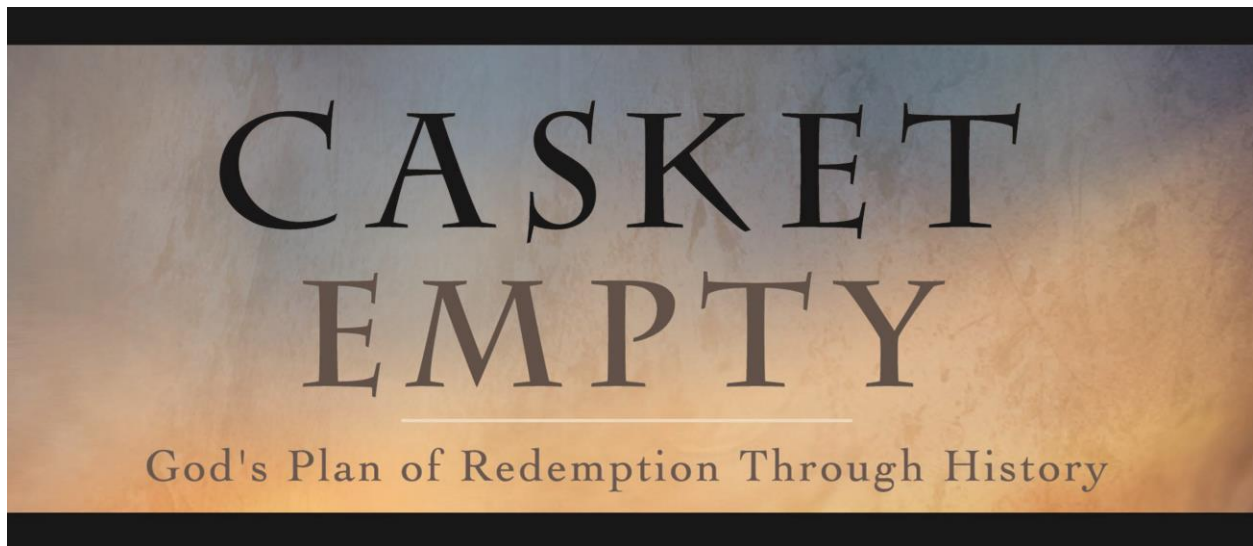


***T is for Temple***  
CASKET EMPTY Sermon Series  
Kenwood Baptist Church  
Pastor David Palmer  
November 26, 2017

**TEXT: Ezra 1:1-11**



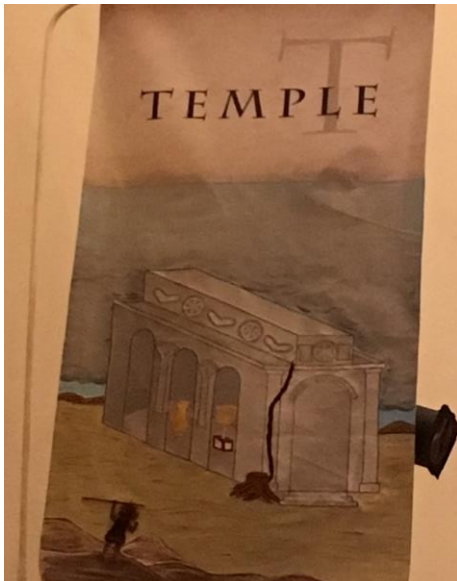
Good morning, Kenwood. It's good to be back, and I want to thank all of you for praying for us. Christine and I were away last week at an International Archaeology Conference and the Society of Biblical Literature meeting. So, if you squeeze me hard this morning, archaeology is going to come out. It was a fantastic conference. There were 1,100 archaeologists from around the world present, the leaders of current excavations. To give one example, the man in charge the last three years of the underwater excavations at Caesarea, the city that Herod built, had 20 minutes to report on everything that he found. He started his presentation with a video of a storm coming in with 45-foot-high waves crashing into the ruins of this the city that Herod had built. We were looking at it with awe, and he said it was great for the archaeologists because these waves came in and removed nine feet of sand from the ancient harbor. He said that when the storm was over, when they put their gear on, they just started picking up all the ancient items that were revealed. It was fascinating. Christine did a phenomenal job presenting to this group. In the latter half of the week, there were 11,000 biblical scholars from all over the world that came and presented, and I had the privilege to present two papers, Kurt Backlund presented, and it was just a real joyful time and a testimony to the Lord. So, thank you for praying for us. It is great to be back at home in Cincinnati and at Kenwood.

