

Today we celebrate St. Paul's feast day. But I've preached on the readings for this Feast each year for the past several years. So today we're using the readings for this Sunday.

Our Old Testament lesson today may seem a bit obscure. It's from the short book of Nehemiah, which is normally NOT on anyone's top ten list for favorite Biblical books. And yet today's lesson from the 8th chapter of Nehemiah is of profound importance for us 2,400 years later. So this morning I want dive into it.

Quick review—there are two candidates for "the darkest time" in the history of the Jewish people. One was the Holocaust in Nazi Germany in the 20th century. The other was the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile to Babylon in 587 BC. Decades after the exile, a small group of Jews was allowed to return to Jerusalem. They rebuilt their Temple. But the second temple was a small shabby thing in comparison to the glories of the first temple. These returning Jews lived amongst the ruins of Jerusalem, rattling around in a city that used to be much larger, centering their lives around a temple that used to be much nicer. And they lived that way for a good 70 years.

But then a couple of successive waves of returning Jews brought new life and new leadership to Jerusalem. First, the priest Ezra came, and provided a much-needed spiritual shot in the arm. Then a decade later, Nehemiah, a Jewish courtier of the Persian king, asked permission to go home to his ancestral city of Jerusalem. The king sent him to be governor.

The combination of Ezra and Nehemiah did wonders for Jerusalem. The city walls were rebuilt. And people began to be much more serious about their faith. Which brings us to today's OT reading from the book of Nehemiah, ch8.

The people of Jerusalem and the surrounding villages gather together. They do so because **THEY** have made a request. Let me say it again. They have not been ordered to assemble. They have chosen to assemble. And they have made a request.

Our reading begins with their request, that Ezra bring with him the book of the law of Moses.¹

What they're wanting is to have the Torah, the Law of Moses read aloud. That's the first 5 books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. In our modern Bibles, that's a good 200 pages or so. That'll take a number of hours to hear it read aloud.

In fact, they are there "from early morning until midday."

And we're told, when Ezra opens the scroll to begin reading, "all the people stood up."² In the same way that we stand in respect and worship to hear the Gospel reading, they are standing for a number of hours to hear the Torah read to them.

¹ Neh 8:1

² Neh 8:5

Plus, it's more than just a straight reading. Ezra and the Levites on the platform with him are offering explanation and commentary as well.³

And this hearing of scripture seems to be overwhelming to the people. We're told, "all the people wept when they heard the words of the law."

Why this reaction? We're not sure? Are they overwhelmed by a sense of God's sovereignty and holiness? Are they touched by God's love for his chosen people in the midst of difficult times? Are they keenly aware of how far they have slipped spiritually? We're not sure. It may be a combination of all of these things.

But Ezra and Nehemiah have a different message for the people. They say, "This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep."⁴

And they tell the people to prepare a feast, and get the best wine, and have a celebration. And they are to send extra food to the poor. And they conclude with the words, "do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."⁵

Don't be sad. Celebrate. It's an incredible message.

Yes, you're rattling around in a city that used to have many more people. Yes, your new Temple is nowhere near as nice as the old one. Yes, you're no longer an independent nation but a satellite state within another empire. Yes, you have not been as close to God as your ancestors have been.

But, they tell the people... BUT you have drawn close to God today. You have heard his word proclaimed today. You have worshipped him today. So celebrate. Feast. And share your feast with those who are not here.

And then those incredible 9 words at the end of our reading: "for the joy of the LORD is your strength."

Don't wallow in what you've lost. Be joyful, because God is here. Remember who you are as God's people. "For the joy of the LORD is your strength."

"The joy of the LORD is your strength."

We often equate joy with happiness or contentedness. And to some extent, that's true. But our human sense of joy is often derivative. It's usually dependent upon our emotional state. It's often dependent upon life's circumstances—when things are going well, we can be joyful. But when we run into difficulty, such derivative, human joy quickly evaporates.

³ Neh 8:8

⁴ Neh 8:9

⁵ Neh 8:10

However biblical joy, "the joy of the Lord," is a bit different. Scriptural joy is deeper. The opposite of "human joy" is sadness. The opposite of scriptural joy is "anxiety, worry."

The joy of the Lord is a deeper joy, a joy that can come from trusting God. This deeper joy scriptural, spiritual joy is not dependent upon the rollercoaster of human emotions. Instead, it is a real joy that comes by drawing closer to the living God.

