

**New St. James Presbyterian Church
Third Sunday after the Epiphany
Sunday, January 26, 2025**

**“When They Heard the Words of the Law”
Nehemiah 8:1-4a, 5-6, 8-10**

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Our Old Testament Lesson from Nehemiah offers a glimpse of a community in crisis. After Babylonian invaders destroyed Jerusalem, they took the Jewish people into exile in Babylon; then, after decades, the people were finally able to return home to Jerusalem. But this was no easy transition, no simple return to the way things had been; as they returned from exile, they faced uncertainty. How would they “rebuild Jerusalem” or “restore [their] worshipping community”? How would they be governed, and how would they defend themselves against another invasion (O’Connor)? These questions—this uncertainty—lasted for decades.

So, faced with this kind of uncertainty, what did the Jewish community do? “All the people of Israel gathered together into the square before the Water Gate,” we heard in our Lesson. “They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the LORD had given to Israel. Accordingly, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly [...]. He read from it facing the square” (vv. 1-3). In a time of uncertainty, they listened to the Law, the Torah, the guidance and instruction of God; they responded to the uncertainty of the age by listening to the Word of God.

Now some parts of this story sound surprisingly familiar to us Presbyterians. We believe that listening to the Word of God is an event for the whole community, and that’s precisely what we find here. As we heard in our Lesson: “the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding. [...] He read from it [...] in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand” (v. 3).

And, also very familiar to us, the reading of the Word was accompanied by the interpretation of the Word. We heard: “So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading” (v. 8). Much like our worship services, the Word is not only read—but also interpreted, so that we can understand more fully the message of the Scriptures. And what’s more, we heard: “The scribe Ezra stood on a wooden platform that had been made for the purpose” (v. 4). So not only do they interpret the Word, but they even do so from a purpose-build “wooden platform.” So there you have it: chapter and verse for pulpits!

Yet this scene is familiar only to a point. For one thing, did you notice how long they listened to the Word? “[T]he priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly [...]. He read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday” (vv. 2-3). They listened, with interpretation, from daybreak until lunchtime. Isn’t that something? Facing uncertainty, the Jewish community listened to the Word for hours on end. Now that doesn’t sound quite as familiar, does it? Though, in keeping with our Old Testament Lesson, maybe this morning I should preach for at least another five or ten hours.

And to me, what’s really striking is that not only do they listen to the Word for hours—but they do so with profound attentiveness. We heard that Ezra read the law “from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law” (v. 3). Can you imagine not only listening to the Word for hours, but also listening attentively, hanging on every word? In our overstimulated world of social media and short videos, it’s very rare to find this kind of undistracted attentiveness to anything.

And then, as this story becomes even more unfamiliar to us, the people respond to the reading of the Word in a way that I’ve not seen in my years as a minister: we heard, “all the people wept when they heard the words of the law” (v. 9). It’s not entirely clear why they wept: as one Presbyterian minister suggests, “[p]erhaps they [were] overcome with regret for the loss of the Torah during the exile,” or “[p]erhaps they ha[d] been reminded of how far short their actions ha[d] fallen from God’s expectations of them” (Lester). Whatever the reason: as they listened to the Word, the community wept.

In my experience, this is not a familiar reaction to the Word; in fact, if I were preaching a sermon, and you all began to weep, I think I’d find that rather distracting. Yet the weeping we hear in this Lesson should remind us that the Word of God is comfort—yes, of course—but also challenge, that the Word also opens us up to judgment and correction. Scripture reveals to us the love of God, but Scripture also unmask[s] our own unloving ways. The Word threatens to change us, but—very often—we’d rather not have to change. And so the Word can generate upheavals we don’t welcome. (See, that’s the risk of keeping a Bible by your bedside and reading it at night before you turn out the lights: Scripture is comfort *and* challenge; sometimes it can make you feel peaceful and assured, but other times it’s like curling up in your bed with coffee and firecrackers.)

But notice, though the people weep at first, that’s not how the story ends: we heard, “And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, “This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep”” (v. 9). Weeping had its moment, yet weeping does not get the last the word, as this story

ends instead with joy. “Then he said to them, ‘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’” (v. 10). Notice that? “and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared.” The people are sent out to rejoice—and to be a joyful blessing to others, to “prepare a feast [...] and share it with those who don’t have anything” (Peterson). After listening to the Law, the community set out with a renewed call to care for others.

And so weeping is transformed in the end into celebration. Here, pious devotion to the Word brings joy. That might surprise us, but—as one scholar writes—“Where did we ever get the notion that merriment is antithetical to holiness? [Here] holiness is connected to eating fat and drinking sweet wine. Life in God [...] produce[s] gladness, especially [when] listening for and living out God’s word” (Davis).

Our Lesson reminds me of the Jewish celebration called Simchat Torah, or “Rejoicing with the Torah” (שמחת תורה). In a contemporary synagogue, the Torah, which is the first five books of the Jewish Scriptures—the Torah is read through in a yearly cycle; and when the cycle completes at the last verse of Deuteronomy, the cycle begins again with the opening of Genesis...and a celebration accompanies this turning over of the scriptural cycle: “Torah scrolls are [...] carried through the synagogue [...] in a joyful procession [...]. There [is] singing and dancing and, for the children, sweets. The rejoicing [...] is meant to express the joy that Jews feel in [...] the Torah” (Zeidan).

In our Lesson, what at first seems almost like a familiar sketch of worship becomes, in the end, unfamiliar to us. Sure, we listen to the Word as a community (with interpretation from an elevated “wooden platform”!), but most of the similarities end there, as the people respond with deep weeping—and even deeper joy. Yet I wonder if hearing this story could inspire us to a deeper engagement with the Word. Because in times of uncertainty, as always, this is our text—not the news, not social media, not politicians, not celebrities—*this*: the Word of God is our text.

In our Lesson, the Jewish community turned to the Law in a time of uncertainty; could we likewise learn to listen for the Word amid the uncertainties of our age? The community listened attentively to the Law and its interpretation; could we likewise listen to the Word of God with our fullest attention? The community wept at the hearing of the Law; could we likewise read the Word not only for comfort—but also for judgement and correction? The community set out to share their portions with those who had none; could we likewise be transformed, by the Word, into more compassionate people? The community rejoiced at hearing the Law; could we likewise hear the Word with deeper—and more meaningful—joy? Amen.