This morning, we have the great and sacred privilege of finishing the first portion of the book that God is given to us of what we call the Old Testament. If you have never read the Bible before and you open it up, the first division that you become aware of is that there are two main parts: the Old Testament and the New Testament. This year at Kenwood, we are going through this big story learning to read and understand the Bible. It is a single story. We began this fall with a quote from Robert Jenson who said:

“It's the church's task to tell the biblical narrative to the world in proclamation and to God in worship. It is the church's mission to tell all who will listen that the God of Israel has raised His Servant Jesus from the dead and to explain the soteriological import of that fact.”

That is a fancy word for *salvation implications* of that.

The Bible is a single story with the death and resurrection of Christ at its center. We been using this acronym, CASKET EMPTY, to guide us through the story. Let's review very briefly where we've been so far. In the Old Testament, C is for CREATION; A is for ABRAHAM; S is for SINAI; K is for KINGS; E is for EXILE; and T this morning is for TEMPLE. This is exciting. Once you know the



story, you can be gripped by the story. Once you know the movement of the story, you can live out the story in your own life and setting. We see again this morning that the Lord has written into the story in large letters the death and resurrection of the Beloved Son as the key to history, foreshadowing our redemption. We transition from last Sunday, the time of exile—that dark chapter in the narrative where God vindicates His holiness, where He shows us what deep down we know to be true and long to be true, that God is holy and righteous and that sin deserves punishment. If God just turned a blind eye to that, He would not be righteous and He would not be worthy of our praise, but the Bible does not end in exile. The Old

Testament does not end in exile. The Old Testament ends on a note of hope, pointing us forward to what will be fully realized in the New Testament.

We turn our attention to the last great movement of God's plan of redemption through history, and this is the period of Temple. This is the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, the prophets Haggai and Zechariah. So this morning, we turn our attention to Ezra 1. Keep your text open and we are going to look at this important and wonderful passage in God's Word that has rich things to teach us about the Lord and His work with us. Ezra 1:1 starts by locating us in time:

*“In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the Word of the LORD by the mouth of*

*Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, . . .”*

The first year of Cyrus was 539 BC, and it was a big year for Cyrus. It was the year that Cyrus moved against the city of Babylon. For those who are slightly unfamiliar with the geography of Babylon, the largest city in the world at the time, the river Euphrates goes right through the center of the city. It was considered to be a completely impregnable city, and yet, you will recall from the book of Daniel, the Lord appeared to the Babylonian king Belshazzar with the writing on the wall and said: “God has weighed you on the scales, and you are coming up light. God has counted the days of your kingdom, and tonight is the last night.” As that feast was happening, Cyrus, king of Persia, and his army were diverting the river Euphrates, and they walked in unopposed, took the city without a fight, and the kingdom of Babylon, the head of gold, fell in a single night without opposition. The Greek historian Herodotus describes this as well. It was a big year for Cyrus: he took Babylon; his kingdom was expanding. But as big of a year as it was for Cyrus, it was a bigger year for the Lord, because in the first year of Cyrus, Ezra 1:1 says that God did something: the word of the Lord would be fulfilled, and this word is a very specific word. Ezra says, it was the word of the Lord that had come through the mouth of Jeremiah the prophet. Jeremiah ministers during the time when Jerusalem is taken into exile. In Jeremiah 25:3-4, the prophet says:

*“For twenty-three years, from the thirteenth year of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah, to this day, the word of the LORD has come to me, and I have spoken persistently to you, but you have not listened. You have neither listened nor inclined your ears to hear. . .”*

Can you imagine a father pleading with his son for 23 years and receiving no response? The Lord spoke to His people through Jeremiah, pleading them in Jeremiah 25:5-6:

