

Nehemiah 8:1-8

## The Start of a Great Religion

Another minister once told me, speaking about this very passage, “Don’t let them complain that your sermons are too long. Remind them that Ezra read the entire Torah that day, and they were standing the whole time”; verse 3 has it, “from early morning until midday,” think you could you last that long? Well, don’t worry, I can’t talk that long.

Let’s picture the scene here- first day of the seventh month: that matches our middle of September. All the people of Jerusalem and the outlying areas gathered and crowded together. Standing, as I said; and when Ezra began, perhaps by saying something like, “This is the word of the Lord,” the people answered “Amen,” and lifted up their hands in silent praise. And then they bowed their heads and worshipped, their faces to the ground- which may mean they stood in the same attitude as we do in prayer, or that they actually fell to the ground in repentance, faces in the dust. We can’t be sure which is correct. But I think we can understand that the people were emotionally involved as they took part in this outdoor worship.

And they should be, this was a big event in the life of God’s people- the first time they had gathered like this in eight hundred years. It is hard to know the exact

chronology of all that is described in the Old Testament books of Ezra and Nehemiah, but this we do know, that until now there had been no wall around the city to protect the citizens, or to safeguard the treasures of the rebuilt Temple. Maybe the people were emotional because they knew they were becoming at last a civilized and stable and more secure society, with government and leadership. Nehemiah, governor and administrator, had overseen the building of the wall- that's detailed in chapters 1-7; and now, an organized religion, as Ezra, the priest, is leading them in worship.

It's easier for us to read this scripture devotionally, thinking this is how we should react to hearing God's Word. But this is a deep and challenging passage that shows us the start something new. Everything has to begin somewhere and somehow, even religion- or perhaps especially religion- and often, things have several beginning points. Think about your own faith. When did it begin? When you were a child? If you heard the good news of the God who loves you while you were still young, you are fortunate- it isn't that way for everyone. But think how your perspective has changed over time; think how the way you believe has grown and been transformed by the years that have passed and the influences of technology, travel, education, and the clash of cultures you've experienced in your

life; the sorrows and joys you have known; the people you've met and learned from. Our faith isn't some changeless thing. Even if the object of our faith is true and trustworthy, we are always changing, and seeing our lives differently. We know that don't we? It is so important to know that.

Consider our Christian religion. When did it begin, and where? Last Sunday, we examined the baptism of Jesus, is that the beginning, when God called Jesus- "my Beloved Son," the voice proclaimed from heaven- and the very next verse has Jesus beginning his ministry. Or does Christian faith begin as Jesus gathered followers around him, or perhaps particularly when Peter spoke his belief that Jesus was the Messiah, and Son of God. Do we find our faith at the end of everything- at the crucifixion and burial? Or does it start at the new beginning, on that glorious Easter morning? Of course, we must say that Christianity begins with Jesus Christ, that's our confession, but we usually say the church began at Pentecost, when God's Spirit descended and thousands heard and believed the gospel. And maybe that's the key, that faith begins for us when we hear and believe. Thus, we understand that faith changes- personal faith, and the faith of communities and cultures- consider all the different interpretations and movements in these two thousand years since that day the church began.

Well, our passage recounts a moment similar to Pentecost. Imagine it, the people crowding together, listening and believing. And here is what makes this a new beginning, as well: that God's people gather- "as one" our scripture has it, they hear God's word for them, and they worship; they see themselves in a new way, as a unified and secure people, and on this day they recommit themselves ("as one") to the God of Israel. This event is one of those transformative moments. After all they have lived through- exile in Babylon, deprivation, and the fearful prospects of living unprotected in a dangerous land: how much had their vision of God changed because of it; how much altered was their understanding of faith?

So Ezra reads aloud the Law; Ezra, the father of Judaism. And chapter 8 is the story of how that religion began. The second half of verse 4, is a list of thirteen names, men sitting behind Ezra as he read. Kind of like deans and faculty at graduation. And in the verses following our passage, is another list of thirteen names, priests who passed among the people that day to give them understanding of all that was read to them. Here is the moment that the people become the Jews, as they hear the Torah read, and as the teachers explain it. Certainly, their faith begins with the acts of God in their history and in the history of the world, but faith becomes religion now as they come together to worship, as they yield themselves

the God of these great acts, and as they acquiesce to a certain interpretation of the scriptures. It is the same way for us: our faith begins with Jesus, but our faith becomes religion as we share the same doctrines and hold to the same sacred writings, and as we join together in particular forms of worship to praise God.

Here is the community at worship. The people react in proper humility: they bow their heads and worship. That's the start of true religion; and they hear the teachers lead them into the deeper meaning of faith. In the next verses, they say, "This is a holy day, and so don't weep, don't mourn." They tell the people, "Go now, eat and drink and be joyful, because the joy of the Lord is your strength." And do this, "Share what you have with those who have no food prepared, because this day is holy."

For all the difficulties this passage presents, still we can see in it good news: God's joy and God's blessings given to us, and the unity of spirit among those who share God's gifts with one another.

"And Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, helped the people to understand the Law; they gave the sense of it, so that the people understood the reading." That's from

verses 7-8. I may have skipped the earlier names, but I didn't want you thinking I wouldn't read the names because I was afraid of them. Besides, it's important for us to remember what is going on here. We should not think they are simply explaining scripture; it is, rather, a reteaching- it is catechism and nurture on the one hand, and on the other, indoctrination or propaganda. And the cynic in me wants to ask, "Why should any of us be compelled to think like Ezra, or the other professors from his school of theology?" I don't doubt we could learn much from them. But the key word is "compelled," forced to think as they do. And let us not gloss over it, acceptance and obedience were required. For that matter, why should I be told to think like the Pope, or Alexander Campbell, the father of our movement; or John Calvin or St. Augustine, or even Paul the Apostle? Think of your favorite religious leaders or writers. If they are sincere and humble, there is much they can teach us, and we should listen. But they don't know everything.

The reality of human life in community is this: we will never agree completely, and no single person possesses the perfect truth of life; no one has complete knowledge. So, there will be times when we must agree to disagree, and then, *decide to love one another enough* to smooth over the rough edges of honest dissent and diversity. What is most important is to remember God's love for the

world, and as verse 10 tells us, to rejoice in it; and to share God's goodness with those who see God differently, and to give a word of hopefulness to those who do not know God at all: so that, in the end, we may all, to the best of our ability and knowledge, offer to God our humble obedience.