A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

*“Hearing the Story”*

Nehemiah 8

January 27, 2019

This Sunday’s Old Testament reading is from the 8th chapter of Nehemiah. This is the only Sunday in the three-year cycle of lectionary assigned readings that any verses from Nehemiah are included. Ezra, too. This is the only Sunday we hear from Ezra or Nehemiah which together tell the story of the return of Israelites to Jerusalem from their exile in the 400s BC. It’s about the rebuilding of the city and the rebuilding of their lives after their forced exile in Babylon. Ezra and Nehemiah tell an important chapter in Israel’s story and have important lessons for us, and because it’s the only time we get to hear from either of them, it was clear to me I wanted us to spend some time with Nehemiah this morning to explore its message for us today as we join all the people gathered together in Jerusalem to hear the Word of God read out loud.

Yet, oh boy, I realized a moment later. Do you remember what Nehemiah is actually about, I asked myself? It’s about building a wall! Ugh, I don’t want this reading to step into that current politically charged debate. Ok, I thought, surely, I can preach about Nehemiah building a wall around Jerusalem in the 5th century BC without insinuating divine sanction for building a 21st century wall around our whole country. Besides, we’ll just focus on chapter 8, where the people congregate to hear scripture read. But, oh no! look at this, all the people are gathered at the Water-gate! Well, I guess there’s something for everyone here if you’re looking for it!

So, maybe there’s a good reason why Nehemiah only shows up once every three years, and does so paired with a passage from the Gospels that is surely enticing to every pastor, every Christian, Jesus opening the scroll and reading from it, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me”. That’s the obvious go-to passage for this week, yet I think we’ll save that one for next week, because it’s not so simple either. The same people who are impressed with Jesus’ reading of scripture one moment want to throw him off a cliff the next moment. That sounds like a good one for next week.

For this week, in Nehemiah, there’s no cliff throwers, but there is a public reading of scripture and there is the movement of the human heart. It’s that act, and the profound response of the people to that reading that is so dramatic, far more enduring that any wall, and more important than the rule of any ruler over any nation. It’s a lesson these people were learning in real time, no matter what things looked like, half-built, half-wrecked, like a lot of life for a lot of people, how their lives and ours are constituted as part of a historical community extending back in time under the guiding, faithful hand of God. They needed to hear such a word, to hear a word telling them, you are part of something bigger than you are alone, right now. God is with you, bigger than your problems, higher than your aspirations, stronger than your opposition, to give joy, and hope, and faith for the work ahead. When they heard such a word spoken aloud, they wept. And then they celebrated.

Who are these people? They are the children and grandchildren of Jews who were in Jerusalem when it was sacked by Babylon and the people marched away from their home to a foreign land. These people were of a generation born in a foreign country, surrounded by foreign foods, and language, and cultures, and gods. They’d heard about God’s temple, but had no temple. They heard about God’s holy city of Jerusalem, but had no city. They heard about God’s kings, but had no king. The epitaph of their lives was psalm 137, “How we wept by the waters of Babylon when we remembered Zion. There on the poplars we hung our harps, for there, our captors demanded songs of joy, Sing us one of the songs of Zion.”

But in about the year 538 BC, the new King of Babylon allowed them go back home to the glories of Jerusalem if they wanted to go. The truth is that not all of them wanted to go back. Babylon was kind of nice many come to realize. The streets are paved, garbage is picked up on time, the food’s not so bad. The untold story is that for many of the exiled Jews, they made a home in Babylon, which works great as long as you leave your identity as Israel at the door of your new house. As long as you leave behind who you are, you can make a new life anywhere doing anything, if you forget who you are. Some refused to forget, holding on hope that they could restore the glory days of old. As soon as they could go back, they headed back home.

But back home it wasn’t glorious. It was a ruin. This was going to be harder than they’d imagined. They were back in the land, but there was still no city, still no temple, still no king. They rebuilt a temple as best they could. That’s what most of Ezra is about. Then Nehemiah shows up and leads the people to rebuild the wall around the city and start to rebuild what is in the city. The people worked. All of them. They worked hard. And in a seemingly impossibly short period of time, they had the city defenses on the way to being restored.

And then the 1st day of the 7th month of the year came. It was New Year’s Day. And all the people said, “today we will not work. Today is different. It is sacred to the Lord.” In what appears to be an impromptu rally, they all gathered in the city square near the Water Gate, a public place welcoming of men, women, children, everyone. All the people were there. And the people took charge. Most attention goes to the leaders, Ezra, Nehemiah, but this time the people led the way. They built a platform. They summoned Ezra the priest. They told him, “Ezra, read to us from the book of the law of Moses. Read to us the Word of God.”

