

Revival at the Water Gate

Nehemiah 8:1-12 and Luke 4:14-21

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Thirty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time

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Today our study of the Book of Nehemiah comes to an end. We have been at this since the beginning of September, so it's been quite a journey. And for me it has been quite a surprise.

This Old Testament person, with such a strange-sounding name, has quite a lot to teach us about what it means to be a faithful follower of God.

Sam will be preaching next week, and because next Sunday is known on the liturgical calendar as Christ the King, he is going to reflect on Christ (and how a person like Nehemiah prepares us to meet him and helps us to anticipate him).

Today, the story from Nehemiah, chapter 8, as you heard, is about a kind of celebration, although the word "celebration" does not quite capture what happens here. The wall around Jerusalem is now complete – after only 52 days of construction. The people have overcome many obstacles and challenges, which would have stopped most construction projects.

And now the people do something to mark the occasion. Let's talk together this morning about what they do and why it's significant and what we can learn from it.

But before we do that, let's read together from the New Testament, and I think this story from Luke's gospel – about Jesus in his hometown synagogue – I think this story helps us to understand a bit better what happened in Jerusalem way back in the fifth century BC.

¹⁴ Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. ¹⁵ He was teaching in their synagogues, and everyone praised him.

¹⁶ He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷ and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

¹⁸ "The Spirit of the Lord is on me,

because he has anointed me

to proclaim good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners

and recovery of sight for the blind,

to set the oppressed free,

¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."^[1]

²⁰ Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. ²¹ He began by saying to them, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”

The word of the Lord! Thanks be to God.

Dear friends of Jesus Christ,

As I hope you have noticed throughout the fall, I have been energized and excited about Nehemiah, of all people.

Several times I have felt as though I found something new in scripture, like a buried treasure, except of course that Nehemiah has been here all the time, not buried at all, and not exactly hiding from us.

And today, rather than feeling a letdown, because the story is coming to an end, I think we have a story before us that, in many ways, is better and more interesting than all of the others. There is so much here. I hope we have time to do it justice.

So, let's get started.

As you heard me say, the wall around Jerusalem has now been re-built. Nehemiah's inner call was to leave Persia and go to Jerusalem for the purpose of re-building this wall which had been in ruins for 70 years or so.

But at some point Nehemiah must have realized that the wall by itself was not very important. God, as always, had a much bigger vision in mind. Yes, I suppose that re-building the wall, like re-building the Temple, which occurred at about the same time, was important at some level, but God – as I hope you know – is always thinking and planning far into the future.

Our perspective is always so limited. Too often we see only what is right in front of us, and we mistake that for the whole plan. But God's perspective includes all of history.

What needed to be restored was not just a wall, but a people – a people who thought of themselves as a people, a people who thought of themselves as *God's* people ... chosen, set apart, gifted with a special mission and purpose. And it was from this people that God would call forth a savior for the world.

So, here they are. Nehemiah recognizes that something significant has been accomplished. He doesn't know the whole story. No human being ever does. But he senses that a significant milestone has been reached, and he decides that the occasion should be marked with a gathering of some kind.

As I said earlier, this gathering may have started as a celebration, but it soon became a lot more than that. By the end of the story, the people were weeping. And not only that, but they started a process of confession and repentance. They were making promises about how they were going to live their lives going forward.

So, what may have started as a celebration became much more.

Here is the first thing I would like you to see today. I have three insights into the story today, and this is the first.

These moments of celebration and achievement and confession and promise-making are far more important than we sometimes realize. We should be having more of them than we do. We – and I mean “church people” like you and me – we are uniquely equipped for gatherings like these. We know how to plan one of these. We do it every single week.

Whenever a baby is born, whenever a couple decides to get married, whenever a loved one dies, whenever a 15 year old decides to confirm the faith that his or her parents passed along, there is – usually – a sense that the community of faith should come together. We should celebrate, we should sing, we should pray, we should tell stories, we should remember who we are.

And – this is important – we should remember who God is.

That’s pretty much the definition of worship, by the way.

I think – tell me if you disagree with this – I think there is something in human nature that wants to come together and wants to worship. In fact, when it doesn’t happen, when we fail to commemorate these important moments in our lives, we feel as though something is missing. We feel as though we have missed a great opportunity.

