

January 23, 2022 Rev. Katheryn McGinnis

Let us pray.

Creator God, your Word is a gift. It is our inheritance as the people of God. We give thanks, and we ask, Holy Spirit, that you move in this place.

Open our hearts and eyes to hear what we need to hear, to know what we ought to do, and to follow Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Amen.

Our Scripture for this morning comes from Nehemiah, chapter 8, verses 1-3, 5-6, and 8-10. Listen now for the word of the lord.

1 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. **2** 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. **3** 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. **5** 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. **6** 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 worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground. **8** So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. **9** 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. **10** 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."

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Growing up, I remember a time when our pastor in my home church went on sabbatical. So my church hired a guest preacher to fill in while our pastor was on sabbatical, and on this new pastor's first Sunday with us, before he began his sermon, he told us that one time a parishioner came up to him after service and told him the number of window panels in the sanctuary that this parishioner had counted during the sermon.

We laughed and it was a good way to break the ice. Now while none of you have ever told me, for which I'm grateful, I would be naive to think that none of you have also found some mundane thing to count in this sanctuary to get through one or two of my sermons.

I am no different. Growing up I would always doodle along the margins of my bulletin when I got bored during worship, and even today I would be lying if I said every once in a while when I'm part of a congregation and not leading worship, I find myself drifting off and have to snap back into attention.

We all do it. And our worship services are just an hour. Yes, even an hour can sometimes test our patience and attentiveness in worship this day and age.

Our scripture for today vividly paints a worship scene that is much different.

The men, women, and all who could understand (meaning older children) that were gathered there, our scripture tells that their ears were attentive to the book of the law (the Torah) as it was read to them.

And it wasn't just a short scripture passage that they listened to. The text says scripture was read from early morning until midday. So for several hours they attentively listened to God's word being read - men and women and children.

Perhaps they were so attentive because they asked for this. They instigated this worship by telling the priest Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses - or the Torah.

Perhaps they were so attentive because this was a vastly illiterate society. Being able to read was a high privilege - so when these people and children hear the Torah being read to them - this is their only access to it. To God's word.

This was a difficult point in time and history for God's people when they asked for the Torah to be read to them.

The book of Nehemiah is set in the post-exilic period in the history of Israel. The Babylonian empire - which had conquered Judea, destroyed the temple in Jerusalem, and forced God's people into exile, has now been defeated by the Persian Empire.

And the king of Persia now allows the Israelites to go home, back to Judea, back to their promised land.

This, at first, seems joyous and hopeful - but the reality of returning home was much more complicated.

There was division among these returned exiles about how to restore their identity and life in Judea and rebuild the temple - the house of God, the foundation of their identity as a people.

There was also division among them because some never left Judea and they were averse to those returning home, the ones who did leave. And some, in exile, had taken foreign wives and had children who thus were biracial. And there was division about their place - whether there was one - in this new chapter.

God's people quickly realized that simply walking into the physical promised land was not enough to unite them and start anew. And they were lost.

Perhaps we're not so different from the people of Israel attempting to come together, realizing that this new chapter of their lives is full of fear, confusion, and division.

We need not look far to see fear, confusion, and division all around us.

In fact, I probably sound like broken record for our whole lives are consumed by this reality. You don't need me to say it.

There is division on just about everything - how to get through Covid, how to run a country, how to break down the foundations of racial supremacy and exclusivity and build anew.

And maybe we're a bit different from the people of Israel because maybe it doesn't feel like our exile is over and we've returned back to the promise land - I think it feels like we're still reaching for a way home.

It's quite remarkable then, that this community divided - a community that cannot agree on any way of how to rebuild their identity as God's people back in the land God gave them - turns to worship in radical inclusivity.

Two times the scripture states explicitly that women, men, and all those who could understand (meaning children) were there together.

They stood together for hours and were so moved they openly wept together - perhaps because they felt guilty realizing all the ways they had fallen short when hearing the Torah read to them, perhaps because they were so grateful to hear God's word and were overcome with emotion. Whatever the reason - they wept.

And in response Ezra, Nehemiah, and The levites do not ask why they weep - They tell simply them not to weep, but to leave in joy. To eat fat, drink wine, and give to others - for this is holy. For their strength is the JOY of the lord.

I find myself continuously drawn to obscure scripture. Scripture that is peculiar, or strange, or confusing.

I like scripture that when you read it for the first time, you don't really get it.

So you have to read it again and again, you have to turn to others, to books, to history, to help you grasp its meaning.

And then you have to think critically and creatively about how it speaks to your life now.

I like those scriptures so much because I think they much more authentically reflect the reality of what life is, what faith is.

Life right now is strange and confusing. Certainly unique. I think about it over and over and I don't understand.

I turn to others, to books, to history to try and make sense of what this reality is that we're living in and faith's role in how and where God is in the midst.

Our scripture, upon first read, seems like a story of people hearing the torah, and their surroundings described in explicit detail.

But it's really the story of people divided and hurting so much that they can think of nothing else to help them come together. So, in desperation, they ask to hear God's word.

And the problem isn't solved instantly - but none the less they are told to leave in Joy with fat and wine. To find joy. Because that is their strength - God's joy.

The joy of the lord is our strength. The Joy of the lord. Not the love of the lord, the grace of our lord, while all are in important - Nehemiah tells us the joy of the lord is our strength.

It is hard to find joy in division, in confusion, but even in the midst of darkness and despair when all seems lost - there is joy to be found.

There is joy to be found in our world too.

Hebrew Scholar James Kuegel says that this passage is so important because it ushers in the age of interpretation. Verse 8 tells us the people there don't just listen to the word. They listen with interpretation.

The priests gave the sense of the scripture, so that the people understood the reading.

It shows us, and the women and children and men listening, that God's word in scripture is not self-explanatory, that its interpretation changes as the circumstances of the people change.

This reading of God's word urges the gathered people to meet God anew in the changing times in which they find themselves. To seek a united community within overwhelming division is to come together and hear God's word interpreted anew with joy. Anew to show us a path to a united community of justice and joy.

And so as I read this peculiar passage, over and over, and turn to others and books and history - and think critically and creatively about how it speaks to my life - our life - perhaps this passage tells us to focus on joy.

For having strength in God's joy forces us out of the inaction that being overwhelmed by all the problems of the world causes.

For how might it look like instead of being paralyzed by the fear of all that divides us, we came together - still carrying that division - and upon hearing the word reinterpreted within our context, we found cause for joy.

For God's word is never stagnant - it is interpreted anew through each and every point in our lives.

Maybe that's why those gathered there were able to listen so attentively for hours - because they knew God's word would speak to them anew. And this was the only chance they were able to hear it.

Perhaps we sometimes count the number of window panels in a sanctuary during worship because we do have access to God's word whenever we want it.

But that's the thing about faith that these people gathered tell us - we cannot overcome division and fear alone.

But if we see the JOY of the lord as our strength, and come together with inclusivity to hear God's word read anew, maybe we see the path forward starts not in despair, but in holy joy.

Amen.