



**GOD FREES  
AND  
REDEEMS**

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# THE ORDER OF SERVICE

- I. Bell tap or organ voluntary as a signal for silence
- II. Singing
- III. The Apostles' Creed
- IV. Prayer, closing with the Lord's Prayer in concert
- V. Singing
- VI. Calling roll of officers and teachers
- VII. Responsive reading of the lesson text by school
- VIII. The Decalogue

## THE LESSON

- I. Organ interlude while the classes are being arranged
- II. Class study of the lesson
- III. Warning bell — 5 minutes
- IV. Closing bell — silence

## THE CLOSING

- I. Singing
- II. Review and application of the lesson
- III. Secretary's report
- IV. The Church School Creed
- V. Singing
- VI. Benediction

## EDITORIAL STAFF

**Rev. Dr. Roderick Belin**, Publisher  
**Rev. Faith M. Waters**, Lessons  
**A.L. Stanfield**, Copy Editor  
**M.E. Russell**, Layout Design

## THE APOSTLES' CREED

I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried; the third day He arose from the dead, He ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Church Universal, the communion of the saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.

## THE CHURCH SCHOOL CREED

I believe my AME Church School must grow and grow; and that I must make it a top priority to make it so. Every member a Christian, every Christian a worker, every worker trained so that a worker need not be ashamed. This we ask in Jesus' name.

*AME Discipline*



LESSON 1

MARCH 6, 2022

SAMPLE

# Babylonian Captivity Ends

Lesson Scripture: Ezra 1; 2:64-70

Focus Scripture: Ezra 1:1-8, 11; 2:64-70

**KEY VERSE:** *“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.” Ezra 1:2*

## WORDS TO KNOW

- **HERALD** – an official messenger bringing news
- **EDICT** – an official order or proclamation issued by a person in authority
- **FREEWILL OFFERINGS** – The free will (or freewill) offering was a sacrifice regulated by God’s standards in the Mosaic Law, but it was completely voluntary (Leviticus 23:38)
- **VESSELS** – utensils, dishes
- **EXILES** – the state of being barred from one’s native country, typically for political or punitive reasons
- **CYRUS** – pronounced: Sires
- **NEBUCHADNEZZAR** – pronounced: Neb(y)əkəd - ‘nezər
- **MITHREDATH** – pronounced: Mith'-re-dath
- **SHESHBAZZAR** – pronounced: Shesh-baz'-ar

**FOCUS SCRIPTURE: EZRA 1:1-8, 11; 2:64-70**

- 1** 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.
- 6** All their neighbors aided them with silver vessels, with gold, with goods, with animals, and with valuable gifts, besides all that was freely offered.
- 7** King Cyrus himself brought out the vessels of the house of the Lord that Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and placed in the house of his gods.
- 8** King Cyrus of Persia had them released into the charge of Mithredath the treasurer, who counted them out to Sheshbazzar the prince of Judah.
- 
- 11** ... the total of the gold and silver vessels was five thousand four hundred. All these Sheshbazzar brought up, when the exiles were brought up from Babylonia to Jerusalem.
- 
- 64** The whole assembly together was forty-two thousand three hundred sixty,
- 65** besides their male and female servants, of whom there were

seven thousand three hundred thirty-seven; and they had two hundred male and female singers.

- 66** They had seven hundred thirty-six horses, two hundred forty-five mules,
- 67** four hundred thirty-five camels, and six thousand seven hundred twenty donkeys.
- 68** As soon as they came to the house of the Lord in Jerusalem, some of the heads of families made freewill offerings for the house of God, to erect it on its site.
- 69** According to their resources they gave to the building fund sixty-one thousand darics of gold, five thousand minas of silver, and one hundred priestly robes.
- 70** The priests, the Levites, and some of the people lived in Jerusalem and its vicinity; and the singers, the gatekeepers, and the temple servants lived in their towns, and all Israel in their towns.