*“Turn now, every one of you, from his evil way and evil deeds, and dwell upon the land that the LORD has given to you and your fathers from of old and forever. Do not go after other gods to serve and worship them, or provoke Me to anger with the work of your hands.”*

Yet, the people did not listen, and so in Jeremiah 25:8, finally the Lord says:

*“Because you have not obeyed My words, behold, I will send for all the tribes of the north, declares the LORD, and for Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, My servant, and I will bring them against this land and its inhabitants, and against all these surrounding nations.”*

And the Lord says in Jeremiah 25:11:

*“This whole land shall become a ruin and a waste, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years.”*

The Lord vindicates His holiness. He sends the prophets, pleading with the people to turn, and then at last the Lord says: “I’m bringing judgments against My own house. I’m going to let My own house be torn down. My presence will leave.” One of the saddest scenes of the entire Old

Testament is Ezekiel 9, 10, and 11 where the prophet looks and sees the presence of the living God leaving His House, and God's House is torn down, and God uses the Babylonians to do it. The Lord says that this land will be a ruin and a waste, but yet the punishment of exile will be divine discipline. It will have a limit, and that limit will be 70 years.

The Old Testament does not end with exile. Jeremiah's ministry does not end with the promise of judgment. Jeremiah's ministry ends with the promise of hope on the other side of that. Let me just say pastorally that exile and return is often woven into our discipleship plot lines. Let me just say early in the sermon that there are times when you find yourself under divine discipline. There are times when you will find yourself in exile, struggling to be faithful in a foreign land, and let me promise you from the Scripture that divine discipline has a purpose. It is corrective. God teaches us, and He will restore on the other side. In Jeremiah 29, Jeremiah looks beyond the judgment of exile, and he says in Jeremiah 29:10:

*“When seventy years are completed for Babylon, [the Lord says,] I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you My promise and bring you back to this place.”*

In other words, when the discipline of exile is complete, when the 70 years of My purpose are fulfilled, I am going to act again and restore you. I'm going to forgive you. I'm going to bring you back, and this promise is grounded in one of the most famous lines from the Old Testament. God's commitment to restoration, His commitment to bring you back, is grounded in Jeremiah 29:11. I'm doing this; I'm promising this because I know what I'm doing with you:

*“For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.”*

God has plans, and the Hebrew says: *plans for shalom*. The ESV translates this as *welfare*; others translates it as *peace*. The Lord says: “I have plans in the end that are for your *shalom* and not for evil. I've got plans to give you a future, literally an ending. I'm going to give you a good ending.” It's not an ending where the couple gets married and they just fly off into marital bliss. That's how we tell our stories. This ending is a real ending of restoration, forgiveness, and reconciliation, and the Lord says: “I'm going to do it,” and He watches over His Word to perform it, to fulfill it. So, what God does in Ezra 1 is that the Lord stirs up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia. Proverbs 21:1 says:

*“The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; He turns it wherever He will.”*

So, we read in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, to fulfill God's Word, the Lord stirred up the heart of this ancient, near-Eastern king. Now, I want to challenge you right at this point. Do you have faith enough to believe in a God who stirs the hearts of people who don't even know Him? Do you believe the hearts of international politicians are in the hands of the living God? The Lord says in Isaiah 45: “O Cyrus, you are My servant; you are My anointed one even though you

don't even know Me.” The God that we meet in the pages of Scripture is the One in whose hands are the nations and whose purposes will be accomplished. And so the Lord stirs up the spirit of Cyrus. What does he do? He stirs up his spirit so that he literally causes a voice to be passed over all his kingdom. It's a beautiful way of saying he made a proclamation. What was his proclamation? Ezra 1:2 gives us the words of the proclamation. He says:

*“Thus says Cyrus king 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, which is in Judah.’”*

Cyrus issues the proclamation throughout his kingdom, addressing the people of God. We read in Ezra 1:3:

*“Whoever is among you of all His people, may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel—He is the the God who is in Jerusalem.”*

