

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

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.'

It had been the most traumatic of experiences. The Babylonians had come and enslaved them, taken them from their homes, ripped families apart, and done God knows what else to them. Their faiths had been shaken. They had been violently separated from everything familiar, everything comforting, everything that oriented them to normality and stability. This utter act of disorientation brought forth very uncomfortable questions for the Israelites.

Where is God? Does God still love us? What have we done to deserve such trial and tribulation? Does God even exist? Will there ever be an end to such travesty? If God does, in fact, still exist, does God care for our wellbeing? Will there be life after this evil? Will happiness take its rightful place and will we be restored as God's beloved children who enjoy God's protection and providence?

No one likes to ask these questions. I would be willing to bet that there is not one person in this room who has not asked at least one of these questions at some point during his or her life. Suffering is part of the human condition. Trauma comes in many forms and in varying degrees of severity. What ties traumas of all sorts together is that they disorient us and leave us in the scary wilderness of making sense out of the senseless.

The Israelites had long suffered at the hand of the Babylonians. After decades of enslavement, the time had come that generations of Israelites were being born who had never known Jerusalem. These children did not know what it was like to be in their homeland. This fraction within the communal memory added further insult to injury.

However, after many long years, the Babylonian captivity came to an end and the Israelites were released to make the arduous journey back home. What would they find?

Well, what they found was a desperate need to rebuild - to rebuild their city, to rebuild their relationship with God, to rebuild their very way of life. The center of all needs was the Temple, which had been viciously destroyed at the beginning of the Babylonian captivity.

It took years to rebuild the Temple - it was, after all, a massive structure that did not get erected over night. This long reconstruction project gave the people much time to reconfigure and reorient themselves to their new reality. They longed for what was and, yet, realized that their experience (for better or for worse) prevented them from moving backward. Trauma does that; it separates us from what was and forces us, most of the time against our will, to move forward into the scary territory of that which will be.

The book of Nehemiah is a historical narrative of the Israelites' struggle to rebuild in the wake of trauma. Three major things happen in today's passage: the priest, Ezra, reads the Torah to the people, the whole community agrees to revive their trust in, and observance of, God's law, and finally, the people gather in renewed celebration of their life in God's protection.¹

First, the people gather by the city gate which was where, in those days, the community gathered to deliberate things of great importance. The rebuilding of the Temple was of great importance. However, what was of ever *greater* importance was rebuilding that which could not be constructed by brick and mortar; that is, the people's relationship with God and God's word. Ezra gathers the people and reads the Torah for several hours. All the people, women and men alike, join and listen attentively to the Torah. Here it is helpful for us to be reminded that the Torah (the first five books of the Bible) is first and foremost a narrative instruction regarding how the people of God are to live in relation to one another and to God. As the people listen to the Word of God, they are moved by its wisdom and hear it with different ears. You see, the ears that were listening to the Word of God were ears that had listened to horrible things - screams of mothers being torn away from their children, screams of slave-drivers whipping their helpless servants, screams of Israelites crying out to God for salvation. But now, these ears heard the words of God's scripture differently. These weathered ears heard a renewed promise from God to restore God's people. The ears of the Israelites hear something different in the reading of God's word that they didn't hear before. They are moved by God's grace. They stand and raise their hands in praise. They worship God and promise to live anew in God's newness.

Secondly, it has become clear to them that God has heard their cry and brought them home. God has not, in fact, abandoned the covenant made long ago. God still loves them. God still cares for them. God still desires for a relationship with them. Since God has renewed God's covenant with them, the Israelites decide to do their part and agree to the new terms of the same covenant. "Amen, Amen!" they cry out in today's passage. This double exhortation was the way that a treaty was sealed. In a way, they hear God's word and say, "so be it! So be it!" Now, to be perfectly clear, this does not signal an end or "resolution" to their trauma. Anyone who has undergone significant trauma knows that it is never that simple. However, as the people of God continue to process their pain, they make a communal decision to do so with a renewed relationship with God as their guide.

¹ with much thanksgiving to Kathleen O'Connor for her exegetical organization of this passage as recorded in *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 1*.

Thirdly, because of this renewal, this revival of worship, the people celebrate. However, this was apparently not their first inclination. Their first response was grief. Today's text tells us that, upon hearing the Word of the Lord, the people wept, perhaps because of their fear that they had not lived up to it and thus was the reason for their captivity. However, Ezra and Nehemiah, the prophets of God, tell the people not to weep but to rejoice in celebration! Today is a day for gladness, they say! Today is a day to sing and praise for God is with us. In other words, the leaders of the people, in this supreme act of worship, invite the people to walk in newness with the Lord and to listen again to the fresh word of the Lord.

Today's passage reminds us of the reason we return to God's word week in and week out. We come to God's Word because we hear God's Word differently each time we find ourselves before it. Just like the Israelites hearing God's Word with a renewed sense of understanding and appreciation, we gather to listen to these stories of old because *we* have changed since the last time we heard them.

A mother-to-be is probably going to hear the story of Mary's pregnancy differently than she did before her time of expectation.

A recovering alcoholic is probably going to hear the story of the prodigal son differently than he did before his sobriety.

A person who has just lost their job is probably going to hear the Sermon on the Mount differently than they did while they were employed.

In today's passage, the people of Israel heard the stories of God's salvation with a renewed sense of beauty and fascination on the other side of the Babylonian captivity.

What experiences are you going through that color the ways you hear scripture? What is that story in the bible that you return to and have heard at least a dozen different ways because of the context in which you read it?

At the very least, today's text calls us to marvel at the fact that perhaps our most important role as a church is to gather on a regular basis to hear and be transformed by God's Word. God's Word never changes but the Spirit endlessly changes the way we hear it!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.