## INTRODUCTION

This quarter we will focus on the theme of liberation to examine and experience the nature of God, who acts to deliver and free people in different situations. This liberation is explored and experienced in the story of the Passover and the good news of the resurrection of Christ. Christians experience liberation in God's new covenant community. Unit One consists of four lessons that explore the memory of the liberating event of the Exodus. The memory of the Exodus, relived in the Passover liturgy, cultivated a desire for restoration and liberation for the Hebrew people, as told in the books of Ezra and Deuteronomy. Today's lesson focuses on the faithfulness of God, who provided people and provisions to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem, as told in the book of Ezra.

The book of Ezra begins in 538 B.C. and follows 2 Chronicles as a history of the Jewish people recording their return from Babylonian captivity to their homeland. Ezra and Nehemiah were one book in the Hebrew Bible. Along with the book of Esther, these three books comprise the post-captivity historical books. Ezra was a priest, a scribe among the exiles in Babylon, a teacher, and a great leader. The account of Ezra centers on God and his promise Jews would return to their homeland at the end of 70 years, as spoken by prophets such as Jeremiah (Jer. 25:11-12; 29:10).

*What demonstrates to others that you are dedicated to God and God's word?*

## BIBLE STORY

**Ezra 1:1 – 4** – According to the prophet Isaiah, God chose Cyrus to be his anointed and rebuild Jerusalem (Isa. 44:28–45:6). This occurred 100 years before Nebuchadnezzar would destroy the city. King Nebuchadnezzar was the Babylonian ruler who God permitted to destroy Jerusalem, defeat Judah, and take the Jews as captives to Babylon as punishment for their disobedience (Lev. 26:27–45; 2 Chron. 36). After he died in 562 B.C., 48 years later, Babylon was overthrown by King Cyrus of Persia in 539 B.C. King Cyrus had conquered many cities and built a strong empire.

He was not a brutal conqueror but instead was very tolerant of the traditions and beliefs of the nations he conquered. He maintained an “Edict of Restoration,” which permitted conquered peoples to return

to their homelands, including the Jews. Cyrus demonstrated mercy towards others. He was not a follower of the God of the Jews, but God used him for God's glory. Cyrus even acquired the resources the Jews needed to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem.

*Do you recall a time when God used a very unlikely person, such as a perceived enemy, to meet your needs?*

**5 – 8, 11; 2:64 – 70** – It was only after the people considered their ways and humbly turned back to God did restoration come. The spirit of God had transformed them. Even though there were twelve tribes in Israel, only the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, along with the priests and Levites, agreed to travel back to their homeland and rebuild the temple. Because 70 years had passed, others remained in Babylon, unsure of their identity and heritage as God's chosen people.

Not only did Cyrus give his permission, but he also returned to them the sacred vessels that had been stolen from the temple by Nebuchadnezzar. Others (Jews and pagans) gave silver, gold, goods, animals, and freewill offerings, enabling the returning exiles to have vast resources to aid in the building project. There was a registry of those who returned, including the people, the priests, the Levites, the descendants of Solomon's servants, and other priests. The total number was 49,897. Others were included in the registry that previously were not counted. They worked together as a team to accomplish God's plan. Those who could work did so while others gave freewill offerings in support of the rebuilding plan.

*How does it feel to have God provide resources during challenging times in your life?*

## **SANKOFA**

(Written by John Antczak of the Associated Press on April 21, 2021)

**A California city took a beach property from a Black family 100 years ago. Now, it may be returned to their descendants.**

LOS ANGELES — Los Angeles County leaders took initial steps Tuesday toward returning prime beachfront property to descendants of a Black couple who built a resort for African Americans but were stripped of the land by local city officials a century ago. The five-member Board of Supervisors voted unanimously to have the county chief executive's office report back in 60 days with a plan on returning

the land and having the county be a sponsor of state legislation that is needed to enable the transfer. “We have the opportunity not only to right a wrong that happened right here in LA County but also to be an example to the rest of the nation on how the government can begin to act now to correct historical injustices,” said Supervisor Janice Hahn, who is leading the effort.

