

August 7, 2022    The Great Reminder    Nehemiah 8:2-10

The reading from Nehemiah takes place in a specific set of circumstances. A century before, the Israelites living in exile in Babylon began to come home. Clearly the Babylonians were nervous about that return. And equally clearly, the Israelites who returned have been well behaved. They have not revolted, or done anything to upset the delicate political situation. They have requested the right to restore, and rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. And they have been given leave to do so. The reconstruction of the walls has been completed. And that brings us to the ceremony marking this accomplishment.

The exiles mourned their inability to be in their own land, the land God had given them. They mourned the inability to worship in Jerusalem. “How can we sing the songs of Zion in a strange land?” they had mourned. You may remember that the various tribes lived in different areas of ancient Israel. But anyone who could travel makes a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to celebrate the completion of the walls. They gather in the square before the Water Gate, to hear the reading of the law of Moses, the scrolls of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. It is a huge deal. It is an emotional moment for the exiles who have returned, even though some of them have been back home for most of their lives.

Something we may appreciate given the times we are living in. It is almost like they are getting back to a state of something like normalcy. It is a moment when people are

emotional about the return, they are listening intently to the reading of their Scriptures, and they are celebrating their lives and their land in a context of their faith in God, the Creator who stepped into history and through HIS servant Moses led them to this place, and gave it to them.

To return to the phrase, they can now sing the songs of Zion, because they are home...and Jerusalem is beginning to look like the home city it once was.

There is a lot of emotion. Tears. Tears for moments of hardship endured. Tears for people lost when they were defeated. Tears at remembering the marvelous moments in exile, because there were marvelous moments. Daniel in the lions den. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the fire furnace. The changes that came when Nebuchadnezzar realized the God of Israel was singular and real. Moments in which a non-believer recognized that those he tried to punish were accompanied by one who looked like the Son of God. It all comes flooding back, and yet here they are; standing on their sacred soil, standing inside the walls of their sacred Jerusalem, near their beloved Temple, listening to the reading of their sacred history, and the Law of Moses. They weep.

Nehemiah reminds them, and he reminds us, there are times for celebration, and this is one of those moments. As we know from our own experience, When the faithful celebrate there is good food and traditional drink to wash it down. Nehemiah issues the invitation and reminders that there should be care and concern for those who are not so well off. They are

to eat and drink and see that those who are not well off share in the feast. He also says something really important. I am trying to take it to heart. “Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.”

It is tempting to grieve in a time when things are demanding that we cope with change. It is tempting to wish we could turn back the clock. My body is reminding me daily that I am no longer a young man and that I cannot go back, to the physical strength of younger years. I confess it is not easy to accept. If you have noticed I am walking with a limp. It is arthritis for the most part. The wear and tear of my age. It cannot be reversed. And there is a degree where acceptance of the facts of age are simply necessary. And there is this basic truth: “the joy of the Lord is your strength.” The joy of the Lord has been and is my strength. In fact if anything has been at the core of the balance of my life, it is the reality of my faith journey and the precious love of my wife who was a believer before I became one.

I wear a number of badges of accomplishment in my years in ministry. A congregation scheduled for closure underwent a revival and continued for another 30 years. A congregation that was 13 years old had never really made its way forward. It grew while I served and built a church facility and is one of the most stable churches in its Presbytery today. A 3<sup>rd</sup> congregation was on the verge of having its church building condemned. We moved out into a school and saved the building and were able to move back in for Christmas. Our bills were paid when we moved back in. Then I served as the

founding pastor of Amberlea Church in Pickering. We built a church and it continues to prosper under the Rev. Mona Scrivens. And here in Stirling we have done well over the last 11 years in spite of the challenges of the Pandemic.

One of the fundamentals I learned when I did my doctorate, while continuing to do full time ministry, was that God Himself grows the church. I believe that. And I also believe that I have tasted more than a full measure of the joy of the Lord in the midst of the time I have spent in ministry. I have had more than my fair share of experiences that reminded me, I served the ONE who owns the cattle on a thousand hills. I have seen first hand what God can do to bless and to sustain the lives of people under my care, never forgetting that as the wisdom of Ecclesiastes reminds us...there is a time to be born, and a time to die, in fact a time for every purpose under heaven.

My life changed course when I was led to faith in Jesus Christ. Like many others, I thought I had changed perhaps a smidgin, which the dictionary tells us means "a small bit." But the fact is as the gospel tells us will happen, the course of my life was changed in its entirety. Which of course is exactly what conversion and rebirth is all about. I can no more take credit for the man I became, than I can the growth and prosperity of the churches I have served. Those things do belong to the realm of God's sovereignty. The fact that St. Andrew's is still here, that you are still here, and that I am still here as well, is not a tale of luck, good fortune, or human accomplishment. "God is so

good,” as the chorus proclaims and we have tasted of HIS joy present in the midst of the time and distance we have shared together. I praise the name of Jesus each day that I awaken from sleep, and I praise the name of Jesus as I fall asleep at night.

I do not think of myself as a strong person. Physically, emotionally, or even in the matter of character. I think of myself as being very common. In fact, truth be told I think of myself as being below average. But I do take heart at the proclamation of Nehemiah to the people who had just listened to the reading of Scripture which was fundamental in the coming to be of the ancient state of Israel, and was just as fundamental to the return of Israel to statehood in 1948.

I will go to my grave when that time comes (I told you my cancer surgeon thinks I have a shot at 95); when the time comes, I will still believe that the Biblical Word is the most precious resource in the world. As a truck driver, who became a manager for a major transport firm once said to me, “My God, you could build your life on this stuff.” He was attempting to do so. I had the privilege of being his minister at the time.

It is this basic. The Scriptures lead us to God: to the Father, the Son and Holy Spirit. It is in HIM, one and yet three, three and yet one, that we find the joy of life. And it is in serving HIM, in the midst of that joy that we discover in moments of incredible weakness, we can be strangely, and incredibly strong.

It was a railroader who took me aside after my last service as the minister of Knox Church in Cochrane and said that my ministry had meant the world to he and his wife during his two and a half years in that community. He paid me a number of compliments, and I remembered in my prayers that night to thank the Lord for what HE had allowed me to do for that couple while they were under my shepherding.

For me this is a most blessing and encouraging verse in the Bible. Nehemiah 8:10. "The joy of the Lord is your strength."

Let us pray;

Lord Jesus, YOU have made us what we are as we have pursued the life of faith, and experienced new life. YOUR word moves us to tears sometimes because of its power to lift us up, filling our lungs with your praises. YOUR joy becomes available to us as you touch us in the sweetness of YOUR Spirit. We are moved to respond with thankfulness for YOUR hand upon our lives. Continue we pray to touch our lives with your blessing, that we might be strong especially in our times of weakness. Amen

