

“All the People Gathered Together”

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

Merritt Island Presbyterian Church

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“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. 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. 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. 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. 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 worshipped the LORD with their faces to the ground. So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. 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. 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.”

Ok, I never thought I would be saying this. It’s cold outside!! I looked at the temperature in my car on the way to church yesterday morning and it said 51 degrees! I said, “What???” It didn’t feel like 51! There must have been a wind chill of 32 because I was freezing! Then I got to thinking, after I got home yesterday afternoon and changed into my sweatpants, that if I’m cold, I bet the Florida natives are REALLY COLD. Am I right?

So I brought you something. I climbed deep into my closet and pulled out my Minnesota, full-length parka. And my Muk Luks! These fur-lined babies are guaranteed to keep you warm and dry!

And you know, with this cold weather -- and all that snow coming down up north -- - I think maybe I should help ya'll get ready--just in case the snow decides to head our way. I received an email yesterday with some tips for shoveling snow. And there was this little blue man illustrating each of the tips. Think of this as the 10 commandments of snow shoveling.

1. Stretch first!
2. Push snow, and use your legs to lift when you can't push it.
3. Keep your back straight as you move from the squat position to the upright position.
4. Use your shoulder muscles!
5. Hold the shovel close to your upper body.
6. Keep one hand close to the shovel blade for better leverage.
7. Don't twist your upper body as you throw snow!
8. Keep hydrated.
9. Rest frequently. (the blue man sitting on a chair in the snow)

And my favorite, number 10: the illustration is two blue people holding hands, side by side. One has a shovel --and the other has a snow blower. Number 10 is (in big letters) ASK FOR HELP (and small letters) "whenever possible." After surviving 4 winters in Minnesota, I have some advice. Skip steps 1 through 9. Go straight to 10, and if no one is available to help, just wait till springtime. It'll melt. Eventually.

But seriously, snow can really be a problem for the elderly in Minnesota, particularly in the rural areas. One of the challenges of winter in Minnesota for me as a pastor seeking to minister to ALL of my flock was that many of our most faithful attendees couldn't make it to church when it snowed or was icy. We missed them,

and they felt bad; they really wanted to be there--for the fellowship and worship and the preaching and teaching.

So I thought and thought. How could I bring the Word of God to **ALL** of them?

I am so excited that we are studying Nehemiah today! Who in here has read Nehemiah? Good for you! If you are looking for Nehemiah, it's right after Ezra and before Esther. Ezra and Nehemiah go together, and the two books may have been one, in the beginning. Ezra may have written both books, or Ezra and Nehemiah may each have written their own. Or someone else may have written them entirely. Parts of Ezra and Nehemiah are written in the first person, like a journal. The time is at the end of the Babylonian Captivity, after King Cyrus of Persia declares that God is charging him to rebuild the temple at Jerusalem and restore the Jewish religion. The temple and the Holy City had been destroyed in 586 or 587 BCE; Israel was scattered and beaten, struggling to keep their faith without being able to gather around God's Word in community, and without worship and sacrifice in the temple.

Ezra, from Babylon, a scribe or "secretary, versed in the law of Moses which the Lord, the God of Israel, had given," (Ezra 7:7) came to Jerusalem in the "seventh year of King Artaxerxes" (Ezra 7:7-8)--around 458 B.C.E. Nehemiah, who had held an important position in the Persian court, arrived to be the governor 13 years later, around 445 B.C.E. Being a "secretary" was a high political office, such as someone appointed secretary of the treasury or the province. King Artaxerxes had appointed him as secretary in Judah on behalf of the religious institutions. He was also a priest, who had made a special study of the law of Moses, and so was able to interpret the law for the Jewish community. The cool thing I discovered about Ezra was that he was the founder of Jewish *exegesis*--the close, critical study of a text to determine the meaning and application.

Well, Ezra was brought to Jerusalem not just to reform the Jewish religion, but to restore it; to make a fresh beginning. He had to teach them how to be the people of God. Many years had passed since they were together and whole as a community. And they had been unfaithful. Ezra learns that many of the people of Israel, including the priests and the Levites (the leaders of the community), had married foreign wives. Families were practicing idol worship. Ezra 9:2 says, "When I heard this, I tore my garment and my mantle and I pulled out some of the hair of my head and my beard. I sat down dumbfounded... At the evening sacrifice, I rose from my humbled state and with my torn garment and mantle, I went on my knees and spread out my hands to the Lord, my God."