The property known as Bruce’s Beach is along the shoreline in Manhattan Beach, now an upscale city along the southern end of Santa Monica Bay. One of the descendants, Anthony Bruce, called into the virtual meeting to urge the supervisors to “make it a reality.” “Uphold justice for the Bruce’s and grant these motions,” he said.

The land was purchased in 1912 by Willa and Charles Bruce, who built the first West Coast resort for Black people when many beaches were segregated. They suffered racist harassment from white neighbors, and in the 1920s, the Manhattan Beach City Council took the land away through eminent domain under the ruse of needing it for a park. However, the city did nothing with the property, and it eventually was transferred to the state in 1948. In 1995, the state transferred it to the county, which built its lifeguard training headquarters on the site.

That transfer came with restrictions on further transfers that can only be lifted through state legislation. A bill to do that was introduced in the state Senate last week. If the law passes, the transfer to the descendants of the Bruce’s would have to go back before the Board of Supervisors for final approval. The current Manhattan Beach City Council recently formally acknowledged and condemned their predecessors’ efforts to displace the Bruces and several other Black families in the area but stopped short of formally apologizing.

The lifeguard building sits along The Strand, a popular oceanfront walkway where many of the once-modest beach houses have given way to multistory luxury residences. According to Hahn, a return of the land could involve the county leasing it back from the descendants or moving the lifeguard facility elsewhere.

*The Bruce’s were banished from their property and subsequently worked as cooks in Los Angeles the rest of their lives. The Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors voted unanimously (the week of April 23rd, 2021) to start a process of transferring the Manhattan Beach plots, seized from the family in 1924, back to the Bruce’s heirs. What will the restoration of the Bruce’s property mean for their legacy and*

heirs? Google “Bruce’s Beach in California” for additional information.

Sources: <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2021/04/21/manhattan-bruces-beach-may-returned-black-descendants/7316520002/>  
<https://www.lamag.com/citythinkblog/manhattan-beach-bruces-beach/>

SAMPLE

## REAL TALK, FAITH WALK

AME Church history is rich in personal accounts of God’s faithfulness throughout the generations. Every church congregation has individual and corporate testimonies of God’s provisions during challenging times. If possible, speak with your church historian or a trustee about the ways God has manifested his faithfulness by providing for the congregation’s needs. Write down some notes about the conversation in a journal. Later write down a few testimonies of friends and family members who have witnessed God’s faithfulness as they endured trials and suffering. What have you learned from others’ accounts of God’s faithfulness? How do their testimonies deepen your faith in God? Write in your journal your witness of God’s provisions at various points in your life. Share with others about God’s faithfulness using examples from the word and personal testimonies. In the future, refer back to your journal entries as evidence of God’s goodness and offer praise to him.

## SUMMARY

God used King Cyrus to release the Jews from captivity and permit them to return home. King Cyrus also ensured the Jews had the people and resources to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. Sometimes God chooses people to achieve God’s plans and purposes that are not a part of the body of believers. This is further proof of God’s sovereignty and faithfulness. God cares and provides even in the face of challenges. Our God knows in advance what we will need as we encounter life’s struggles and wants us to trust him fully. What can we do to demonstrate our trust in God when given challenging tasks to accomplish?

## CLOSING DEVOTIONS

*Prayer: God, we praise and honor your name. We trust you to provide everything needed to accomplish your plans and purposes for our lives. Thank you for always being faithful no matter the obstacles that arise as we seek to fulfill your will. Amen.*

Closing Hymn: "Great Is Thy Faithfulness"  
(AMEC Hymnal #84)

LESSON 2

MARCH 13, 2022

SAMPLE

# Freedom to Worship

Lesson Scripture: Ezra 5; 6:1-12; 10:1-5

Focus Scripture: Ezra 6:1-12

**KEY VERSE:** *“May the God who has established his name there overthrow any king or people that shall put forth a hand to alter this, or to destroy this house of God in Jerusalem.”* Ezra 6:12a