Remember that this is a westward journey for the people of God, and yet theologically you always go up to Jerusalem from any direction, because it is the theological summit of planet earth. May God be with them, let them go up to Jerusalem, and may they rebuild the house, the temple of the Lord, the God of Israel. Cyrus’ proclamation summons also each survivor, each member of the exiled community, and those not able to physically go. Everyone is involved and helps. Let each survivor in whatever place he sojourns be assisted by the men of this place with silver and gold, goods, and with beasts and free will offerings. That is my favorite use of *free will*. Free will is not walking down the cereal aisle and thinking “which of these 526 cereals would I like?” That's not free will. That's tyranny; that's confusion; that's disorientation in the marketplace; that's which of the coupons go with which cereal? I'm lost, and you have to be carried out and you think: “Thank God for online shopping. I order this and someone makes a choice for me, and they bring it out to my car.” That's where we're headed. Free will in the Bible is when God moves on you and you willingly give yourself to Him. That's the free will that I want and that I want for you: where God moves, stirs the spirit of a man, of a woman, of a child, and they say: “Oh, Lord, here is my life, here are my goods, here are my resources, extend Your kingdom and make a great name for Yourself.” That's freedom: to abandon our interests and freely offer ourselves to God. Cyrus not only makes this proclamation, but he does something else incredible: he writes it down.

I want to tell you about one of the most important lumps of big clay on the planet. It is 23 cm wide and 8 cm in diameter. It's not that big, and it's in the British Museum. It was discovered in 1879 by Hormuzd Rassam, who succeeded Henry Austin Layard and was in charge of the British Mesopotamian excavations. This 23 cm baked cylinder is one of the most important objects of its kind. It was finally brought to the United States for the first time in 2013, and it stopped in just four cities: in Washington DC, in New York, in Houston, and in Los Angeles. It was loaned

for four months to Iran, which is the modern day name for Cyrus' kingdom. When it was brought on loan to Tehran for four months, it created an international stir. Seven hundred thousand people came to see it in four months. Why is this lump of clay so important? This



lump of clay so important because it contains 40 lines of Babylonian cuneiform, and these 40 lines describe the decree and proclamation of Cyrus. Deep into the inscription, Cyrus recounts his victory over Babylon and then identifies himself: "I am Cyrus, king of the world, great king, mighty king, king Babylon, of the lands of Sumer and Akkad, king of the four quarters of the universe." We have a few people in our

church who know Akkadian, and Cyrus refers to himself, not just as the king, *lugal*—lu is man; *lugal* is a big man—but he's not just *lugal*, he is *lugal gal lugal*, which is the big man bigger than all the other big men, which is the way you say in Babylonian, king of kings! He's a big man. He attributes his victory over Babylon to the gods, and then he describes a remarkable decision, to return the exiles to their lands and restore their sanctuaries. The decree of Cyrus is critically important because it shows the historicity of the Bible. Scholars rightly assert that Cyrus is

following ancient practices of kings to describe their feats and to give credit to the gods. The Cyrus cylinder doesn't just show the historicity of the Scripture, but it pleads to be interpreted, and that's why when children go to the British Museum today. The Cyrus cylinder is one of the most important objects that they see. The interpretation of the cylinder, though, begs to be interpreted both in



antiquity and up until modern times. Is the Cyrus cylinder a cause for nationalism and celebration of the king's accomplishments? Cyrus probably thought so. In 1968, the first United Nations conference on human rights was held in Tehran and Shah Mohammed Raza Pahlavi presented this replica of the Cyrus cylinder to the first-ever United Nations conference on human rights. He wrote in his book in 1967, *The White Revolution of Iran*:

"The history of our empire began with the famous declaration of Cyrus, which, for its advocacy of humane principles, justice and liberty, must be considered one of the most remarkable documents in the history of mankind."

The Shah described Cyrus as the first ruler in history to give his subjects “freedom of opinion and other basic rights and advocacy for people to return to their lands and worship their own gods.”

