



Walking in the *Foot Prints* of Jesus A Discipleship Journey

The OLD TESTAMENT- Their Story is Our Story

The Return

After 70 years in exile, a remnant of the nation of Israel returned to Jerusalem. According to the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, the people returned in three waves over approximately one hundred years. In addition to all their reflections throughout the journey (see last week's reflection), new questions arose: who were the true descendants of the Israelites? Who should run the nation? How can the old traditions be honored and God's wrath avoided?

When the exiles returned, the land was far from uninhabited. Left behind had been the poor, the weak and the widows, groups who settled and multiplied in the area of Samaria who came to be known as the people of the land. Soon a struggle ensued over who would be the leaders of a restored Judah: would it be the returning exiles or the people of the land? Understandably, each side saw the other as unworthy: the people of the land were undeserving because they had married outside the kinship lines of ancient Israel and the exiles were unworthy because their ancestors' sins led to the country's downfall in the first place! Quite the dilemma.

Upon their return, the Israelites immediately set out to restore the altar for sacrifices to the Lord and rebuild the Temple. The question of who could rebuild the Temple only fueled the smoldering conflict. When the people of Samaria heard the Temple was being rebuilt, they naturally offered to help.

When [the people of Samaria] heard that the exiles were building a temple for the Lord, the God of Israel, they approached [the leader of the Israelites]...and said to them, "Let us build with you, for we seek your God just as you do, and we have sacrificed to him since the [time of the conquest of the land]."
Ezra 4:1 - 2

Sadly, the exiles refused their help; the exiles viewed them as outsiders and not qualified to participate in this religious activity because they were considered impure, unclean, and, hence, suspicious because they had married outside the kinship lines of ancient Israel. As a result, the two groups became arch-enemies, right up to the time of Jesus. Once united as the Chosen Ones of God, the people divided into two distinct groups: the returning exiles became the people of Judah and the people of the land returned to Samaria and became known as the Samaritans.

Reflection:

Read the piece again slowly. Notice any questions that arise, any insights that come forward, and/or any feelings or reactions you have to the story. Share these with God.

Who are the Samaritans in our community? How might we begin to mend the rift between us?