## WORDS TO KNOW

- **DECREE** – a law or statute that a king made that was published for all to know
- **ARCHIVES** – a collection of historical documents providing information about a group of people
- **SCROLL** – an ancient book that was made of leather or papyrus rolled into a cylinder after having been written upon
- **CUBIT** – an ancient measure of length, approximately equal to the distance from the elbow to the middle finger (around 18 inches)
- **HEWN** – to chop or cut something such as wood or stone with an axe, pick, or other tool
- **TRIBUTE** – a tax or levy
- **DILIGENCE** – careful and persistent work or effort
- **ECBATANA** – pronounced: Ekbatan

**FOCUS SCRIPTURE: EZRA 6:1-12**

- 1** Then King Darius made a decree, and they searched the archives where the documents were stored in Babylon.
- 2** But it was in Ecbatana, the capital in the province of Media, that a scroll was found on which this was written: “A record.
- 3** In the first year of his reign, King Cyrus issued a decree: Concerning the house of God at Jerusalem, let the house be rebuilt, the place where sacrifices are offered and burnt offerings are brought; its height shall be sixty cubits and its width sixty cubits,
- 4** with three courses of hewn stones and one course of timber; let the cost be paid from the royal treasury.
- 5** Moreover, let the gold and silver vessels of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took out of the temple in Jerusalem and brought to Babylon, be restored and brought back to the temple in Jerusalem, each to its place; you shall put them in the house of God.
- 6** Now you, Tattenai, governor of the province Beyond the River, Shethar-bozenai, and you, their associates, the envoys in the province Beyond the River, keep away;
- 7** let the work on this house of God alone; let the governor of the Jews and the elders of the Jews rebuild this house of God on its site.
- 8** Moreover I make a decree regarding what you shall do for these elders of the Jews for the rebuilding of this house of God: the cost is to be paid to these people, in full and without delay, from the royal revenue, the tribute of the province Beyond the River.
- 9** Whatever is needed—young bulls, rams, or sheep for burnt offerings to the God of heaven, wheat, salt, wine, or oil, as the priests in Jerusalem require—let that be given to them day by day without fail,
- 10** so that they may offer pleasing sacrifices to the God of heaven, and pray for the life of the king and his children.
- 11** Furthermore I decree that if anyone alters this edict, a beam shall be pulled out of the house of the perpetrator, who then shall be impaled on it. The house shall be made a dunghill.
- 12** May the God who has established his name there overthrow any king or people that shall put forth a hand to alter this, or to destroy this house of God in Jerusalem. I, Darius, make a decree; let it be done with all diligence.”

## INTRODUCTION

Last week we learned King Cyrus, by royal edict, released the Jews from captivity to return to their homeland of Israel. They also had to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. It was a humongous task. Who can we rely on to help during challenging times? God always provides what is necessary to fulfill his plans. King Cyrus returned all the gold and silver vessels that Nebuchadnezzar had taken out of the temple when he overthrew the nation. Those who were able gave their silver and gold jewelry or freewill offerings. King Cyrus also gave additional resources to the Jews. Zerubbabel led the first group of Jewish exiles back to Jerusalem from Babylon.

When the Jews arrived in Jerusalem, the priests and Zerubbabel built an altar on the temple foundation to offer sacrifices to God. The Jews desired to worship God once again. A spiritual transformation had occurred in their lives during the 70 years of captivity. They were ready for a fresh start with God. Moreover, this meant it was vital to their spiritual development that the temple be rebuilt. It represented the place where God's presence dwelt. What role does the church (building) have in your spiritual life?

Zerubbabel and the Jews did begin the process of rebuilding the temple. But the work had to be halted due to opposition from their enemies. In today's lesson, we explore the role King Darius had in completing the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem.

*Do you recall a time that you faced opposition while working on a project? What was your reaction?*

## BIBLE STORY

Darius was king of Persia from 522 – 486 B.C. The rebuilding of the temple was delayed until the second year of the reign of Darius (520 B.C.). The disruption caused the Jews to feel somber. The prophets Haggai and Zechariah provided encouraging messages to the Jews to incite them to resume the work of rebuilding the temple (5:1-2). The people were strengthened by the messages, so they began to work again. The prophets joined in the work as well.

