

Third Sunday After the Epiphany  
Neh. 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10 Focus

May I speak to you in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today in our Old Testament reading, we dip into an important historic moment in Jewish history. The people are gathered, sacred text is read, the people respond, and the people are encouraged to celebrate.

People have come back from exile. Enough people, a critical mass, to return to religious practice that has not happened in community in this geography in roughly 70 years.

70 years of captivity. Exile. These people were displaced, isolated, put in new culture, oppressed, harassed, in danger, and when it formally ended in 538 B.C. Jewish people could return to Palestine, prior to that formal ending, some began to escape exile and return.

Some came back. Some did not...they had been away and learned how to live where they were, and they stayed. A generation had gone by.

Almost twice the amount of time than the 40 years of wilderness wandering after the Israelites left Egypt.

As we hear this snapshot today, I cannot help but ask what we may glean in these pandemic times. Certainly not harsh and dangerous like the Exile, but times of isolation, oppression of health and welfare, culture changes, church changes. How do we come back? Do we come back? What is important?

There are three angles of observation in this passage that may inform us: The person of Nehemiah, the people, and the practices they all participate in together.

The person of Nehemiah.

Nehemiah, along with Ezra, was catalytic in the returning and rebuilding of Jerusalem. Nehemiah had never been to Jerusalem before this. He was born in Persia to parents who had been exiled from Jerusalem. Nehemiah grew into a person of character and good reputation. We hear early in this book that he was cup bearer to the King. This means he had access to the King –

King Artaxerxes I - in ways perhaps no others did. His job was to sample wine for quality and safety before the King drank it. He was familiar with the King.

When Nehemiah asks travelers how Jewish survivors who had returned to Jerusalem were doing, he is told: "The survivors there in the province who escaped captivity are in great trouble and shame; the wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been destroyed by fire." He is overcome with grief.

As the book of Nehemiah unfolds, we glimpse some similarities to the familiar story of Esther that Amy preached on not long ago – and remember, Esther was just a story – it did not really happen but was written encourage returned exiles a generation after Nehemiah lived.

But Nehemiah was for real, and his courage, commitment, and determination did happen.

Like we heard in the story of Esther, access to the King is utilized at great risk. Nehemiah uses his position and risks the Kings disapproval. He asks if he can return to Jerusalem to rebuild the city. And the King says yes.

What this means about Nehemiah's person is that he knows the story – the faith story of the people of God. Knows who God is and how to worship. He never lived there, but he knew the faith. It must have been practiced in his home, by his parents, those in their inner circle. It was so in him that he risked all to go help other Jews as they returned, and he sought to protect and provide for the worship of God.

In our lectionary, strangely we are plopped into chapter 8 of this book. Nehemiah has faced much opposition in rebuilding the wall – political intimidation, economic challenge, death threats – hardship, but the walls are rebuilt at record speed – 52 days, the boundaries protected. And now, now, in this chapter, the people gather to mark the completion of all the work – including that the temple had been already been restored.

The people can gather safely. They have returned. But they do not all know the story like Nehemiah, in fact, many, like him, were born in another

country or in another culture and things got a little rusty with religion. Maybe this second generation of exiles has brought their own families back with them.

The people gather to worship together. Community. A body as we heard about in our Corinthians passage. Some of these people probably do not speak Hebrew, or maybe they speak a different dialect than what is being read. I imagine for many of these people it is the first time in their lives they have heard the sacred scripture read.

This dynamic is missed in our passage. Ezra is standing on a platform reading and we hear in verse 4 – not read in our passage today – he is flanked by 6 or 7 people on his left and on his right. He is not alone, he is supported, and these people along with a group of Levites present (verse 8, also not a part of our passage today) – that they are explaining what is being read while people listen attentively. Reading and explanation taking place for hours. Language and culture and history barriers being broken down. Chaos, Community, Care.

These people gather and they are acting like the body we hear described in our Corinthians passage. They did not all have the same strengths or gifts or talents. But its sure sounds like there was a lot of care and respect going on. And it must have felt safe, not only physically, but emotionally. Because people were vulnerable.

The response to what they heard, God's word, brought tears. Joy, grief, regret, shame, inspiration. I imagine it was a complicated time. Lots of different things going on in the group. But they stayed a group. Attention on God and acceptance of one another.

But they needed help in their returning. As they understood what was read and reacted, they probably wanted to respond in all kinds of ways. But what is the exhortation from Nehemiah? He says, "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." He is saying, it is ok. You are ok. God loves you. We are back. Let us celebrate. And let us share with one another.

This is beautiful stuff. It informs us in our pandemic holding patterns.

This will end, likely incrementally. We will need to rebuild.

We need to, like Nehemiah and his parents, to know the story – know the faith. We also need to be willing to risk at the appropriate moments for the sake of all.

The unspoken exhortation of this passage is: need each other. We need each other. As we have experienced isolation these passed couple of years, we may have forgotten our need for one another. Might have hardened our hearts a little bit to get by. Let us soften our hearts and welcome our need for one another.

We need to worship God together – in person or on line or watching later in the week. Come. Let us be together. It helps us know the story. It helps us know how to live and do the next thing.

After pondering these things, our collect for today makes a lot more sense:

Give us grace, O Lord, to answer readily the call of our Savior Jesus Christ and proclaim to all people the Good News of his salvation, that we and the whole world may perceive the glory of his marvelous works, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.