A Job Well Done
Sermon text: Ezra 6:13-18
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I. It's important to appreciate

Last week John Ferreira asked me who I use at home as a lawn service to keep the grass mowed, the edging taken care of, and the trimming done. I told him that I use "B and H Lawn Service," as in "B" for Bruce and "H" for Hedgepeth. I like to do my own yard work because I'm kind of particular about how I want it to look. Now, that may seem surprising since I'm such a loosey-goosey, devil-may-care kind of guy…

Actually that loosey-goosey, devil-may-care thing is probably not a good description for me – especially when it comes to the lawn. What I've observed with many lawn service companies is that they come in with their big, heavy mowers and ride around the yard in the same pattern every week. And do you know what happens when you ride around the yard in the same pattern week after week and month after month in a big mower? That's right – you get ruts in your lawn. You can see the dents from the big tires going over the same spots time after time.

But I don't have ruts in my yard. Do you know why? It's my own lawn care secret, but I'm willing to share it with you: I switch up the direction I cut from one week to the next. For example, last Sunday afternoon I cut the yard starting at the street and going up to the house, and then back down again. So last week was an "up and down" cut week. This week when I cut the grass, I'll go from the driveway to the other side of the yard. It's a side-to-side cut week. Can you picture how that works? I don't get those unsightly ruts because I change directions from one week to the next. It's a beautiful thing.

And that's not all. I love this yard because the previous owners put in these attractive cement dividers to clearly mark the end of the flower beds and the beginning of the lawn. I can run my edger right along the cement divider and get a clean line between the two – just like the line I get when I edge down the driveway and along the curb. After I've cut the grass, and done the edging, then I complete the job by getting out the weed-eater and doing the trimming.

It does my heart good in the mornings when I'm out for a run on the other side of the lake and I look back at our yard. I can see the lawn manicured with cutting lines but no ruts, the edge between the beds and the grass looking nice and neat, and the trimming all done so there aren't stray pieces of grass sticking up here and there. I look at that sight and think to myself: "A job well done, Bruce – a job well done!" It's a great way to start the day.

Today, as we turn our attention to the sixth chapter of Ezra, we come to the point in the narrative where the returned Jewish exiles finally complete the job of rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem. If you've been here in recent weeks, then you already know that it's been a long road, both literally and figuratively, from leaving exile in Babylon in 538 B.C. after the edict of King Cyrus of Persia allowed the Jews to return to Judah, through the difficult journey back to Jerusalem, through the opposition to the temple project of other peoples who lived in the area and the discouragement among the Jews that followed, to this important milestone in 515 B.C. when the rebuilt temple was completed in the sixth year of the reign of King Darius of Persia.

Here's my hope for today: I hope we appreciate the significance of what is happening at this point in the book of Ezra. I hope we realize what a big deal it was when the temple in Jerusalem was rededicated. I hope we don't just skip over the celebration that is recorded in this

sixth chapter, because I believe that it may have something very important to teach us. I know it's a great reminder for me, personally, of the importance of recognizing and appreciating what God has done and is doing in our midst.

II. It's more than a job

From our study of Ezra this summer, you may remember that what was going on with the Jews return from exile and the initiation of the project to rebuild the temple was much more than just a job to be done. It was nothing less than God's call for his people to accomplish this important work. We have learned that it was the Lord who stirred the spirit of King Cyrus to allow the Jews to return to Judah. God prompted Cyrus to make the royal pronouncement that they should rebuild the temple in Jerusalem.

The Lord's call did not go away, even when the people lost heart for the work after they dug the foundations for the temple and became discouraged by the opposition of the peoples who lived nearby. And last week, we learned how God rekindled the spirits of the Jewish leaders Zerubbabel, the governor, and Jeshua, the high priest, through the encouraging words of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah. They remembered the Lord's call on them and led the people to restart the work on the temple early in the reign of King Darius.

What we didn't talk about last week was the inquiry made by the Persian overseers of Judah: Tattenai and Shethar-bozenai. When they visited Jerusalem and saw the construction on the temple in progress, they wanted to know who gave the authorization for the project. They wanted to know who was responsible for the work. They wanted names of the leaders who would be held accountable.