As could be expected, the opposition against the work resumed, and the work stopped. This time the challenge was under whose authority did the Jews get permission to build the temple (5:3-5)? A letter was sent to King Darius requesting he search the royal archives to determine if

King Cyrus issued a decree in reference to the rebuilding of the temple.

**Ezra 6:1 – 5** – King Darius desired to resolve the issue, so he ordered a search of the archives in Babylon to find the document. The decree of Cyrus was found on a scroll at Cyrus’ summer residence in Ecbatana. The decree mentioned that money from royal funds was to be set aside to rebuild the Jerusalem temple and the importance of erecting the altar so sacrifices to God could be offered again. The decree also specifies the dimensions of the temple and how it is to be built. It is always wise to store essential church documents in a secure location for the benefit of future generations. The documents provide historical evidence of prior church actions.

Many clay and papyrus documents recording business transactions and historical data have been discovered in this area (near present-day Syria). A great library and archives with thousands of such records have been discovered at Ebla in Syria. It is amazing what historical and archaeological evidence exists to validate the word of God.

**6:6 – 12** – Once Darius heard the details contained in Cyrus’ decree, he immediately responded. Darius ordered the work to be completed without interference from others. All the expenses connected with the rebuilding of the temple were to be paid out of the royal treasury. Persian kings’ consistent policy was to help restore sanctuaries in their empire even if their religious practices were not the same.

Darius’ decree also included provisions for the sacrifices needed for the burnt offerings to God. The Jews had not been making sacrifices while in exile in Babylon. Persians did not make animal sacrifices as part of their religion, so a special note was made to provide animals for sacrifice to fulfill Jewish religious requirements. There was hope that the Jews would pray for the king and his family. The decree also specified the return of the gold and silver taken from the temple by the conquerors. The decree further indicated that “whatever was necessary” was to be provided. Priests would also be paid from the royal treasury. Anyone who failed to obey every word of Darius’ decree or interrupted the rebuilding would be dealt with harshly.

*How does supporting friends and/or family members practicing their faith, which may not be Christianity, reflect positively on the Christian church? In what ways can the government interfere with our individual freedoms? How can we hold government officials accountable for their promises and responsibilities?*

## SANKOFA

As African Americans and peoples of Africa, we often experience unequal treatment by those in authoritative positions in our government, judicial systems, educational and healthcare systems, etc. Therefore, as a people, we have had to come together to fight for the same equal rights others take for granted. If the government would only uphold its legal ordinances, provide equal resources and provisions, and take action against those who violate laws, we all could be free to live our best lives. Restorative actions have to be taken to make up for all the decades of suffering and trials endured by many generations. We have many people and organizations who are using their collective powers to hold our oppressors accountable. Black Lives Matter (<https://blacklivesmatter.com/>) is one such organization. And there is a multitude of people from every race, religion, and nationality that support its mission.

“#BlackLivesMatter was founded in 2013 in response to the acquittal of Trayvon Martin’s murderer. Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation, Inc. is a global organization in the U.S., U.K., and Canada whose mission is to eradicate white supremacy and build local power to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities by the state and vigilantes. By combating and countering acts of violence, creating space for Black imagination and innovation, and centering Black joy, we are winning immediate improvements in our lives.” (Source: <https://blacklivesmatter.com/>)

*How did King Darius ensure the Jews could complete God’s plan without interruption to worship freely once again? What are some specific actions you can take as individuals and members of the AME Church to ensure our freedoms are no longer violated?*

## REAL TALK, FAITH WALK

Richard Allen and others left Saint George’s United Methodist Church in Philadelphia to protest the unequal treatment they endured in the church. Eventually, the African Methodist Episcopal Church was organized and churches established. God provided all that was needed to fulfill his plans for the AME Church. Their actions paved the way for us to freely worship God in a manner that reflected our African heritage and rightful positions as heirs of Christ.