Read to us the Word of God. They had all the visible things they needed to make a life, but they needed more. Not just more money for luxuries or a nicer temple building for liturgies or a higher wall for security. They needed to hear their sacred stories, to hear again how the story of their lives constituted a part of the old story of God’s wonder working and maybe their life story could have some wonder working to it too. They needed to remember who they are. They needed to remember God is still God. Read to us the Word of God.

Reading is a powerful thing. Helen Fagin is a survivor of the Warsaw ghetto in Nazi occupied Poland. She tells about offering a clandestine school offering Jewish children a chance at education denied them by their captors. “Being caught reading anything forbidden by the Nazis meant at best hard labor and at worst death” she writes. But she says, “I soon came to feel that teaching these young sensitive souls Latin and mathematics was cheating them of something far more essential—what they needed wasn’t’ dry information but hope, the kind that comes from being transported into a dream-world of possibility. One day as if guessing my thoughts, one girl beseeched me, “Could you tell us a book, please?”

As it happened, Fagin had spent the previous night devouring a clandestine copy of *Gone with the Wind* so that’s the story she told them, of the loves and trials of Rhett Butler and Scarlett O’Hara, themselves trying to survive in a world ravaged by war. “For that magical hour we had escaped into a world not of murder but of manners and hospitality. All the children’s faces had grown animated with new vitality.” They didn’t have many more opportunities. Yet even from that dark memory Fagin still believes, “To read a book and surrender to a story is to keep our very humanity alive.” (quoted from *A Velocity of Being*)

Is that not a perfect picture of what the people in Jerusalem needed that day, to hear a book and surrender to a story, to keep their humanity alive. This is the power of scripture. It is charged with electricity to fire the dimmest hope. It is filled with comfort to dry the most bitter tears. It is a story of mercy and love to soften the hardest heart. The Psalmist sets the scripture alongside the glories of creation as revelation of God, “The law of the lord is perfect, reviving the soul.” Jeremiah, in the midst of terrible suffering and famine prayed, “Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart.” And the author of Hebrews compares the riches of scripture to solid food, nourishment for our spiritual lives. In an earlier generation when King Josiah heard the reading of scripture, he tore his clothes and wept.

Read us The Book! The people stood. And Ezra read. He read while teachers explained the meaning so everyone could understand. Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, Job, Psalms, Isaiah, Jeremiah . . .for hour after hour, the Word of God was read, the stories of Creation of the heavens and earth, and Abraham from Ur of the Chaldeans called to the land, and a covenant with him. They heard about the afflictions in Egypt and how God heard their cries and performed signs and wonders against Pharaoh until God divided the sea before the people and they went through on dry land. By a pillar of cloud and a pillar of fire they were led home. They heard about Mt. Sinai and how God gave them rules, laws, good statutes and commandments by which to live, and about Sabbath. They heard about manna and remembered God’s provision in lean times.

They also heard about the sins of their fathers, the presumption and callousness that people showed to their God in every generation. People refused to obey and were not mindful fo the wonders performed among them. A stiff-necked people they were called. They heard about the golden calf. Oh, that’s a tragic story. They heard the stories of disobedience to God over and over: worshipping false idols and things that are not God, how people oppressed one another, seeking their own way instead of God’s way. They heard about God’s warnings, and they trembled to realize how the rubble around them was their history writ in crushed stone, only partly rebuilt. They heard suffering people cry out for a savior and wondered when God himself might just break in to the world.

To *hear a book*, *surrender to a story*, is to *keep your humanity alive*. The people, standing there among their half-built lives, wept as they heard the word of God. They wept, cut to the heart. These were not just stories about other people. This was their story. This is our story. Scripture has mysterious power to move the human heart. It always has. It still does.

If those people all gathered there at the Water Gate, those men, women, children could speak to us today, I think they would say something like: Read the book. Surrender to the story. Keep your faith alive, your hope, your love, your humanity alive. The Word of God is a feast, a banquet of riches. In the lord your joy will be your true strength. Feast on the word like you’re eating the fatted calf, drink the sweet wine of the Word. Let it flow!

The people wept but Ezra and the leaders quickly turned that sorrow to celebration. Swept up by the spiritual significance of that holy day, Feast, they said, today is a day holy to the Lord. Feast with joy, with gratitude, with generosity.

And so, we, who have the word of God in letters and in flesh, present with us by the Holy Spirit, feast now as well, called to the Table of our Lord, to the simplest of meals with the profoundest of meaning. We come to the altar now, where our tears and our joys are received by the one who was, and is, and is to come, by the one who takes our broken places and heals the wounds, half-built lives, and makes them whole. In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.

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