Ezra has his work cut out for him! But so does Nehemiah, who arrives after Ezra and finds that the small remnant of Israelites who had survived the captivity was "in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates" are burnt. (Neh. 1:3) Hearing this, Nehemiah "sat down, wept, and mourned for days." Then he "fasted and prayed to the God of heaven." He leads the community that is broken emotionally, spiritually and economically to repent from their sins, grow stronger, and rebuild the wall, despite opposition and ridicule from their Samaritan neighbors.

And now, many more of the exiles and their descendants return. In Nehemiah 7, the chapter that precedes today's reading, we find a list of all who came back after the wall was rebuilt--and the people could safely live in their Holy City once again. The whole assembly, we read in Neh. 7:66 is 42,360 people, plus 7,337 male and female slaves, 245 male and female singers, 736 horses, 245 mules, 435 camels, and 6,720 donkeys. That's the "all" that is gathered in the square before the Water Gate" in Neh. 8:1; more than 50,000 men, women and children--slave and free, plus many animals. They demand that Ezra come and preach from the Holy Scriptures! It's their idea, not Ezra's! The Levites, Nehemiah and Ezra share in the teaching and worship that goes on for about 6 hours! Can you imagine this? They are outside the temple--not only are there too many to fit in the temple at the same time, they

wouldn't all have been permitted to attend. The women and children would not have been allowed to enter the holiest places. They would not have been able to hear the Word of God or begin to understand.

What we see here is worship at its most powerful, completely centered on God's Word, and it's not even in a building! They listen to Ezra and the other teachers--from early morning until midday, "both men and women and all who could hear with understanding." The people stand as the Scripture is read, lifting up their hands when they pray, "Amen, Amen!" They humble themselves before God, bowing their heads as they worship the Lord "with their faces to the ground."

The miracle of this passage is that God's Word was completely accessible to **all**. Everyone was given "ears to hear" and hearts open to change. And what was the effect of God's Word? They wept! Why did they cry? They were reminded of their sins! The law convicted them of how much they fell short, just as God's Word continues to both convict us and inspire us to want to change.

But Nehemiah, Ezra and the Levites told the people not to grieve! They wanted them to turn away from their sins and the brokenness of their lives--and look to the God *who would heal and provide*. "This day," they say, (meaning, the day that the Scriptures were opened to them) "is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep." They say, go home, eat, drink and celebrate--and share with all who don't have enough. "Do not be grieved," Nehemiah, Ezra, and the Levites say, "for the joy of the Lord is your strength!"

After my first winter in Minnesota, when I felt bad for the people who could not make it to church on snowy days, I started an ecumenical Bible study at a senior living community in the center of town. We had a core group of our members faithfully attend AND they invited their neighbors and friends. We averaged 12 to 20 people every week, which is pretty good in a town of only 1,300 people. And we

truly dug deeply into the Word, a close, critical study, chapter by chapter, line by line. After 2 and ½ years of teaching on my own, I invited a Methodist colleague and friend, the Rev. Dean Nosek, to join me--and the study was better than before. We read Ruth, Acts, James, and Joshua. Pastor Dean began Genesis after I left. The group, he says, is still going strong!

The best part of the study was at the end, when people would share what they had learned and we would pray. I was always amazed at the insight of this group, most of whom were older than 85.

Friends, how can we take God's Word to **ALL** our community? We have gifted Bible teachers--intelligent, creative, and educated people, blessed with the time and the passion to teach and learn. Let us look to our example in Nehemiah today, when more than 50,000 men, women and children, slave and free, plus many animals, gathered around God's Word in the square of Jerusalem at the Water Gate.

They wept--and found strength together in the joy of the Lord!

Let us pray.

Holy One, we thank you for your Word that is so easily accessible to all of us. We have been given so much!! Thank you for your Spirit that speaks to us as we gather in your name, in this beautiful place, in this lovely community that is warm almost all year round. Help us to hear your voice, dear Lord, and humbly obey. Give us passion and excitement to reach our entire community with your Word. Raise up teachers and stir our hearts with a desire to learn, more and more, and grow closer and closer to you. Convict us of our sins and move us to tears of gratitude for what you have done for us through your Son! Strengthen us with your joy! In Christ we pray. Amen.