In the 21st century, there can be various reasons why individuals,

churches, and organizations fail to accomplish their plans. What are some of the obstacles that hinder the completion of goals? What can you do to assist in rebuilding people's lives, communities, or places of worship?

### SUMMARY

The Jews often stopped working because of the constant opposition they faced while seeking to rebuild the temple. They had forgotten about Cyrus' decree and the provisions of God that had been given. It was only after a government official inquired about Cyrus' decree that its content was revealed to Darius. He immediately issued a decree reinforcing the legal contents of the previous decree. In addition, Darius declared no one was to disrupt the temple's rebuilding with the warning of harsh punishment. What impact does the support of governing authorities make when seeking to rebuild a community?

### CLOSING DEVOTIONS

*Prayer: We thank you, God, for the assurance of knowing your plans will be fulfilled. Guide us and provide all we need as we work helping others rebuild their lives and communities. Amen.*

*Hymn: "Come, We That Love the Lord  
(We're Marching to Zion)"  
(AMEC Hymnal #520)*

LESSON 3

MARCH 20, 2022

SAMPLE

# Celebrate Passover Liberation

Lesson Scripture: Ezra 6:13-22; Leviticus 23:4-8  
Focus Scripture: Ezra 6:13-22

**KEY VERSE:** *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. Ezra 6:16*

## WORDS TO KNOW

- **DEDICATION** – an act or rite of setting apart a person or item for God’s use
- **PASSOVER** – a festival instituted to commemorate the passing over or sparing of the Hebrews in Egypt when God killed the first born of the Egyptians
- **PURIFIED** – the cleansing of the ceremonially unclean person by bathing the body and clothes of the person purified
- **POLLUTIONS** – contamination from being in contact or exposed to the unclean
- **TATTENAI** – pronounced: tat’-e-ni
- **SHETHAR-BOZENAI** – pronounced: she’-thar-boz’-na-i
- **ARTAXERXES** – pronounced: ar-taks-urk’-sez

***FOCUS SCRIPTURE: EZRA 6:13-22***

- 13** 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.
- 14** So the elders of the Jews built and prospered, through the prophesying of the prophet Haggai and Zechariah son of Iddo. They finished their building by command of the God of Israel and by decree of Cyrus, Darius, and King Artaxerxes of Persia;
- 15** and this house was finished on the third day of the month of Adar, in the sixth year of the reign of King Darius.
- 16** 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.
- 17** They offered at the dedication of this house of God one hundred bulls, two hundred rams, four hundred lambs, and as a sin offering for all Israel, twelve male goats, according to the number of the tribes of Israel.
- 18** Then they set the priests in their divisions and the Levites in their courses for the service of God at Jerusalem, as it is written in the book of Moses.
- 19** On the fourteenth day of the first month the returned exiles kept the passover.
- 20** For both the priests and the Levites had purified themselves; all of them were clean. So they killed the passover lamb for all the returned exiles, for their fellow priests, and for themselves.
- 21** It was eaten by the people of Israel who had returned from exile, and also by all who had joined them and separated themselves from the pollutions of the nations of the land to worship the Lord, the God of Israel.
- 22** With joy they celebrated the festival of unleavened bread seven days; for the Lord had made them joyful, and had turned the heart of the king of Assyria to them, so that he aided them in the work on the house of God, the God of Israel.

## INTRODUCTION

During special holidays such as Easter or Christmas, most families celebrate with a big meal and other fun activities. It is always good to have celebrations. Celebrations allow us to gather with those we love and reminisce. Our past enables us to understand the present and gives us glimpses of the future. What do you enjoy about celebrations?

In today's lesson, we examine the decrees of the three Persian kings and determine how each affected the lives of the people.

