

“The Joy of God is your Strength”

Nehemiah 8: 1-6; 8-10

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As the book of Kings ended, Jerusalem is destroyed, the temple has been razed to the ground, and the prominent members of Judean society are in exile. The northern and southern kingdoms fell, and the people of Israel lost their land. The Temple was destroyed and the people were scattered with some even taken into captivity.

What was next? Would there be a return to the land of promise?

After approximately 70 years, the long exile of the Jews in Babylon at last came to an end. It was through an unlikely hero, Cyrus, the King of Persia. After defeating the Babylonians, Cyrus instituted a policy of release and return for the captives.

The return to Jerusalem from exile of a small faithful remnant of the Jewish people is treated principally in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. These books are named for two men who played central roles in the renewal of the spiritual and national community.

The book of Nehemiah, coupled with the work of Ezra, combines to tell a story of courage and triumph in the face of tremendous challenges. Not considered to be among the professional religious leaders of the prophetic age, the layman Nehemiah responded with decisive action when he felt the call to guide and lead his people out of physical and moral laxity.

Under Nehemiah's direction the walls of Jerusalem were rebuilt, restoring physical security to the city's populace. But Nehemiah also helped restore the moral fiber of the community by insisting that the division between rich and poor be diminished. He forbade the land-grabbing, freedom-robbing practices of the wealthy that put the poor into slavery and the community into disarray. In rebuilding the city walls, Nehemiah helped to once again cement the bonds of community that made everyone responsible to and for one another.

Ezra was the establishment, the officially recognized religious leader of those days. Now numbered among the prophets, Ezra worked alongside Nehemiah and added another message to the reforming, rebuilding activities. Ezra reminded the people of

both the responsibilities demanded by God's commandments and the joy and hope sustained by God's promises.

Nehemiah's political and practical actions, teamed with Ezra's prophetic words of love and concern, brought spiritual and physical renewal to a discouraged, disheartened people.

The eighth chapter of Nehemiah intertwines the words and actions of these two men in a special way.

The portion of chapter 8 that Christine read today depicts a community profoundly moved by both its accomplishments and its shortcomings. The wall of the city has been successfully rebuilt, giving the people a reason to celebrate their newfound security and reflect on their future.

Gathering at one of the newly fortified main entrances to the city, the Water Gate, the people prepare to combine their celebration with worship. Yet note that it is the "seventh month" - the month of both the solemn Day of Atonement and the celebratory Festival of Booths (commemorating the Israelites' sojourn in the wilderness). Thus even the season of the year suggests both celebration and reflection.

Ezra, in his role as scribe (though elsewhere he is referred to as "priest"), prepares to instruct the gathered community by reading from the "law of Moses." Deuteronomy 31:9-13 stipulates that the Torah given to Moses be read every seventh year during the Festival of Booths. Perhaps Ezra's scripture reading is the rebirth of this tradition, marking a new age of obedience to God's word.

Whether or not this was Ezra's specific intention, the result of reading the law at this time -- during the joyful celebration of the refortified city -- puts all the human labor expended on the wall's construction in the context of God's saving history with Israel. The past promises of God were heard by the community as they stood within the security of the newly-walled city and looked towards a future brightened by hope. Our text gives a rare glimpse of the community at worship. The picture the writer creates is of a unified body worshiping God, first in joy, then with a sense of despair at their own shortcomings, but moved by a sense of awe at all times.

What is evident is that the words were heard and understood by those present. Indeed the Law and all its implications was so clearly comprehended that it caused this festive crowd to break into tears as their failures and foibles became evident to them.

But Nehemiah and Ezra refuse to let the festivities of the day be dampened by the community's newfound conscience. Instead they call the people to rejoice. The word of the Lord has come back to the people. Although the people stand judged by it, both the civil and the religious leader in this story urge the community to savor the word of the Lord as sweet wine or fat meat. For those who think of the Old Testament as nothing but strict rules and confining laws, Nehemiah and Ezra remind us of how rich and satisfying life can be when lived under the Torah.

Centuries later, when a young boy would undertake his first lesson in Torah study, an old Hasidic tradition called for a golden drop of honey to be dripped onto the first page of Torah, reminding the young student of the essential sweetness of God's words.

