

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

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North Decatur Presbyterian Church

Rev. David Lewicki, preaching

I don't suspect many of you spend your days poring over the books Nehemiah and Ezra in the Old Testament. It's OK. Me neither. 15 years and I've never preached on either book. Today's reading is the one time these books appear in the 3 year lectionary cycle. We're going to read from Nehemiah today—don't sleep on it. I might not get back to it for another 15 years. In seriousness, I was truly surprised at how relevant the themes of these texts are for our time. I think you may be surprised, too.

Because we don't spend too much time with these books, I'm not going to presume you're coming to them with much, if any knowledge about them. Let me set the scene for the reading you are about to hear. Nehemiah and Ezra are Israel's two most influential leaders during the period of return from the Exile. The Exile began in 587 BCE and continued for at least 3 generations. It is the central crisis-- political and theological—in the history of Israel. In 587, the Babylonians sacked Jerusalem and desecrated the Temple. Years later, the Persians conquered the Babylonians, and by edict of the Persian king Cyrus, the Israelites (or what is left of them) are allowed to return to undertake the awesome, impossible task of rebuilding what was destroyed. It is grim work and it is hard. How do you rebuild a city? All of the social and familial networks? How do you rebuild a culture? Nehemiah is the administrator. He takes charge of the repair of Jerusalem's walls and buildings. There is a heated debate about whether walls even work as a security mechanism. That should sound familiar to all of you. Ezra, meanwhile, is a teacher; his job is to make sure people remember and obey God's Law. Ezra thinks one of the problems is that there's been too much religious laxity. And too much marriage with foreign women. Ezra begins a program of "true religion" and "ethnic purification." That should also sound familiar. Then, as now, there was opposition to this re-building program from without and within. By the end of Nehemiah, it's not clear that it will work. But still, by the 8th chapter, the walls are up. It is at this moment that the people feel that something in this program to re-inscribe their identity is missing. Walls aren't doing it. Chastising people for marrying foreigners isn't fixing what is broken. Here's what happens next, from Nehemiah 8.

8:1 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.

8:2 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.

8:3 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.

8:5 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.

8:6 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.

8:8 So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.

8:9 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.

8:10 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."

If you have ever been to services in a synagogue, you know that synagogues are set up similar to churches. The seats face forward toward the front where there is a raised platform (like our chancel) called a bimah. Behind the bimah is the ark—a cabinet where the most important, holiest objects in the room are kept—the Torah scrolls. Every week of the year from the bimah, a Torah portion is read and interpreted so that the people *understand* it—the same process of reading and interpreting Sacred Scripture that we share here. Once a year, in the fall, is a celebration known as Simchat Torah—*rejoicing with the Torah*. That day is the day when the last reading of the Torah happens—the very end of Deuteronomy, where Moses dies looking over the Promised Land. But instead of just ending, on Simchat Torah, the community goes back to very beginning and on that same day reads the first words of Genesis. The idea is that God is eternal, and so is the Torah—it's wisdom never ends. The law, the life, the love of God in the Word is continually given to God's people in our story. Simchat Torah is the one day when all the scrolls are taken out of the ark; they are danced seven times around the sanctuary. Everyone—all the people get to hold them. It can be raucous and it is joyful.

Maybe you see the roots of that tradition in today's passage. This is story about the story. The main character in this reading isn't Nehemiah, or Ezra, it's not even "all the people" who, if you were listening, are mentioned 13 times in 12 verses. The main character here is the story itself. That story begins "in the beginning" with God's ingenious Creativity. It's a story about the Garden of Eden and floods and rainbows. It's a story about an old couple, Abram and Sarai, sent late in life on a journey of faith. It's a story of mothers and daughters, fathers and sons, and sibling rivalries. It's a story about famine and pharaohs and miracles of freedom. It's a story about wandering in the desert for years, and about tablets from Sinai inscribed by the finger of God and it's about golden idols. It's God's story. And ours.