## BIBLE STORY

**Ezra 6:13 – 15** – King Darius discovered in King Cyrus' decree that the people of Israel were released from captivity and free to return to their homeland to rebuild the temple. Darius issued a decree that stopped all opposition to the work and provided the needed provisions for the completion. God also reprimanded the people for a preoccupation with their own homes (Hag. 1:2-11). It is very easy to get off task when God's plan seems to take longer than expected, and your enemies are harassing everyone. Often people will look after their interests first, which is selfish.

God commanded the rebuilding of the temple and used the kings to accomplish his will. Throughout the process, God utilized the prophets Haggai and Zechariah to share the word to uplift and encourage the people as they built the temple. The temple was completed in 516 B.C. King Artaxerxes is mentioned for his contribution to the work of the temple at a later time under Ezra. He allowed Nehemiah to return to refortify the city (7:21-24; Neh. 2:1-8).

**6:16 – 22** – God was the source of joy for the Israelites. They celebrated God's faithfulness. It was only God who enabled the Israelites to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. And God used the Persian kings as conduits of protection and provisions. This dedication was similar to King Solomon's dedication of the temple (1 Kg. 8). It is always good to give thanks to God for new beginnings.

Celebrating is nice, but there is always work to do in God's house. The priests and Levites were separated into twenty-four groups to serve God in the temple on weekly rotations (v. 18; 2 Chron. 35:4-5). After they purified themselves, the Levites prepared a slaughtered lamb for the Passover celebration. All the exiles ate the Passover meal together. The Feast of Unleavened Bread lasted for seven days (Exo. 12:12-20).

The people were filled with joy because of all God had done.

*Why is it important to commemorate the past and celebrate our future?  
How do you and your family celebrate holidays and special occasions?*

## **SANKOFA**

“Juneteenth is the name for a holiday celebrating June 19, 1865, when the Union army (fighting to preserve the Union of the United States) arrived in Texas and spread the word that President Lincoln had signed the Emancipation Proclamation freeing African Americans from slavery. The initial date for freeing slaves across the South was January 1, 1863. Enslaved people in Texas, however, did not receive word of their freedom until more than two years after the proclamation was issued.

“The 1863 Emancipation Proclamation freeing enslaved people could not be immediately implemented in places still under Confederate control, as in Texas. However, the surrender of General Robert E. Lee in April of 1865 officially ended the Civil War. On June 19, 1865, more than 2,000 Union soldiers, led by Major General Gordon Granger, landed at Galveston Bay, Texas, with news that the war had ended and that the more than 250,000 enslaved Black people in the state were free. This day came to be known as “Juneteenth” by the newly freed people in Texas. The celebration of Juneteenth (June 19) became a time for prayer, reflection, and jubilation to begin their freedom.

“Although Juneteenth has been informally celebrated each year since 1866, it was not until June 3, 1979, that Texas became the first state to proclaim Emancipation Day (Juneteenth) an official state holiday. Today 47 states and the District of Columbia celebrate Juneteenth. It is much more, however, than just a holiday for Black people. It has become a day for African Americans to celebrate their freedom, culture, and achievements. Juneteenth also is a day for all Americans to celebrate African American history and rejoice in their freedom.”

*What are some similarities and differences between Juneteenth and the Israelites celebration of Passover in our lesson?*

Source: Agbor, P. (2021, June 09). *Juneteenth*. BlackPast.org. <https://www.blackpast.org/childrens-page/juneteenth/>

## REAL TALK, FAITH WALK

### *The Seder*

The Seder is the traditional Passover meal that includes reading, drinking four cups of wine, telling stories, eating special foods, singing, and other Passover traditions. As per biblical command, Seder is held after nightfall on the first night of Passover (and the second night if you live outside of Israel), the anniversary of Israel's miraculous exodus from Egyptian slavery more than 3,000 years ago. Research "Seder" to discover the food and drink that is a part of the meal. Write those details in the following section. During the course of the evening, your meal will have:

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At the Seder, every person should feel as if he or she were going out of Egypt. They recall the plagues God sent to punish Pharaoh and his nation, and follow along as they leave Egypt and cross the Red Sea. They recall the miraculous hand of God as the waters part, allowing the Israelites to pass, then return to inundate the Egyptian legions. As they eat bitter foods of affliction and poverty, the Exodus becomes a reality—as real as the festive meal and celebratory toasts that follow.

