

I remember being asked by Terry why we would be moving to Melbourne (besides the weather). We have no family or friends in Melbourne. We lived in a pretty special place.

But why move? Because, for Mary and me, the most important thing for us is to be obedient to God. So when God called us to leave family and friends and home in Qld to come and create a new home, to make new friends and to be a part of a new church family – our heart is to willingly obey.

So on behalf of Mary and I (and Cara who some of you are yet to meet), we say thank you for opening your hearts and lives to us and making us feel welcome.

Photos and celebrations are both ways that we can mark things worthy of remembering. And in the Bible, we read of occasions when God actually commanded His people to celebrate and remember. To be reminded of things, that over the years are best *not* forgotten. The olive leaf you collected as you came in has a part to play in that for us today.

If you have your Bible with you, I invite you to turn to Nehemiah 8. (Get to Psalms too far) Nehemiah 8 we read of one such celebration that was rediscovered from memories past as the leaders of God's people studied the scriptures.

So in Nehemiah 8, in the NLT we read these words, and they will also be on the screen behind me.

Nehemiah 8:13-18 (NLT) On October 9 the family leaders of all the people, together with the priests and Levites, met

with Ezra the scribe to go over the Law in greater detail. As they studied the Law, they discovered that the LORD had commanded through Moses that the Israelites should live in shelters during the festival to be held that month.

He had said that a proclamation should be made throughout their towns and in Jerusalem, telling the people to go to the hills to get branches from olive, wild olive, myrtle, palm, and other leafy trees. They were to use these branches to make shelters in which they would live during the festival, as prescribed in the Law.

So the people went out and cut branches and used them to build shelters on the roofs of their houses, in their courtyards, in the courtyards of God's Temple, or in the squares just inside the Water Gate and the Ephraim Gate. So everyone who had returned from captivity lived in these shelters during the festival, and they were all filled with great joy!

The Israelites had not celebrated like this since the days of Joshua son of Nun. Ezra read from the Book of the Law of God on each of the seven days of the festival. Then on the eighth day they held a solemn assembly, as was required by law.

So on the 9th October 445 BC, the heads of family groups, along with the priests and Levites met with Ezra, and as they read the book of Leviticus, they discovered that God had commanded them to get together and celebrate the Festival of Shelters.

According to one scholar, it may have been as long as 92 years earlier when God's people last celebrated this festival. Several generations had grown up not knowing of the Festival, and neither celebrated it or understood its symbolic significance in their story of God's redemptive power.

When the leaders of God's people discovered what was written in Leviticus 23, they immediately responded. "We've gotta do something about this."

What a powerful thing it is, when the leaders of God's people, spend time reading and reflecting on God's word. But not only that, when they then respond and encourage God's people to also respond by living out what it means to be a part of God's redemptive story.

May I encourage you today, to pray for the Ministry Team and those in the Leadership Group. Pray that we might continue to be people who not only read God's word but also provide leadership as we encourage we who are Northern Community to live out our part in God's redemptive story.

And encouraged they were. Nehemiah tells us that over the next week or so, the people responded. They went out and collected branches from olive, myrtle, palm and other magnificent trees and made outside shelters to live in for seven days.

So you can imagine, these humble, makeshift shelters popping up all over the place. On rooftops, in the courtyards of homes, in the courtyard of the temple. The whole nation had a camping celebration. And from their vantage point through this three-sided lean-to, they could see their homes

and their neighbours. All that they owned and had only a few years earlier returned to was out there before them.

But for us to discover the symbolic significance of the festival of shelters, we too need to remember, to discover the words afresh, that were once read by these leaders in Nehemiah's day.

In Leviticus 23:40f we also discover the rich symbolism of the Festival of Shelters and how it is woven into God's redemptive, transformative story.

Leviticus 23:40-43 (NLT) On the first day gather branches from magnificent trees—palm fronds, boughs from leafy trees, and willows that grow by the streams. Then celebrate with joy before the LORD your God for seven days. You must observe this festival to the LORD for seven days every year. This is a permanent law for you, and it must be observed in the appointed month from generation to generation.

For seven days you must live outside in little shelters. All native-born Israelites must live in shelters. This will remind each new generation of Israelites that I made their ancestors live in shelters when I rescued them from the land of Egypt. I am the LORD your God."

So on the 22nd October 445BC, the nation of Israel moved out of the comfort and security of their homes, moved out of the ease of having belongings at their fingertips, moved out from the protection their homes provided.

And for seven days they lived, with the bare basics of life around them. They slept with unimpeded breezes blowing

across their beds, glimpses of stars through the thatched roof. And with the flickering of the lamps dancing on the breeze, they remember that hundreds of years ago, God called His people to leave the seeming comforts of Egypt. To leave their homes and to move to a land full of promise. They remembered that God called their ancestors out of something that was seemingly safe, and God was called them to something better.

And they, on that night in the October of 445BC were now resting on the ground promised to their ancestors past. They were the beneficiaries of the promises of God and the obedience of His people. And as the flame continued to dance, they remembered that for 40 years, God had faithfully provided for their daily needs. And as they looked back, they were reminded that the same faithful God of ages past, was with them today.

Well, it didn't take Mary, Cara and me 40 years to get here. Only 3 days. But for Mary and me, we believe God has called us to leave the security of a home in Qld and to make a new home in this land of God's promise. And as much as we love our home, our families and beautiful friends, we love God more. And so we come, not because of how good we are, and as great a bunch of people you are, we didn't come because of you. We came because we believe God has called us to join *with* you in discovering and taking hold of His promises for us as Northern Community, now and into the future.

But I wonder; I wonder what God might be calling and stirring in you? If you have your olive leaf, I would ask that you pull it out and rest it in your open hand.

Before you is a reminder of the Festival of Shelters,
a reminder of God's faithfulness,
a reminder of God's promises,
but also a challenge from God, of being willing to
hold the stuff of life lightly, to trust Him tightly.

What may God be calling you to step out of the comfort of, and to say "God I choose you more than this". "I commit to holding this lightly because I love You more." Individually, what might that be?

As a church family, we have woven into our story a willingness to step outside of the security of four churches and to become one. But the story of change and transformation did not stop there. And as much as we might find the now, safe and secure, I believe God is and will call us at to continue to take steps of faith. God will call us to let go of our personal preferences, and what we find comfortable as a church family, to hold that stuff lightly, as we step into the promises for the future.

And just as God's people in 445 BC were reminded of God's calling, and God's faithfulness. May we also trust in God's faithfulness.

In a moment a song will be played by the team at the sound desk. And while it plays I invite you to hold your olive leaf and reflect on a couple of questions on the screen. To respond to what God is saying to you today and then to take home and place the olive leaf in a spot to remind you of what you and God have shared together today.

Response Slide

How has God shown Himself faithful to you in the past?

What might you be holding on to, more than God?

What encouragement can you take from today's readings?

Respond, recommit yourself to God's redemption story and promise.

After our response time, we will have a final song, and I will come back and pray.

NMYNCF&F in the knowledge of God's faithfulness in the past, be prepared individually and as a church family to trust God, and step out in loving obedience to embrace His promised future.