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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

As I read my sermon text now, please notice the strong emotions of the people. They weep. I want to return to this later in my sermon. I want to return to the phenomenon of tears as one listens to the Word of God. So, my text is from our First Lesson, from Nehemiah 8:

For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law.
(Nehemiah 8:9 RSV)

This morning's reading from Nehemiah is an illustration on a national level of a truth that many of us have felt on a personal level: that when we are about at our wits end and quite thoroughly plunged down into failure, the way forward is to cling to the Word of God. That Word is the church's chief treasure. It is the firm foundation on which both the church and the individual Christian can build - or rebuild - a life. And that is worth a lot in this world!

So, this sermon has two parts – the national part and the personal part. The national part concerns Judah after her exile. The personal part concerns you and me. Let's begin with the story of Judah.

Judah fell to the great Babylonian Empire in 587 BC. As the Bible sees things, Judah fell because of her sins. The prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel had tried to spare Judah from this disaster by preaching repentance and amendment of life. But few had listened and the warnings had failed. The defeat of 587 BC was devastating. Jerusalem's great temple was destroyed, the walls of Jerusalem were leveled, and many of the leading citizens of Jerusalem were sent into exile in Babylon, in modern Iraq. There they settled down and lived, but hoped and prayed for the day of their return to Jerusalem.

After fifty years, their prayers were granted. The Edict of Cyrus of Persia (538 BC) granted the Jews permission to return home to Jerusalem and to rebuild the temple.

It sounds good. It sounds like the renewal of national life. But the reality seems to have been disappointing. First off, not all of the Jews in Babylon hurried on home to Judah. A new generation of Jews had been born in Babylon. Some of them went home to Judah, but a good number remained in Babylon. For them, Babylon had become home. So, that must have been discouraging for those who did go home – to realize that some of their brother and sister Jews no longer cared enough about Judah to work their way back home.

But also there was this: for those who did return to Judah, their return was pretty much a non-event. They did not return as a victorious people, but simply as

a conquered people who were permitted to go back home. But in returning home, they were returning to a land that had been devastated half-a-century before and pretty much depopulated. In Nehemiah 7:4, we read this note about Jerusalem:

Now the city was large and great: but the people were few therein, and the houses were not builded. (Nehemiah 7:4, KJV)

According to the prophet Haggai, in the early years of the resettlement the crops suffered from blight, mildew, and hail. Many people had inadequate food and clothing.¹ The people rolled up their sleeves and rebuilt the temple, but it was hard-going for such a poor and small population, and the rebuilt temple was a disappointment. It did not compare with the one before.

Perhaps you can already see why I am drawn to this story and its personal parallels -- because life is sometimes like this, even in our modern world. We, alas, stubbornly march right off into disaster, we hope and pray for recovery, at last it comes along, but then it is mediocre. What we wanted has happened, and yet life is still hard, life is still dull, and in the wee hours we wake up, can't fall back to sleep, and find ourselves wondering, "Is this all there is?"

Back to Judah.

So, she rebuilds her temple, but is disappointed by it. Meanwhile, Jerusalem's walls are still rubble and her population is small. She struggles onwards, but is dispirited, becoming evermore lax in morality and religious life, and in danger of disintegration.² The great days of Moses, the parting of the sea, the pillar of fire by night, the thundering voice of God from Mt. Sinai, and the glorious reign of King David were behind them. And the great days Isaiah had spoken of – the days when the nations would come to Jerusalem and to learn the ways of the LORD – those good days had certainly not yet come. All they seem to have were these relentless, mediocre days – one doggone day after another.

But then come along the heroes of this morning's reading: Nehemiah and Ezra. Almost a century has past since the release from Babylonian Captivity. It had been a hard century, but with the work of Nehemiah and Ezra, Judah begins the comeback trail.

Nehemiah is a practical person, with vision, courage, and determination. It would be great for any church to have him on the Board of Trustees. Nehemiah rebuilds the walls of Jerusalem, thereby seeing to the physical safety of the city. He does the job quickly and well, and then just a few days later, it is as if Nehemiah has done his job and now turns the important work over to Ezra.

