**Sunday, October 11th, 2020**

**Ezra 1:1-7**

1n 1952, young Florence Chadwick stepped into the waters
        of the Pacific Ocean off mainland California,
        determined to swim to Catalina Island,
She had already been the first woman to swim the English Channel both ways.
The weather was foggy and chilly.
She could hardly see the boats accompanying her.
Still, she swam for 15 hours.
When she begged to be taken out of the water along the way,
        her mother, in a boat alongside her,
        told her she was close and that she could make it.
But, finally, physically and emotionally exhausted,
        she stopped swimming and was pulled out.
It wasn't until she was on the boat
        she discovered the island was less than half a mile away.
At a news conference the next day she said,
        "All I could see was the fog.
        I think if I could have seen the shore,
        I would have made it."

For weeks she trained to make another attempt to swim to Catalina island.
But not only did she practice her swimming,
        she also concentrated on believing the Island was there,

 even when she could not see it.

When she again attempted the difficult swim,
        she still couldn't see the island,
        but this time she was convinced it was there.
Trusting that somewhere in fog was her goal, she was able to reach it.

The Israelites had been defeated by the Babylonians about 60 years earlier.

When Persia succeeded Babylonia as the great world power,
        the emperor Cyrus permitted the Jews to return to their home land
        and returned the furnishings which had been taken from their temple.

The Jews had been in Babylon for 60 years.
Most had never seen the land their parents and grandparents had come from.
Many of the Jews rejoiced at the opportunity to go back to Judah
        and rebuild God's temple.
Others, having established homes and families, and friendships,
        decided to stay in Babylon and not move to Judah.
For the exiles who wished to return, the news was almost too good to be true.
They treasured their spiritual heritage
        more than the houses and businesses they had built in Babylon.
They wanted to live and worship in the place God had given his people.

The journey home was no easy task.
Judah was a very long way from Babylonia.
They had to walk carrying their belongings, food, and the items for the temple.
They had to face robbers and murderers in search of plunder.

When they finally reached Judah,
        many of the priests, Levites, heads of families,
        and the old people, who had seen the first temple on its foundations,

 wept with a loud voice.
But many shouted aloud for joy at the chance to rebuild the temple.

The task was not easy.
People in the area began to oppose the work of the Jews with force.
It would not have been surprising if the Jews had not finished
        the almost impossible task of restoration.

But the Israelites held on to the dream of a finished temple.
The could not see it in reality, but they were convinced it could,

 and would be, completed.

Like Florence Chadwick, the exiles had to believe in the project,
        if they were going to be successful.

In spite of how daunting the task was, they persevered.
When the vision became dim, they continued working.
And finally, years later the Temple was complete,
        and the Israelites celebrated with great joy.

Success requires determination, perseverance, endurance, and patience.

We, also face many of the trials of the Israelites.
If God's Will is to be fulfilled, it will be accomplished
        because we hold on to the dream, the values which we hold, the beliefs we cherish, and the ideals to which we are dedicated.

Patience and perseverance, with God's help,
        can overcome the greatest of difficulties.
When we can imagine the goal, we can reach it.
When we trust God, we continue to obey Him.

Like Florence Chadwick, we have to believe in what we are doing if we are to continue,

 if success is to be reached.

Problems and difficulties will come into our lives.
The will to persevere is often the difference between failure and success.

The book of Ezra begins with exiles returning to a ruined city,
        a brush-covered ghost town, burned and pillaged for years.
 But the exiles believed Jerusalem could now have a new beginning.
And they held on to that dream in spite of the trouble, and dangers,

 and problems they faced.
God opened the way, but the exiles needed determination to follow it.
Their dream, and their strong determination to obey the law of God,

 provided a new beginning for God's people.

          (Two Frogs in cream)
Two frogs fell into a can of cream,
        Or so I've heard it told;
The sides of the can were shiny and steep.
        The cream was deep and cold.

"O, what's the use?" croaked Number 1.
        "Tis fate; no help's around.
Goodbye, my friends! Goodbye, sad world!"
        And weeping still, he drowned.

But Number 2, of sterner stuff,
        Dog-paddled in surprise,
The while he wiped his creamy face
        And dried his creamy eyes.

"I'll swim awhile, at least," he said –
        Or so I've heard he said;
It really wouldn't help the world
        If one more frog were dead."

An hour or two he kicked and swam.
        Not once he stopped to mutter,
But kicked and kicked and swam and kicked.
        And then hopped out, by way of  -- butter!

Faith is continuing to trust God when everything is falling apart.
The impossible is possible when God is guiding us, and we are willing to follow Him.

Success is possible when we continue to believe,
        holding on to the dream, and trusting in God.

AMEN