So, we put on good clothes (and I know the definition of “good clothes” has been changing over the years), but we put on something nice, we make sure that there is food available afterwards, and then we come together in one place to mark the occasion.

I wonder why this doesn’t happen more than it does.

A long time ago now, in the first church I served as the lead pastor, a family from Laos had immigrated to the United States after the American war in southeast Asia, and they were being sponsored by the church I was serving at the time.

Church members taught them English, we taught them about money, and we helped them navigate their way through American culture.

And then, at some point - this was wonderful! - they began to teach us.

Like all immigrant families everywhere, they started poor, with barely enough to survive, but at some point they had pooled enough money to buy a car, because in the U.S. survival depends on having air to breathe and a car to drive – the building blocks of life.

And so, their idea was to have a blessing of the Toyota, and they called one day to find out if I would come to bless their Toyota. Which I agreed to do, although I have to tell you that I had never blessed a car. I have cursed a car when it didn’t start on a cold morning when I had to be somewhere, but I learned nothing at all about car blessings at seminary.

Anyway, the day came, and there was food and excitement, there were people everywhere, they were all dressed up, and there was the car – in the driveway, recently cleaned and polished, and no cared – or seemed to care – that the car had a little rust here and there. It was not exactly new.

And as I approached the car to lay my hands on it, all of these Laotian people, dozens of them, were looking at me.

Looking back, I now realize that that moment was as holy as any moment of worship I have ever been a part of. We sang and we prayed. I read scripture (it was hard to find something about Toyotas in the Bible). And then I offered a thanksgiving to God for his marvelous provision for us.

And when I was finished, everyone there that day said “Amen.” And then there was a kind of chant ... in English. “God is good. All the time.”

Tell me something. Why don't we have more of these gatherings in our lives? Why do we keep these celebrations to the birth of a baby or the death of a loved one? I don't know about you, but I need more frequent reminders about who I am and who God is and how God has blessed me and called me to be his own.

That's what the people of Israel did that day in front of the Water Gate.

And then, here is the second thing I want you to see in this story. Nehemiah stepped back. Did you notice that? It's remarkable.

The hero of the story, the one who prayed at every step along the way, the one who was made governor of the people of Jerusalem, even though even no one knew his name two months before this – Nehemiah, at the greatest moment of triumph, took a step back.

Instead of standing in front to take a bow, he took a step back and invited Ezra the priest to come and up read the law of God, which I should point out was not the ten commandments. Ezra began to read from the writings of Moses. It was their history, words many of them had never heard before.

And Nehemiah – I can't get over this – refused to make this celebration about him.

From start to finish, this gathering was about God – and what God was doing among them. That's what I have meant week after week when I have said that Nehemiah was a type of Christ. His ego is almost entirely absent from the story. God did not send Nehemiah so that Nehemiah could be celebrated.

Don't get me wrong. He must have been an extraordinarily gifted man. But he had this exceedingly rare trait, almost absent among leaders today. He did not need to be thanked or praised or recognized. He did not insist that they name the wall in his honor. They did not dedicate the “Nehemiah Memorial Wall” that day,

Instead, at this important moment, he took a step back, and the word of God – the writings of Moses – what we now call the Torah – the word of God took the full attention of the people.

The story tells us that the Law was read from daybreak until noon. And when you heard that, you might have thought, **“That's a long time to hear scripture read.”** And of course you would be right.

In some traditions today, in fact most Christian people around the world, stand when the Gospel is read. We sit and try to be comfortable in our seats. And we can't wait for the reading to be over and for the sermon to begin.

But there were times in history when the reading of scripture was the central act of worship. There was this time, of course, in the fifth century B.C., in front of the Water Gate, but I want to tell you about another time.

Emperor Constantine, who (as you know) converted to Christianity and declared religious tolerance for Christianity in the Roman Empire – Emperor Constantine was led to faith or at least deeply influenced in his conversion by his mother Helena.

And Helena was to spend a great deal of time in Israel. It was Helena who identified various holy sites, such as where Jesus was buried after his crucifixion. Well, Helena kept a travel diary of her visit, and a great deal of what we know of worship in the early church we know because of her and the notes she took.