Thus it is that Ezra and Nehemiah tell the people that joy should be their proper response on this occasion. The walls of the city are rebuilt, the word of the Lord lives again in their ears and in their hearts, and the "joy of the Lord is their strength."

A cartoon pictures two women at a well. Each has a bucket with which to draw water. One woman, looking sad and bitter, remarks, "Life is terrible. Every time I fill this bucket up, it is empty within minutes."

The other woman, who appears at peace with herself, replies, "I think life is wonderful. Every time this bucket is empty, I can simply fill it up again."

Is the bucket always being emptied or always being filled? It's the old question of "is the glass half-empty or half-full?"

But does it really make any difference how you see the glass, how you view that bucket? If you are thinking theologically, the answer is a definite "yes." We must choose sides. This sermon, taking its cue from Nehemiah, helps you make that call. Clearly, for the people of God, the glass is half-full. The bucket is being perpetually filled.

Much of the thrust of this week's text from Nehemiah emphasizes the efforts taken to insure that the people listening to the scripture really understand the spirit and the force behind it. Evidently, however, the people at first only capture half of the message. They seem to readily grasp the reality of humanity's failures.

When the worshipers compare their lives with the exacting standards ordered and esteemed by God, they are horrified at their complete inadequacy. As obedient, worshipful, worthy human beings they are clearly half-empty. The conflictive forces

of daily life are always threatening to drain away ever more of their integrity and faithfulness.

But this is only half the message. The interpretation cannot stop here. Nehemiah and Ezra step in, overriding the Levites' topical translation and interpretation to direct the people's attention to the greater truth that stands behind God's law.

The bigger picture is of a day made holy by the Lord's presence - of a people blessed to be able to freely worship God's presence on such a day. It is the very existence of this presence that must move the people beyond the experience of judgment and on to an open-mouthed, awe-stricken, exuberant sense of joy.

Acknowledging this joy reveals the total picture of humanity. We are not half-empty, but half-full.

While it is true that we are flawed and fractured and thus may never be able to remain filled and satisfied for very long, we can never-the-less return again and again and again to the well of God's love and joy and draw from it all that we need to refill our strength of will and soundness of heart.

While Nehemiah and Ezra proclaimed that the joy of the Lord is your strength, the New Testament promises an even more astounding new reality - that Jesus came so that our joy may be full.

In John 15:10-11, Jesus announces,

"If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete."

Experiencing joy, feeling the laughter of life well up in our spirits and burst out of our mouths is a divine gift.

I arrived here at First Presbyterian Church in November 2002, five years ago, as an interim Associate Pastor. I didn't know much about the church or "the lay of the land." But I soon realized that it was not a joyful place; it was a church with a half empty attitude.

Within six months it seemed like we were in exile. People felt forgotten, abandoned, lost; a question I often heard was "what is wrong with us?" It was a half empty time, a time of grief and sadness.

That was five years ago and who would have thought that we would be where we are today?

Today we are a congregation with excitement and activity; we have a staff that works and communicates well with each other; a staff committed to a common ministry of leading this church into new and exciting areas of mission and ministry; a staff that is capably led by Christine. The bucket is half full and constantly being replenished.

We have returned home; no longer in exile. We have returned to our roots in scripture as we studying “the word of God” in small groups; we hear it read and proclaimed in worship; we have returned to our roots as we have reconnected with the Great Ends of the Presbyterian Church by establishing our core mission to be:

- To proclaim Christ’s message;
- To provide a community of spiritual nurture; and
- To promote God’s vision of justice.

As we begin to plan the celebration of our 150th Anniversary in 2009, we look back and affirm our history and give thanks to God. We give thanks to God for where we are today.

We are called to be disciples of Jesus Christ as we seek to fulfill our core mission. It is a time of renewal and re-commitment to serving the Lord.

As we realize that the joy of the Lord is our strength – our goals, our plans and dreams will lead to the fulfillment and accomplishment of the great ends of the church.

“Rejoice in the Lord always, again I will say rejoice”

For

“The Joy of the Lord is our strength!”

Amen!