

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 to take a pretty close look at 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 b.c. 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, ch 8 (bulletins).

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. ch8 v1 They have asked "the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the LORD had given to Israel."

They have asked to hear 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. v3, which our reading skips, says that they were there "from early morning until midday."

And look at v5: When Ezra opens the scroll to begin reading, "all the people stood up." 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.

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.

v8: "So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading."

And this hearing of scripture seems to be overwhelming to the people. End of v 9, 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 in v9: "This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep."

And they continue in v10:

"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."

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 no where 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 you have drawn close to God today. You have heard his word proclaimed. You have worshipped him. So celebrate. Feast. And share your feast with those who are not here.

And then those incredible 9 words at the end of v10: "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."

Now, that could be a whole sermon in and of itself. "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.

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, a joy that's not dependent upon the rollercoaster of human emotional states, but 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 problem for them again.

Remarkably, except for a few historically short blips during a few revolts, they 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 Bishop Mayer and I have both mentioned the past few weeks, we are in a time of great ferment and change in the history of the Christian church, the greatest time of change since the Reformation 500 years ago. On top of that, as I mentioned last week, 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.

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. But the cultural context in which we ministered for the first century of our history has collapsed. We're sitting in the midst of cultural and ecclesiastical rubble that 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.

The perfect example is the fact that today we will bid farewell to our associate rector. This is painful for us. There was a time when St. Paul's was able to have full-time associates. Now, we can't even support a half-time associate. And I know this has been painful for Mtr.

Kiah as well. She has been seeking to serve God faithfully. But now this is the second time in a year that she's out of a job. And let me add, parenthetically, that I have been impressed by the way Kiah has handled this difficult situation with professionalism and with deep faith, and I trust that God has good things in store for her.

But what about us? What about St. Paul's? How do we move forward in the midst of the ruins around us?

As I see it we have three basic options.

Option 1—do nothing. Pretend nothing has changed. Bury our heads in the sand. Deny that the context for our second century of ministry will need to be different from the context of our first century. Keep on trying to do exactly the same things expecting different results (which, as you know is one definition of insanity). Thus I believe Option 1 is suicidal, and I wouldn't recommend it.

Option 2—make a radical change in the modern sense of the word. Be innovative and progressive. Let our world and our culture set the agenda. Forget about Eucharist—it's too old fashioned and ritualistic. Forget about classic hymns—worship only with the most modern top-40 praise music. Throw out anything that seems old and embrace only the new. Forget about creeds and classic theology—throw out anything that isn't modern and relevant.

Now I could try to spend a considerable amount of time trying to refute this option. But my basic thrust would be twofold. First—been there, done that. That applies personally—after all I was rector of a church for 11 years that had guitars at the early service and pipe organ at the late service. We basically found that guitars appealed more to baby boomers—middle aged folks. The younger folks that came tended to be more attracted to the traditional service. Been there, done that, also applies to the Episcopal Church. In the 70s and 80s there was a powerful urge to try to be modern and socially relevant. While a few good things have come from that, it was largely an unsuccessful strategy.

My second main objection to Option 2 is that there is new data emerging from the churches that spearheaded the seeker friendly movement of the 80s and 90s. To make a long story short, a few years back, the mother mega-church, Willow Creek in Barrington IL, took a long hard look at what they had been doing. They had been trying to make church as user friendly as possible. But they've discovered that those techniques led to numerical growth, but they didn't help with spiritual growth. And now they're turning to classic spiritual disciplines that they had distanced themselves from earlier. Thus I'm firmly convinced option 2, making a radical change in the modern sense of the word, is unwise.

Which brings us to option 3—making a radical change in the ancient sense of the word. Radical means roots. 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. If you've done any reading of Diana Butler Bass or Brian McLaren, my words will sound familiar.

You're going to hear a lot from me this year about focusing on our roots, focusing on corporate worship, individual disciplines of prayer and Bible reading, and strengthening our

community. My shorthand will be the words from the Baptismal Covenant and the book of Acts—we need to focus on the Apostle's teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and 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 God through classic and ancient pathways, rediscovering him in scripture, drawing closer to him 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, rebuilding 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 second century.