



Today we are continuing our journey in The Story, which is a chronological walk through the Bible, focusing on the big picture narrative of God's creative and redemptive work. We've seen God create everything out of nothing, create the nation of Israel out of a ragtag nomadic people, he's covenanted with them to never forsake them...though that doesn't mean things are always easy for them. And then they end up in exile – first the northern Kingdom, and then the southern Kingdom, as they are conquered by Assyria and Babylon.

While that exile came about because of their turning away from God and toward false gods and abandoning themselves to all kinds of ungodly stuff, they began to come back to the Lord in the midst of the exile. The words of the prophets slowly began draw people back. And as they did that, there began to be some signs of hope, and words of encouragement that the exile would not last forever.

One of those prophets was the prophet Jeremiah. The book in the Bible that bears his name is pretty large and covers a lot, but there are a couple of things he said in particular that point to today's passage. He lived from about 650 to 570 B.C. So he was in the midst of calling people back to the Lord before Judah was conquered in the 590's B.C., and then he was also with them in the first 30 years or so of the exile. **[The Lord declares,] “This whole country will become a desolate wasteland, and these nations will serve the king of Babylon seventy years” (Jeremiah 25:11).**

**This is what the Lord says: “When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you,” declares the Lord, “and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and**

**places where I have banished you,” declares the Lord, “and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile” (Jeremiah 29:10-14).**

So twice, Jeremiah gets this word from the Lord that the exile will be 70 years, and then things are going to take a turn for the better and they will be brought out of exile. And that begins to come to fruition here in Ezra.

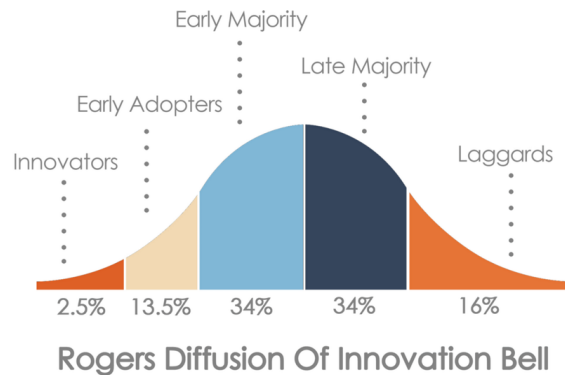
Now, last week we looked at the life of Daniel, who served in the court of the King of Babylon; in fact he served under three of them. There was a fourth, as I mentioned last week: King Cyrus. But he was actually the king of Persia, because Persia conquered Babylon in 539 B.C.

And so Cyrus, the king of Persia, grants the Israelites permission to return to Jerusalem in order to rebuild the temple. Undoubtedly there would be a rebuilding of the infrastructure of Jerusalem and surrounding villages as well. In a couple weeks we will see more of the rebuilding efforts about the city itself, particularly the wall around the city of Jerusalem. But with King Cyrus’ decree: **The prophetic word from Jeremiah finally comes true.**

And so they head back to rebuild the temple. This is the *beginning* of their return from the exile. The return of the Israelites to their home country is not something that happened over night. Some people went back as soon as it became a possibility here with King Cyrus. Others waited until later. After 70 years, some of the people are quite content where they are. Most of the current generation of Israelites didn’t know anything different because they were born after the exile began. Many of those who remember what life was like in Israel before leaving are old enough that the idea of returning probably just isn’t realistic. So not everyone returned right away.

And isn’t this the way things often go? Some people are attracted to a new idea or a new way of doing things, and they jump on those new ideas right away, while others are slower to come along. The study of this sociological phenomena dates to the late 1800’s, but in 1962, Everett Rogers<sup>ii</sup>, who was then an assistant professor of rural sociology at Ohio State University published a book that became the definitive publication on the topic, called

“The Diffusion of Innovation.”  
And in one little graph, we can see what his research shows about how people respond to new ideas. **(Picture here)**



“Innovators” are the smallest percentage of the population. They help to dream up and cast the vision of whatever this new thing is. In Rogers’ research, only about 2.5% of people are innovators. Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, and Jeff Bezos are all contemporary examples of innovators – though not all innovators are billionaires. We do often know their names, because they’re the ones who get the credit for initiating the change. They are the catalysts who have an innovation or an innovative idea that impacts lives, changes culture, and leaves the world a different place. We see a fair number of innovators in Scripture: Joseph (the OT Joseph), Moses – up until they were supposed to enter the Promised Land anyway, Jesus, Peter, the prophets would be called innovators...and of course God is the first innovator...In fact, you could almost say that God is the innovator and everyone since are somewhere between early adopters and laggards. So, that’s the innovators.