That's what the Jewish people do during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. They draw close to God. In fact, they end up being much more serious about their faith than most of their ancestors ever were.

The time of Ezra and Nehemiah is really a watershed moment in the history of Judaism. Up until this time, idolatry was a constant problem, falling away from God was a constant problem. But after this time, the Jewish people got their act together. Yes, they had struggles. But from this time forward they got VERY serious about trying to follow God's law. Idolatry was never a real problem for them again.

Remarkably, except for a few historically short blips during a few revolts, the Jewish people would not be an independent nation again for 2,400 years, until the middle of the 20th century. But they were able to hang together as a people and as a religion. Why? Because they got serious about trying to follow God and be his people. In fact, the time of Ezra marks the beginning of a new pattern of worship for the Jewish people, gathering not just in the Temple for sacrifices, but also in Synagogues, to hear the word of God proclaimed, and to offer prayer and thanksgiving to him. That was the most lasting legacy of Ezra and Nehemiah.

Under Ezra and Nehemiah, the Jewish people were able to rebuild amidst the ruins. They were able to reclaim their identity as the people of God. They got very serious about their scriptures. They got very serious about their faith. And that faith sustained them and kept them together through the next two-and-a-half millennia, a truly remarkable feat.

And I firmly believe that Ezra and Nehemiah have some important parallels for us in our 21st century situation as St. Paul's-on-the-Plains Episcopal Church.

As I've mentioned before, we are in a time of great ferment and change in the history of the Christian church. In fact, it is the biggest time of change since the Reformation 500 years ago. On top of that, in the past few decades we have also seen the collapse of 1,700 years of overlap between Christianity and Western culture. For 1,700 years, from the 4th century to the late 20th century, if you were a citizen of a western society, it was almost automatically assumed that you were a Christian as well. But no more.

And as I mentioned last week, we're in the midst of great cultural shifts. Christianity has been on a decades-long decline in American culture. Doesn't matter whether you're Episcopalian or Baptist, Methodist or Assemblies of God. All American denominations are shrinking, with the exception of ethnic congregations aimed at providing worship for recent immigrants. It's a tough time for all of us.

That means that, like the people of Ezra and Nehemiah's time, we are sitting in the midst of ruins. Don't be fooled. The walls of St. Paul's are standing. This building has been here 78 years, and this congregation has been in Lubbock for 109 years now.

But the cultural context in which we ministered during the first century of our history has collapsed around us. In a real way, we're sitting in the midst of cultural and ecclesiastical rubble. That rubble will eventually get rebuilt into new forms. But for now, we're not sure what those new forms will be.

It can be disconcerting to live in the midst of such rubble. It can be downright painful at times.

But Ezra and Nehemiah provide a strong example. In a time of flux and change, they do something radical. They make a radical change in the ancient sense of that word. Radical means roots.

In a chaotic time, Ezra and Nehemiah offered the people a chance to get back to the basics, to recover their roots, to remember where they came from and who they were as the people of God.

In a chaotic time, we need to get back to our roots. We need to get back to the basics. We need to claim, reclaim, and focus on what we do best.

We have deep roots in the Episcopal Church. We are rooted in deep traditions of meaningful worship. We are rooted in individual disciplines of prayer and Bible reading.

As I've said earlier this month, in this new year we need to be attentive to the living into the words from the Baptismal Covenant which in turn come from the book of Acts—we need to focus on the Apostle's teaching and fellowship, the breaking of bread, and the prayers.

After all, that's what happened in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. They didn't forsake Jerusalem, even though it was in ruins. They didn't try to build something modern and innovative and different two hills over. They rebuilt in the place where they had encountered God before. And they sought to return to a deeper relationship with that same God through classic and ancient pathways. They sought to rediscover God in scripture. They sought to draw closer to God in prayer. That's what we're called to do as well.

Yes, it can be disconcerting to live in the midst of ruins and rubble. Yes, living through an era of change can be tough. But God has called and chosen us to do this work at this time and in this place. Of all the people in the history of the Church, God has called us to minister and serve in the midst of the seismic cultural and ecclesiastical changes of our age. Let us find our strength in the joy of the Lord. Let us draw closer to him, so that we may serve him even more faithfully in our modern world.