Every year there's a celebration of Persian heritage in Los Angeles, with floats and dancing and ethnic music, and this is the coolest float in the parade. Do you see what it is? It's an 85-foot

replica of the Cyrus cylinder and the cuneiform is on the side of the float. I'd be interested in riding on that float. That question of



interpretation is raised in antiquity up until modern times. Is this cylinder just to display the beneficence of an ancient King? Is it really about human rights, or is it actually about what Ezra says it is about? Is it really fitting for the *New Yorker* or *LA Times*, or is it the reality of the God who controls history and owns and stirs the hearts of people to accomplish His purpose? Ezra 1 says what is really going on here is that the Lord God Almighty stirs the heart of the king and the response is in reaction to the proclamation of the king and to the writing of the document. The cylinder was buried in the walls of Babylon, but fragments of it have been found, and so we can be sure that it was a decree that was issued and spread around the Empire. What happens in reaction to the king's decree is the reaction that we really want this morning. It is not to make a float. The reaction that we really want comes to us in Ezra 1:5 when the edict of the King came out:

*“Then rose up the heads of the fathers' houses of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levites, everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go up to rebuild the house of the LORD that is in Jerusalem.”*

They responded; they got up from where they were; they saw; they heard the decree of the king. They recognized God was at work in the world, so it is time to get up, and we are told that their getting up was from the same effect of God's movement of the heart of the king: *“everyone whose spirit God stirred up.”* Is God stirring your spirit this morning? The God that we read about in Ezra 1 is the same one we worship this morning, and He stirs us. He stirs us to accomplish His purpose. We read in Ezra 1:6:

*“And all who were about them aided them with vessels of silver, with gold, with goods, with beasts, and with costly wares, besides all that was freely offered.”*

This is the sovereign work of God. People don't do this; people hoard their things. When God stirs their hearts, they freely give. When God stirs their hearts, they freely go. When God stirs

their hearts, they say, “God is at work in the world. He is reclaiming the land, He is reclaiming hearts, extending His kingdom, and He is calling me to be a part of it. Is He calling you to be a part of it? This word of reconciliation is the word of the gospel that will be written large in the New Testament, as we will see. God not only stirs the heart of Cyrus to issue a decree, but God moves the heart of Cyrus to go into his treasury and pull out his most valuable possessions. He goes into the treasury and he brings out the vessels of the House of the Lord, the vessels from the sanctuary that Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile and placed in the house of his gods. Cyrus goes and gets the vessels made for the worship of the living God, and he brings them out, and he gives them to Mithredath, his treasurer, and he counts them out and he gives them to Sheshbazzar, the prince of Judah, probably Zerubbabel's father. We are told in Ezra 1:9-11 that this was the number of them, and it is a vast amount:

*“30 basins of gold, 1,000 basins of silver, 29 censers,  
30 bowls of gold, 410 bowls of silver, and 1,000 other vessels;  
all the vessels of gold and of silver were 5,400.”*

The translation *basins* in verse nine probably more accurately refers to a leather bag, and so what he brings out first are 30 bags of gold, 1,000 bags of silver and censers for the worship of God. He brings out 30 bowls of gold, bowls of silver, a thousand other vessels, and all the vessels of silver gold—5,400, and he brings all these out and he gives them to the appointed prince of Judah, and everyone whose heart is stirred goes. In Ezra 1:1, we read:

*“All these did Sheshbazzar bring up, when the exiles were brought up from Babylonia to Jerusalem.”*

Sheshbazzar, when he came to the place of God's presence in Jerusalem, we read in Ezra 5:16:

*“Then this Sheshbazzar came and laid the foundations of the house of God that is in Jerusalem, and from that time until now it has been in building, and it is not yet finished.”*

That foundation stone was set. It took years for that work to be accomplished. Finally, in Ezra 6, we read that the house of the Lord was completed by the decree of Cyrus who issued a decree for the exiles to return and his successor Darius who said: “I'll pay for it.” It's remarkable, God's sovereign purpose! God sovereign purpose will prevail.