“Early adopters” (13.5%) are the ones who get in on the change early on, when the vision is just being cast and the plans being formulated. They still risk a lot like the innovators, because the innovation hasn’t actually launched yet and success is far from secured. Biblically, The 12 Disciples would be early adopters; In the cities where Paul preached, the first people who responded favorably...they’re early adopters. The people who left when Cyrus first gave permission would be among the early adopters here in Ezra. Ezra 2 lists all the families who returned in that first group, and then tells us the number of them, and there were about 50,000 people who returned in that first wave of people. They were the risk-takers who initially stepped out to build the temple and the cities.

Then you’ve got the “early majority” and the “late majority.” These people comprise nearly 70% between the two groups, and these people get on board

with the change once there's some progress and the trail has mostly been blazed. These two groups are a little harder to put names to because they're the majority. There are lots of people in here, and so knowing their names is tougher – not just in Scripture, but in general. So, the crowds that follow Jesus would be in this category; the people who went back to Israel after the temple had been mostly rebuilt, or completely rebuilt, would be in this category. In fact, Ezra, the priest whose name is on the book that we're in today, he comes 7 years after the initial group who returned to Jerusalem, once the temple had been built, and he would be in this category along with the others who returned with him. We see those names listed in Ezra 8. Nehemiah, who we'll look at in two weeks, seems to have come a few years after *that* – so we might say that Ezra led the early majority, and Nehemiah led the late majority...though both them were also innovators in their own ways, too.

And then the last group is the laggards, which in the Rogers' study, comprised about 16% of people. These folks are the last to adopt the innovation, when it's clearly successful. How many of you still buy CD's or even DVD's? You're laggards in regards to how you listen to music. Or how many of you just got your first smart phone in the last two years? You're laggards in regards to that innovation. And if you still listen to your music on 8 track or cassette tape, then I'm not even sure what category you'd be in – you're off the chart; although if you still like LP records, then you're like a “retro early adopter.”

The Good News is that: *with God, it doesn't matter where you are on that bell curve*. We do need innovators and early adopters as church leaders – whether that's in identified leadership positions with titles like elder, pastor, deacon, staff...or in leadership roles that don't have titles, but have influence (lots of those in churches). We see God working through those kinds of people in Scripture and throughout history. But innovators and early adopters not the only ones God can work through.

In fact, if you tend to be in the laggard category when it comes to embracing “the new” you're in pretty good company. The Apostle Paul, for example, was a laggard when it came to following Jesus. And he wasn't a passive

laggard who let this new Christian community go their own way proclaiming Jesus as the resurrected Messiah while he just watched from a distance; rather, he was violently opposed to their resurrection message. He persecuted them, sought to have them thrown in jail for their faith, and opposed them in every way he could. And then God got a hold of him in an undeniable kind of way, and completely transformed him and he joined with this new movement that he had so vehemently opposed. And then he became the greatest evangelist and defender of the faith of the early church, and maybe ever. **Paul really went from laggard to innovator, and was a catalyst who God used to propel the church forward when the odds were stacked against it.**

So we see people all along the spectrum throughout Scripture, and God works through them all, even in the return to Jerusalem. And there are a couple things I want to highlight for us that we can take away from this passage – the first for us as a congregation, and the other on a more personal level. First, I believe that: **Right now is a time that we as a church need to let God shift us more into the innovator/early adopter/ and early majority side of that bell curve.** As I mentioned a moment ago, Ezra 2 and Ezra 8 list the family names of the people who returned to Jerusalem, and we see that the list of families in the early adopters is much, much longer than the second group that came in Ezra 8. The Rogers Bell curve did not hold true for God’s people of faith; they had a lot more early adopters than they did early or late majority. The early/late majority are more like the early and late minority.

That’s what being a people of faith is about: adopting God’s ways and following His leading before we’re pretty certain it’s the right way to go. And we’re at a place in our church (and have been for a few years...and we’ve adopted a lot of “innovations”) where I believe we need to let *that* be a model and an inspiration for us, and allow God to shift us over to the left in that bell curve and be a church that has a culture of innovation, early adoption and early majority.