One of the most striking passages from the diary has to do with the reading of scripture. Helena reports that on Sundays there were gathering of believers around the Jerusalem, and when scripture was read – usually one of the gospels – the people came alive. They shouted, they cried, they laughed, they were fully present with each story. It was the loudest, most animated part of their worship.

If you have ever been to children’s theater, then you know how this goes. Children call out to the actors on stage. To them it is real. They make no distinction between reality and the imaginary.

Anyway, by comparison, I have often thought about how we respond to the reading of scripture, and I wonder how it has lost its place of prominence. In a week or so you are going to be invited to participate in a survey about worship, and one of the questions has to do with which part of the service is most meaningful – is it music, is it the sermon, or is it something else?

And I wonder how many of us, in all honesty, are going to say that the public reading of God’s holy word is the high point for us.

Re-read Nehemiah chapter 8 sometime and reflect on the response there. Was it because Ezra was such a skilled reader? Maybe. But we have many skilled readers in this church too.

Here’s the question I want to ask you: What was it about the reading of those words that stirred the hearts of the people?

And that of course brings me to the third and final thing I want you to see – namely, that something happened.

Something happened on that day that had not been planned, that could not have been planned. The reading was planned of course. The food afterward was planned. But something happened during the course of that day by the Water Gate that was not planned.

I want to propose to you that what happens – and please hear me out – some of you will accept this immediately, but not everyone – I want to propose to you that what happens when we read and interpret scripture is a life-changing encounter with a reality beyond ourselves.

Before I go any further, I want you to remember the gospel story I read for you from Luke chapter 4. Jesus, who was an itinerant preacher in the Galilee region, came to his hometown synagogue and was invited to speak.

So, he was both celebrity and favorite son, someone they really wanted to hear because they had been reading about him in the newspaper, and you can imagine that they wanted him to do well. We have that same feeling when one of youth stands to give a testimony.

And during Jesus' sermon, people whispered to each other. And they said, **"Isn't this Joseph's son?"** As if to say, who would have thought that the son of a carpenter would turn out to be such a splendid speaker? He's got a gift!

And if Jesus had only stopped there, if Jesus had read from Isaiah and not gone further, everyone would have clapped their hands and gone home that day feeling so proud of this young man, someone they remembered teaching in Sunday school.

But that's not what happened, is it?

Later in chapter four, we read that the people that day became furious – so angry that they were going to kill him, by throwing him off a cliff at the edge of town.

Look, I don't fully understand how this happens, any more than I fully understand how Christ becomes present to us when we receive the elements of communion, but I do know that something happens, something mysterious and miraculous happens, when hear God's word read and proclaimed.

Among other things, we feel convicted. We realize that these words weren't just written centuries ago, but that they were written for us. They were written to us. And then, when we feel convicted, we respond, but not always with glad and generous hearts.

Remember the sermon that Peter gave on Pentecost when three thousand people were baptized? When Peter was finished with his sermon, the story says that they felt convicted. They felt as though their hearts had been pierced. That's how the Book of Acts puts it. And so, they said, **"Brothers, what should we do?"**

And of course, the answer was **"repent and be baptized."**

When are caught up in this moment, there is the inescapable feeling that we must do something. We can't keep quiet about what we have heard. We can't pretend that it never happened or that it didn't mean much. Something happens to us.

God's word – when it is read and proclaimed – those two things together – and when the Spirit of God is present, working in your heart and in mine – God's word has the power to change hearts, to take a life like yours, a life that has become sad and lifeless and without hope and to transform it into something new, something reborn, something extraordinary.

You know, we should come here every Sunday wondering when it will happen, when a heart will be changed, when someone will say, **"I need to be baptized,"** when someone will say – as the demons in Mark's said when Jesus walked by – **"Get away from us. There is a power here we cannot ignore."**

We should come on Sunday mornings with the expectation that life, as we know it, will never be the same again.

Will you pray with me? Holy God, speak to us today as you spoke to people of old. Stir our hearts to respond to you. Convict us. Create in us the feeling that we should repent, that we need to start over, that our lives need to be re-born in you. We pray this in Christ's name. Amen.