It's not hard to imagine that those inquiries could have had an intimidating effect on the Jews, who had already been discouraged into inactivity on the project once. Think about how you feel when the police pull you over. Even if you haven't done anything wrong, it's an intimidating experience. But it wasn't this time for the Jews – Ezra 5:5 tells us clearly: "But the eye of their God was upon the elders of the Jews, and they did not stop until a report reached Darius and then answer was returned by letter in reply to it."

So the later verses of Ezra 5 provide details about the letter that Tattenai and Shethar-bozenai sent to King Darius to question whether or not the rebuilding work on the temple was authorized. The first twelve verses of Ezra 6 tell us about the search of the Persian archives to determine whether or not the project had been approved by King Cyrus, and the discovery of the king's letter authorizing the work. Those verses also contain King Darius' response to Tattenai and Shethar-bozenai, informing them that the project had the royal seal of approval and should be supported with taxes gathered in that part of the empire.

That's why this morning's passage begins with these words: "Then, according to the word sent by King Darius, Tattenai, the governor of the province Beyond the River, Shethar-bozenai, and their associates did with all diligence what King Darius had ordered." That's also why our text makes it clear that the returned exiles carried out their work with such enthusiasm. God had called them to rebuild the temple. The Lord worked through two Persian kings, both Cyrus and Darius, to support the project. The prophets Haggai and Zechariah continued in their ministry of encouragement and sharing in the labor. And Jewish leaders like Zerubbabel, the governor, and Jeshua, the high priest, did their part to give the people direction. It must have been an amazing experience to be a part of what God was doing.

That's why, when the temple was completed, it was such a big deal. That's why it was a cause for celebration. What they accomplished was more than just a job. What they did was so much greater than just build a building. They played a role in the Lord's activity in their midst. They witnessed what God can accomplish when his people are obedient to live out their call. So they celebrated with gratitude. Ezra 6:16 says: "The people of Israel, the priests and the Levites, and the rest of the returned exiles, celebrated the dedication of this house of God with joy."

III. It's a cause for celebration

So, here's where I know the learning is for me, and where I suspect the learning may be for many of us: I often get really focused on a particular challenge or transition that crops up at home or at church. I think about it and pray about it and talk with Cindy about it. I try to look for Lord's leading toward an answer. I put a significant amount of time and attention into getting that challenge overcome or that transition completed.

But when the challenge is met or the transition is over, what do you think I tend to do? My tendency is not to celebrate. My impulse is not necessarily to give thanks to God for his guidance and provision. My natural reaction is to check that issue off the list and move on to the next one. I tend to take answers to prayer for granted. And I suspect that there are many others who are like me that way. You may be one of them.

Often times, events and situations come at us so quickly that it is the path of least resistance to blow by God's blessing and move on to the next challenge that pops up on the radar screen of life. For example, if you roll the clock back a few years, Cindy and I began to have a sense that the Lord was leading us into a time of transition in life and ministry. We had been in Central Florida for a decade and it felt like a change was coming. We talked about it and prayed about it. I checked out a number of ministry opportunities.

Eventually I was contacted by the search team here, looking for an Executive Pastor. I spoke with group several times. We came to Sarasota for interviews and a tour of neighborhoods in the area. For months we talked about, thought about, and prayed about the possibility of being called to serve this congregation. Then the day finally came at the end of June, 2010, when you voted to call me to join the pastoral staff here at Church of the Palms. We were so excited to be coming. We were so happy that God led us here.

So what do you think I did mentally? I started thinking about selling one house and buying another house. I focused on arranging for movers and looking at schools for Kate. There was a whole checklist of new issues in my mind that consumed my attention. My point is that I didn't take much time to celebrate, to thank the Lord for his goodness and provision in leading us here. It's an example that my tendency, perhaps our tendency, is to gloss over the good news of God's blessing and move on to the next issue.

Like I said, I suspect that I'm not the only one who tends to overlook opportunities to celebrate the Lord's goodness. How about you? Where have you seen God's answer to prayer in your life? In what way has the Lord provided for your needs? With this passage from Ezra as a reminder, let us give thanks and celebrate what God has done and is doing in our lives personally and among us as a church family. We have much to celebrate – don't you think?