

God's Word

Third Sunday After the Epiphany

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10

¹ All the people gathered together into the square before the Water Gate. They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the LORD had given to Israel. ² Accordingly, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding. This was on the first day of the seventh month. ³ He read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law. ⁵ And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. ⁶ Then Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands. Then they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground. ⁸ So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.

⁹ And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep." For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law. ¹⁰ Then he said to them, "Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our LORD; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."

Today is the third Sunday after Epiphany. One of the things I like to do each Christmas is to open my gifts over the course of January. That way Christmas lasts for a whole month! In keeping with my strange practice, today is a time when we recognize that God has given us the gift of God's word ... so we give God thanks for such a wonderful gift! It may be difficult for some of us to relate because we can pick up a Bible at any time and read with understanding. We can also turn on our radio or television and find a program where a preacher or teacher is explaining the meaning of a scripture. It was not so in the past.

Jewish people have a different tradition and mark the last day of the observation of Sukkot, or Feast of Booths, with the celebration known as Simchat Torah—Rejoicing in the Torah. That day ends the annual cycle of the reading of the Torah in the synagogue, and the people read the opening of the book of Genesis to begin the process again. As the

name of the festival suggests, the events reflect great joy that God has given the law to Israel. They have an appreciation for the law and the celebration reminds them that the law is a gift from God.

The book of Nehemiah narrates Nehemiah's return to Jerusalem to rebuild the city and its wall. As King Artaxerxes' cupbearer, Nehemiah received news that the city of Jerusalem was ruined. Known to have a good disposition, he became depressed. So the king released him to help restore his homeland.

While in Jerusalem, Ezra and Nehemiah presided over a community in severe conflict, dispute, and fragmentation. The book tells about returnees from exile in Babylonian, led by Nehemiah and Ezra among others, who attempted to rebuild Jerusalem and restore Judah as a worshipping community. The future of the people was in serious doubt. Enemies attacked from outside, but even more disruptively internal disagreements threatened to undermine the community's future. The people formed factions arguing about who was in and who was out, who should govern, how the temple could be rebuilt, how Jerusalem could be reestablished in safety and peace.

The question of whether or not the Jews could resurrect life together and reclaim their identity as a worshipping people was an urgent matter of life and death. Like all communities that undergo military invasion and cultural breakdown, their identity had come unraveled. To rebuild their faith and their cultural life required recovery of their pre-Babylonian worldview, yet they needed to reimagine it for the new situation, because their history had undermined their faith. Ezra and Nehemiah's actions in today's scripture provided one way the community could reestablish itself in connection with the past and in unity and hope for the present.

By the time of our text, the work of repairing the city walls and building a scaled-down version of the temple had been completed. It was time for the people to experience the word of God read and explained.

I think we learn three things from our scripture:

1. God's word convicts us.
2. God's word assures us.
3. God's word is the center of our worship.

After Ezra completed his reading, all of the people weep (v. 9). Why? We are unsure. Perhaps they were overcome with regret for the loss of the Torah during the exile. Perhaps they had been reminded of how far short their actions had fallen from God's expectations of them. The Torah is the law of Israel, found in the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible. It is not primarily a legal system, but has instructions about how to live as God's covenant community. After the people had settled in towns, they gathered in solemn assembly at one of Jerusalem's city gates. The gates of a city were significant in the ancient world, because they were places of deliberation and judgment. When we hear God's word it tells us what God requires and reminds us of what we are to do and where we have fallen short.

God's word also assures us. On "the first day of the seventh month," Ezra began reading the Torah early in the morning and did not finish until noontime. Meanwhile all the people—were "attentive to the book of the law" (v. 3). Their renewal ceremony came to a climax when "all the people answered, 'Amen, Amen,'" agreeing to the terms of covenant like the people in the wilderness (v. 6). But the most significant aspect of this renewal occurred when teachers were sent to help the assembly understand the Torah. This means that the Torah changes as the circumstances of the people change.

For a people seeking to renew themselves as a community, they proclaimed that their unity rested in the law of Moses, the Torah that "gives light to the eyes" and is a "lamp to the feet" (Ps. 119). Given at the nation's beginning, the law of Moses guided them in their identity as worshipers of God. For us, God's word teaches us we are children of God through faith in Jesus Christ.