There are a number of ways this is true – including in children’s and youth ministries where we need more early adopters, adult discipleship such as classes and small groups. But one very visible way, and that is a parallel to

today's passage about the rebuilding of the temple, is in regards to our facilities and our Master Plan. We need God to raise up some people to lead us in rehabilitating our facilities. There are two facets to this.

First, there's an opportunity for people to lead us in the raising of funds for that. And if you're thinking, "what does that have to do with Scripture or our faith" Well, the same thing happened here in Ezra. Near the end of chapter two after all the families who returned are listed, we read, **When they arrived at the house of the Lord in Jerusalem, some of the heads of the families gave freewill offerings [in other words, above their usual tithes/offerings] toward the rebuilding of the house of God on its site. According to their ability they gave to the treasury for this work 61,000 darics of gold, 5,000 minas of silver and 100 priestly garments (Ezra 2:68-69).** The passage doesn't say this, but some individual, or a team of individuals, had to have organized and collected the raising of those funds to rebuild the temple. They didn't just collect it at the base of the temple mount, and the resources got distributed on their own. Someone was in charge.

And 2500 years later we have the same opportunity for a few people to be used by God in the same way as we seek to work on the church facilities here. We had an example of this recently that I updated you on at last week's annual meeting, but in case you missed it I want to share again. I told you three weeks ago, and Bud VanderAa followed up two weeks ago, that the Elders anticipate up to \$50,000 in facilities maintenance and repair costs this year (not Master Plan expenses, but maintenance that has been deferred for many years) that we were not able to fund in the 2018 budget in order to have a balanced (or nearly so) budget. But these fixes still need to be funded somehow, and we thought we could do that in some other way, perhaps. And on the Sunday that Bud shared, someone was moved to write a check for \$50,000 to cover those costs. Praise God, right?

That's an unbelievable gift that ought to inspire us all in our faith, and inspire some of us to be innovators and early adopters in our capital campaign to fund our Master Plan. So if you feel God tugging on your heart to lead our capital campaign team, it shows that all you have to do is stand up here on a

couple Sundays, announce the need and the financial goal, and the congregation will respond by writing checks for large sums of money, and your job will be done in like two weeks! ☺ OK, it will probably take a little more than that...But that fundraising process is going to take a few people who are able to be innovators and early adopters to lead us in that endeavor.

The second facet of this is in regards to the actual construction process. We'll work with a General Contractor, of course...but it will take a small team of people to help oversee all the work that gets done, to work with the GC and the church and facilitate communication, etc. Maybe God has put it on your heart to be one of those people...like those who returned to Jerusalem in the first wave of innovators and early adopters...to be one of those people who help lead the building process here.

The second thing I want to highlight from this is on a more personal level: Just as the Israelites were returning home to Jerusalem after returning home to their faith in the midst of the exile: **We also have the opportunity to return home to God when we've been gone for some time.** God always welcomes us back. In fact, Jesus tells a very famous story in Luke 15 about a son who asks for his inheritance early and heads off from his father and his father's house. And then, after squandering everything he had in wild living, the son comes home, not sure what kind of welcome he's going to get because of the disgraceful way he treated his dad and how he'd been living ever since he left home.

But he's welcomed with open arms by his father, who has been keeping an eye out for his son, and who runs out to greet him when he sees his son off in the distance. And Jesus says that that is how our heavenly father treats us when return home. No matter how far you've wandered off...no matter how much your life has been hijacked and you've been in exile from God, or you haven't set foot in a church...you are welcomed home by Him. Like the Israelites...like the prodigal son...you can return home: Because God is a gracious God, a good God, who loves you, who cares about you unconditionally.

And where you've been – whether that's wandering in the desert, in exile, or

running away – that’s not what matters, and cannot separate you from the love of God in Jesus Christ. He has good plans for you, and for the Church, as that passage in Jeremiah that we started with says. They are plans filled with hope and a bright future. And whether we’re on the leading edge of the Rogers bell curve, or one of the laggards at the end: those plans are yours and mine and become our reality when we step out in faith and return home to him. Let’s pray...Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Today’s sermon correlates to Chapter 19 in “The Story.” We took orders for copies of the book, “The Story” at church, but now you can get a copy of the book on your own online through many websites (Amazon.com, cbd.com, etc.). In fact, cbd.com (Christian Book Distributors) has them for \$5, hardback. Just search for “NIV The Story Bible” at their website.

<sup>ii</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Everett\\_Rogers](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Everett_Rogers)