congregation where there are dozens of small groups where folks find through those relationships a closeness to God – these things are not new territory for us. We've been here before. In the memory of many folks in this room are the

living memories of days when we were indeed larger, more able to therefore do more for God's mission. That's good news, because unlike congregations for whom this is uncharted territory, **we've been here before** and the choice before us in a time of such change is to say: **we WILL be there again**. The forms will be different. Things will not look the same as they did in 1967. But our earlier forays into this territory can function as inspiration to us, never as straightjacket.

A few weeks ago I preached a sermon in which I talked about the phenomenon of anoneiria, a syndrome that is caused by a brain injury whose chief symptom is the inability to dream. Now, if you know anything about the physiology of sleep, you know that dreaming is essential to healthy life. If you can't dream, you become exhausted and your days become rote and simply a slog. And, what's more, the other affect of anoneiria is that one suffering from it loses the ability to have any internal motivation to do anything at all, to envision changing anything at all. He or she simply becomes the passive victim of the changes around them instead of being able to influence and truly respond to those changes. I think that's instructive to us in many ways, not just in the realm of brain pathology but in life itself. For think about it: it does seem oh-so-true that those who cannot dream also lack the motivation to do much of anything. Our ability to dream of what might be is essential. Our ability to believe that we can affect the world around us and not just be battered by it is essential. **Only if we dream can we do.** Martin Luther King did not just dream of a day when a somewhat greater number would be somewhat more free. John Kennedy did not just dream of a day when we could gaze even more admiringly on the moon. Ronald Reagan did not just dream of a day

when folks might be able to see more clearly over the Berlin Wall. Jonas Salk didn't just dream of a day when people might have milder forms of polio. Harriet Beecher Stowe didn't just dream of a day when slaves might be a little less oppressed. And the prophet Isaiah did not just dream that the returning exiles would sit huddled up comfortably in the ruins of Jerusalem lamenting what had become and longing for what had been. No, he dreamed that the mountains themselves would clap their hands at how those now-returned exiles could do, would do whatever was necessary to once again show the world the good news of a God of unconditional love for all folks – news that is just as desperately needed now in Colorado Springs as it was in ancient Judea. Can you dream it with me? I believe that you can. And I believe that if we listen oh-so-closely, we will hear the mountains around us clapping and shouting for joy at what First Christian Church can do, will do for God in the coming years.