Our scripture also teaches us about worship and how God's word is central to worship. First, worship is something that all of the people of God do together. "All the

people gathered together into the square before the Water Gate" (v. 1). The place is significant; the square in front of the Water Gate was a place where everyone could be present, even those who were ritually unclean. The author of Nehemiah is explicit that Ezra spoke to a gathering that included men, women, and children "who could understand." The unity of God's people is emphasized by the number of times that "all" appears in this text and by Ezra's instructions to the people as they left: those who have brought food and drink were to share them with those who have brought nothing (v. 10). Nehemiah 8 brings to mind the admonitions for inclusivity in passages such as Deuteronomy 12:12 and 14:26-27.

This passage speaks a countercultural word to our individualistic West. While private spiritual disciplines and practices are important, there is no substitute for God's people gathering together to worship. As someone has said, there are many things we can do on our own, but being a Christian is not one of them. Together, we are the body of Christ. In our life together, we should seek to share and to be inclusive, so that all parts of the body feel welcomed and valued.

Second, the people know that they had entered the presence of the living God. The people did not ask Ezra to speak *about* God. They asked him to read the *Word of God*. When Ezra opened the Torah, he prayed, and the people prostrated themselves with their faces to the ground in response to God's living presence. God is not just the *object* of our worship; God is also the *subject* of our worship, the living, Holy One whom we encounter in our worship. We may well work hard to express through our worship the friendliness, hospitality, and grace of God's immanence. We must work equally hard to convey the holiness of God's transcendence, that is, "the *awesomeness* of God... the *overpoweringness* of God... the *energy and urgency* of God ... the *mystery* of God... and the *fascination* of God?"

Third, the worship led by Ezra centered on the Word. Worship in Nehemiah 8 is simple and straightforward: Ezra stepped up on a wooden platform made for the occasion

and read directly from the Torah. Then, certain named Levites present with Ezra interpreted the Scriptures, either by translating the Hebrew into the Aramaic language more commonly spoken by the people or by explaining the sense of the Torah to the people, passage by passage.

Finally, what we see in Nehemiah 8 is worship that transforms lives. God's Word can convict us and assure us, because the Scriptures give us a lens to look at this world and our lives through God's eyes. We are reminded of God's presence and love when we otherwise might feel alone and abandoned; we are pierced with words of judgment when we might otherwise be puffed up with arrogance and self-satisfaction.

When we gather together as God's people, when we are conscious of coming into the presence of the living and holy God, when we center our worship on God's Word, when we offer all of ourselves to God, we cannot help but be changed over time. We gather to give glory to God and to have God make a difference in us so that we can be sent to make a difference in God's world. When all of that happens, we have reason to follow the example of the people on that special day in Nehemiah 8 who ate and drank together and made "great rejoicing" (v. 12). **W. Carter Lester**

Returning to Nehemiah, we see among the people a pattern we can use in our worship. Ezra, who had returned from exile with the "book of the law of Moses" (v. 1), stood before the people of Israel and read it to them. Notice that the peoples' first reaction to the law was to cry out in repentance for their sin: "'This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep.' For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law" (v. 9). However, beyond that initial reaction came the realization of the law as the revelation of God to the people for their benefit, not their condemnation. They were told to celebrate: "Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine... and do not be grieved" (v. 10).

Although we, as Christians, deny the law or any system of works as a way to salvation, we can embrace the law for the purposes it serves: restraining evil, convicting of sin, and aiding our understanding of God's will. Because we know the law as gift from

God, we understand that the entire law can be summarized positively as loving God and loving one's neighbor. Christ becomes for us not the rejection of the law but its fulfillment. No longer can Christians, as we are prone to do, simply think of the Old Testament as containing the law and, therefore, telling of a God of judgment, while we now worship a God of love and mercy. The law remains, in a sense, in the gospel, and it continues to serve us. In that we can rejoice. **Rick Nutt**

In this season of Epiphany, Ezra reminds us that we too are recipients of divine instruction, a people called to continual renewal and reinterpretation of God's word among us. That word is alive and ever new in the power of the Spirit among us.

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