**Sermon: Second Guessing**

**Scriptures: Ezra 5:7-17; 6:1-12**

**Preached: February 19, 2017 at Grove Presbyterian Church by Rev. Merritt N. Schatz**

Don’t you hate it when a plan backfires? This is especially true when you are dead certain you are in the right. Tattenai must have been shaking his head when he received King Darius’ reply.

Tattenai, governor of the Persian province called Land Beyond the River, had all the evidence he needed. Or so he thought. Not too many years previously – when the Israelites had begun rebuilding the temple, the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin sent a similar letter to the then King Artaxerxes. In that letter the opponents told the king that Jerusalem was a rebellious city. They advised him to check the history books and see if this were not so. The king did, and found what they had told him he would find. He stopped the rebuilding. Discouraged, the Israelites quit building even though King Cyrus had given them permission some years before Artaxerxes. They did not pursue their rights. They decided that maybe they had misunderstood God’s message. They second guessed their mission. They gave up for over a decade.

The prophets Haggai and Zechariah then revealed God’s displeasure. The people had not just built nice houses for themselves, but ornate, paneled houses. They had become quite comfortable. They were neglecting God…again. Time to get to work on the temple!

Soon as the work began however, the neighbors were again curious, and disturbed. The governor of the region appeared and asked questions. ‘Who gave you the authority to do this? By the way, what are your names? Write these names down, scribe!’

Can you imagine the fear this visit instilled in the workers? ‘Will I lose my job? Will I lose my house? Will I be placed in exile *again*?’

Someone told the governor about the decree of King Cyrus. The governor had his doubts. He wrote to the current king, Darius. Perhaps he was just doing due diligence. He probably knew where the blame would fall if there was a rebellion within his territory, or if the king learned that a temple was being built without permission. Tattenai carefully reported what the workers had told him, and encourages the king to search the history books (sound familiar?) and see if this is true. Darius did search the books. In fact, his people had to search hard, for the answer was found in an outlying storehouse, not in the capital city. However, find it they did. So King Darius wrote back.

It appears you often find what you look for. The earlier letter had advised Artaxerxes to look for reports of rebellion. He had found this. Tattenai’s letter advised Darius to look for a decree from Cyrus with permission. He found that.

Tattenai got more than he expected. Not only did Darius command him to allow the work to continue, Tattenai was now to finance the whole program! If he had just kept his mouth shut – or rather his writing instrument down – the Israelites would have paid for this project themselves! You have to believe that there was a lot of second guessing in the palace of Tattenai!

There is a lot of second guessing going on now. We second guess ourselves. We do so especially when times are difficult. Are we hearing God’s call correctly? Are the difficulties a sign from God that we are not going in the right direction? Maybe we need to sit back and think about things for a bit. Maybe we need to focus on something else, do something that isn’t quite so hard?

Haggai and Zechariah speak to us as well as they spoke to the people rebuilding the temple. They admonish *us* to keep our focus on God. They remind us that we have been charged with building the kingdom of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. We have a sacred charge to live in ways that give glory to God. We have a sacred charge to care for others in ways that reveal God’s mercy and love. We have a sacred charge to trust that *God* is the true authority of the world. Whether it is our own behavior that causes us to second guess, or the behavior of others that discourages us, we are to find our hope and direction in God.

We also second guess one another – especially those with whom we disagree. Like Tattenai we can be so sure of ourselves, only to find out that we might be mistaken on some of our assumptions. We can assume that giving rights to others, or allowing others to gain in power must result in a loss to ourselves. We seek to slow progress toward justice, rationalizing that we are only being cautious. We may allow fear to override hope.

In response God calls us to follow God’s example of generosity and mercy. God fills us with vision which sees beyond the immediate to a future in which all benefit. God calls us to share in building up rather than in tearing down.

As in the exciting yet turbulent time in the history of Israel, the time of the return from exile, *we* are called to consider what we are looking for – for what we look for is most likely what we will find. The earlier adversaries told the king to look for rebellion, and that is what he found. Tattenai told the king to look for a decree from Cyrus – and that it what Darius found, even though it was not in the expected place. If we look only for evidence that bolsters what we already believe, that is what we will find. If we look for truth wherever it comes from, *that* is what we will find.

In her program, On Being, Krista Tippett was interviewing a physicist, Margaret Wertheim. Dr. Wertheim has an interesting project called the Crochet Coral Reef. Crochet, it seems, is the closest representation of the physics of natural coral building. Dr. Wertheim made the connection between coral building and our life together as humans. Each individual coral creature is small. Alone it can do little. But working together, they recreate the magnificent Great Barrier Reef.

Humans have both an advantage and disadvantage to coral. We can either work together, or we can pull apart, damage one another. Because we are bound together, interdependent, we *will* do one or the other. We can choose which way to go. Each little interaction we have with one another can help build God’s kingdom. A word of praise to a child – or to a child’s teacher, an expression of encouragement to a colleague, or someone assisting you in a store, noticing the efforts of law enforcement or social workers or anyone else, each little thing can build up.

Whatever we are doing, we are called to look to God in Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit lifts us up to look in usual and unusual places to find the will of God. There are lots of voices happy to tell us of rebellion, of deception, of brokenness. We are not supposed to ignore these as if the world were all songs and roses. Evil and sin are real parts of the world. Yet, if we look, we will also find signs of God at work, evidence of hope and truth, bits and pieces of the kingdom being built. Above all, we will find the encouraging words of Almighty God to move beyond sin and evil.

God has laid the foundation stone of Jesus Christ; In that foundation, is the forgiveness we receive from God through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Forgiveness can only be received with humility. We must acknowledge our sins, and rest in God’s undeserved mercy. We are then strengthened to pick up the building blocks, the coral cells, of ministry which God gives us to build the kingdom. Let us now pick up the cells of truth, justice, generosity, hope. Working together, following God’s design, we lay these cells together – not, this time, to build temples or walls, but to build reef bridges of hope and righteousness, evidence of the kingdom of God. As we build, we trust in God’s promise to provide the cornerstone of this reef in Jesus Christ. We are not responsible for the completion – that is God’s work. We *are* responsible for doing our part. We are enabled to do our part by the Holy Spirit of God. No second-guessing of God. Just hope and trust.

What we look for, we will find. This God has promised. Let us look for God and God’s way forward. Let us build God’s kingdom!