As Christians and members of the AME Church, we usually celebrate Holy Communion on the first Sunday of every month. We commemorate and celebrate Jesus offering his body and blood on the cross as the perfect sacrifice for all our sins. *How are Passover and Holy Communion connected? What has God personally liberated you from? How can we celebrate God's acts of liberation in our lives and church?*

Source:

*What Is a Seder (Passover Meal)? - A quick, one-page overview of the Passover Meal's steps - Passover (chabad.org)*

## SUMMARY

Just like God provided all the provisions and protection the Israelites needed to complete the rebuilding of the temple, he will do for us as well. God has the ability to provide all we need to accomplish his divine plans. God has empowered us to persevere and achieve goals.

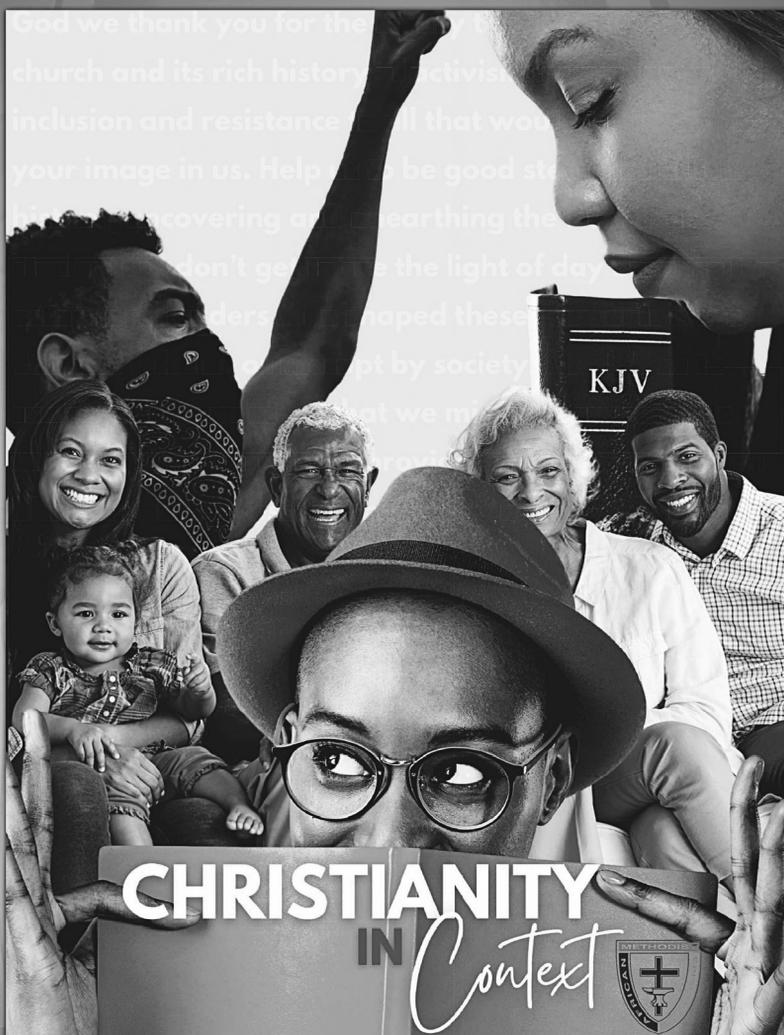
We stand in awe of God’s power at work through us. Let’s worship God and celebrate him every day. How did the Jews celebrate God in worship? Why is worship of God to be taken seriously and planned in advance?

**CLOSING DEVOTIONS**

*Prayer: God, we are in a deep amazement when we think of your goodness. We are so grateful for all you do for us. Every day we will worship and honor you. Amen.*

*Closing Hymn: “How Great Thou Art”  
(AMEC Hymnal #68)*

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