That day, outside the Water Gate in Jerusalem, Ezra and the teachers stood in front of all the people and they read and interpreted this story. And did you hear what the people did when they heard it? There, in the remains of their once-great city, with its hastily-erected walls, surrounded by the ghosts of the past, overwhelmed by the task of re-building something that could never be the same, what did they do? In that moment, when the people gathered had so recently assumed that God had left them in Exile to die, what did they do when they heard that story about God's abiding love and faithfulness?

They wept.

Ezra and Nehemiah are embarrassed by all the weepiness. They say, "no, no, no crying." This is a celebration—and they push on through all the tears with the potluck part of the day.

I think you should linger on the fact that these people—our ancestors, in this moment of existential crisis—when the questions of who they were and who they should be in the world was very much in doubt—that they heard their story read to them—and wept.

Commentators have wondered why. Some say they wept for the sad state of their city and the decline of their religious institutions—a shadow of its former self. Some say they heard God's Law and knew how far away they were from faithfulness and they wept out of guilt.

I wonder too. I ask you: when was the last time a story you heard made you weep?

I watched the movie *Encanto* with my daughter the other night. No spoilers. But I can say that the main character is a girl who is a little different than the other kids in the family and she thinks that she doesn't belong. It turns out that *she* is the one who makes the family strong. I watched that story sitting next to my own daughter, who, because she has been through so much, maybe thinks she's different and doesn't belong. But the truth is, she makes our family strong. I felt my eyes, you know, doing that thing.

Stories do this to us all the time. At least, I hope they do for you. I remember the StoryCorps account of Mary Johnson whose only son was killed. And she went to prison to see the young man who took her son's life. And at the end of their conversation, Johnson broken down. And the young man, Oshea Israel, hugged her. And from that moment on, they became like mother and son to each other. That story makes me cry every dang time because revenge always feels more powerful than mercy, but it's not. And it's so good to hear it and see it.

What stories make you weep? I know it's a cliché, but every time I hear that grainy recording of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom and that voice starts in with, "I have a dream today...," every time I weep because the dream of justice and of human beings treating each other like family is my dream, too. I start crying.

Some stories get inside of us. They find their way past the guard dogs of our cynicism. And those stories, when they get in, vibrate like musical chords with the most human parts of ourselves. These stories tell us who we are. They speak us into a deeper, a fuller, and a truer way of being alive.

I know why the people wept that day. The story got around their fears and doubts; the story got inside of them. This story about a God who showers the world with beauty and makes sure there is enough for everyone. This story about a God who takes brothers who want to kill each other and gets them to embrace and reconcile. This story about God who can take even what we intend for evil and make it good. This story about a God who shows up out of the corner of our eye in the wilderness and makes a call and claim on our lives—one that we think is impossible, until, with God's help, we have accomplished that very thing. This story about a God who parts waters when we have nowhere else to go, a God who makes a way out of no way. This story about paradise lost and found. In this story, God reminds us again and again, "you were slaves in Egypt," "your ancestor was a wandering Aramean," never forget that; you must

be the ones who seeks the liberation of others, who insist that debts be forgiven, and you must be the one who welcomes the stranger. Those people heard this story about flawed and selfish and deceitful and crabby people—people just like them—and yet God never gives up on them.

That day at the Water Gate, when the people heard their story again, they knew that God had left them. Their story had not stopped with the Exile. God's law, God's love, God's mercy, God's story never ends. That day, that that story would include them, too. And they wept.

Every week, on this raised platform, we open this old story about God and God's people. And we let the story speak to us. And, more often than not, it finds its way past our guard. It gives a mirror into our own life. It provides us reason to think differently. It's call to us to turn in a different direction. It's a cause to rejoice and give thanks. This story reminds us again and again that love wins, that mercy is new each morning, that there is enough for everyone, that even enemies are worthy of our love. Some days, it's enough to hear the story and weep.

God's story continues on this day, in the hearing of all the people.