¹ The Lectionary Commentary: Theological Exegesis for Sunday's Texts, The First Readings:: The Old Testament and Acts: 001 (Kindle Locations 3955-3956). Kindle Edition.

² John Bright, *A History of Israel*, Second Edition (The Westminster Press: Philadelphia, 1972) pages 379-380)

Ezra is a scribe and a priest – a religious authority, a minister of the Lord. In Ezra 7:10 we are permitted to see into the heart of Ezra, to see what he cared about:

For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach his statutes and ordinances in Israel.
(Ezra 7:10, RSV)

And that is exactly what he does in this morning's reading. Ezra read the Bible to the people of Judah. And the people wept.

Why did they weep? Our text does not say. It simply says that the people gathered as "one man" (Nehemiah 8:1, RSV). They were united, they were earnest. They gathered together and asked Ezra to read the Bible to them. Ezra did so. He read aloud to the assembly "both men and women and all who could hear with understanding" (Nehemiah 8:2, RSV). Ezra enlisted prominent Levites to help him. It was a great event of proclamation. Our text puts it this way:

⁸And they read from the book, from the law of God, clearly; and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.

And then the people wept.

Nehemiah, the governor, Ezra the priest, and the assisting Levites comforted the people and told them not to weep, but rather to celebrate. They ended their encouragement with these sweet words:

...and do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength. (Nehemiah 8:10, RSV)

This sequence strikes a chord with me. It sounds familiar – this progression from sin, defeat, humiliation and depression, to hearing the Word again as if for the first time, then weeping, and then rejoicing. In fact, this pattern puts me in mind of the Prodigal Son. Indeed, I love this story of Nehemiah and the forlorn people of Judah because it is as if it give us words to imagine what went on in the life of that wayward boy – a wandering boy I always worry about so much.

The story of the Prodigal Son expresses the boy's repentance with this marvelous phrase: he "came to himself":

¹⁶And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him. ¹⁷And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! (Luke 15:16, KJV)

If God has blessed the church, it includes people like this – people who have wasted, wasted, wasted so much: wasted the years, wasted their resources, wasted their relationships, perhaps even wasted their health. But by God’s grace, they came to themselves. Perhaps they had not stepped foot in a church for years. They had been absent from the church for a long time, but some childhood memory of, say, the Christmas story or the Easter story or simply the memory of a good mother or the witness of some Christian acquaintance at least penetrates their hearts when they are down in the dumps. And they weep. But then they begin the journey back home – back home to obedience and back home to a celebration in the end.

Perhaps there is someone in this morning’s snowy congregation who has known something of this pattern. Perhaps there is someone who is waiting to make some more progress along this path.

The Word of God is what did the trick for the forlorn people of Judah. Ezra read the Bible to the people. He read it not as some distant tale, not as some piece of mythology, but as the story of the very people before him. He read the Good Book to the people until the people came to themselves, until the people pictured themselves as part of the story being read, until the people began to understand once again that God loves them and has majestic plans in store for them – plans that will certainly come true if the people are willing. And those people were willing. They wept and turned again to the Lord.

The writers of the lectionary for this day were surely inspired by the Holy Spirit when they linked this reading from Nehemiah with Psalm 19. This Psalm – Psalm 19 – is one of the most perfect expressions of the overall stance of the Psalms toward the Word of God. The Psalms absolutely cherish the Word and the commandments of God. They cherish the Word as a drowning man cherishes the rope thrown to him. They cherish the Word of God as their chance to live again though they had been sinking in sin:

⁷The law of the Lord is perfect and re- | vives the soul;*

⁹the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous | altogether.

¹⁰More to be desired are they than gold, more than | much fine gold,*

sweeter far than honey, than honey | in the comb.

Martin Luther taught this to us long ago:

The true treasure of the Church is the most Holy Gospel of the glory and the grace of God. (Thesis 62, Luther’s Ninety-Five Theses.)

Compared to the Word of God, all else fades into insignificance – indeed takes on the character of temptation. We are speaking of human lives when we are speaking

of the Word of God. We are speaking of human beings for whom our Lord Jesus suffered and died.

So, the people of Judah hear the Word and respond with tears. They weep, but in their weeping they are drawing closer to the God who has drawn close to us in Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.