Exile leads to restoration, and this restoration is a partial return. One 10th of the exiled community comes back, and the Old Testament then ends on a note of hope. There is a candle burning in Jerusalem, the prophetic vision that one day all nations of the world will come and worship the true living God is yet to be fulfilled. The Old Testament has two endings, whether you are reading it in Hebrew or in Greek. The English Bible has the Hebrew books but the Greek order. Let me explain. The Hebrew Bible ends with 2 Chronicles, which is the paragraph right before Ezra, and 2 Chronicles ends with the decree of Cyrus in 2 Chronicles 36:23:



*“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, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all His people, may the LORD his God be with him. Let him go up.”*

The Old Testament ends with an open invitation to join God's redemptive purpose. The Greek ordering of the Books of the Old Testament is arranged by genre, and so the prophets are grouped together. The last of the Old Testament prophets is the prophet Malachi, and he gives us the ending of the Old Testament with which we are familiar: the temple is built; the foundation stones are laid. This structure is called the second temple, as opposed to the first temple built by Solomon. The second temple is constructed; everything is ready; worship starts to happen; and yet there is no description of a glorious filling of the sanctuary with the presence of God, and the Old Testament ends with hope and expectation that God Himself will return. The structure is built, and the people are waiting for God. The Old Testament, in the version that we are most familiar with, ends in Malachi 4:5-6 where the Lord says:

*“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord, and he will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers.”*

This figure of Elijah with the ministry of repentance to prepare the hearts of the people for the return of God Himself is the last breath of the Old Testament, and when we return to this redemptive story later this year, we will see that it is one of the first breaths of the New Testament. John the Baptist will be identified with this Elijah figure preparing for the return of the Lord Himself, who is Jesus Christ. As we wait for that glorious day and we prepare to celebrate, starting next week in Advent, I want to challenge you and encourage you from Ezra 1. I have been encouraged. I really have, and you know at the ASOR Conference, there were 600 presentations in three days, so I really do mean don't squeeze too hard unless you want to hear something. You know, not one of those presentations contradicted the Scriptures! Our faith is rooted in reality, It's not made up, not wishful thinking. It can be corroborated and confirmed that the God we worship this morning stirs hearts. Last Sunday, Pastor Scott challenged us and showed us how at times we are called to be faithful in a foreign land and yield to God's divine discipline in our lives. This morning, that tension is resolved with the summons to go, be restored, go back to those places. God has a sovereign way of bringing such an *inclusio* in our lives.

The conference we went to was in Boston. We got to stay in the same hotel that we stayed in the first night of our honeymoon. It was just so cool. It had been redone a couple times; we hardly recognized it, but knew the address was the same, and the bellman who greeted us. I said: “We were here before, in 1995, and we stayed here. We had just gotten married.” And he said, “I was here.” And I said, “Do you remember us?” All through the week, I kept telling him

the honeymooners have returned. God is going to bring you back. He will bring you back to a place in your life, and His purpose in exile is never the ending. If you are still lingering in exile, then hear His Word this morning, that He wants to bring you back. He wants you back, all your heart, all your soul, and when you come to Him, it's safe to come back to Him. Although Cyrus calls himself *Lugal gal Lugal*, it is the Lord God Almighty who is the King of kings of the earth. He watches over His Word to fulfill it. None of His promises fall to the ground. He knows the plans that He has for each one of us, and for us together, and He is committed to accomplishing them. He is the one who controls international politics. He controls the rising and falling of empires. He is the God of battles. He has the power to move the heart of kings, the heart of professors, the heart of bosses. He is the one who watches over the archaeologists' trowel and spade. He promises to go with us wherever we go. He stirs the hearts of political leaders. He stirs the hearts of religious leaders. He stirs the hearts of His people, and He moves us to willingly offer ourselves in return. Where is God moving your heart this morning? Let's pray.

Lord God Almighty, we worship You. Lord, You are awesome, and we love You. Father, I pray for those who feel exiled this morning, that You would come with power and bring them back. Father, I pray for each of us that You would stir our hearts. Lord, You are the same God who stirred the heart of Cyrus, who stirred the leaders of our ancestral tribes, and You stir us this morning to freely give of ourselves, our resources, our time, our talents or energy, that Your purpose might be accomplished. Lord, I pray specifically that You would stir us to initiate conversations, that the Word of the Lord might be heard in our neighborhoods, our workplaces, and that You would send us out even as You have gathered us to Yourself. Lord, we love You, we praise You, and we are privileged to be Yours this morning.

In Jesus' Name, Amen.