

Sermon Draft

Text: Nehemiah 8:1–3, 5–6, 8–10

Sermon: “The Gift of God’s Word”

In our text today, Israel is returning, rebuilding, and reorganizing, and they must remember how things were and that they cannot be the same. For things to be different, they start with what will make that change. They start with the Word of God. Always a great place to be for: ***“All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.” (2 Timothy 3:16)***

The Jews have gone through their exile, and they have gone through the trauma of their decisions and the consequences of their past. They’re ready, as they gather for their feast, to hear the very gift of God that is the Law of Moses.

Perhaps they remember the words of our Psalm for the day: ***“The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes” (Psalm 19:7–8).***

As they begin their resettlement and rebuilding, we see the power of the Word of God. Likewise, today, as we gather, hear, and respond, we see the power of the Word of God in Jesus Christ.

The Old Testament Reading for today takes us to a remarkable and beautiful event. All the people of God are assembled and attentive as they hear the Torah of Moses read. Listen again and hear about this happy and holy occasion: ***“Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, “Amen, Amen,” lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground.”*** (v 6)

The Word of God powerfully gathers his people. As the people gather together from their places, they ask of the priest, Ezra, that the Law of Moses be read out loud to them. They gather together not just as individuals as we commonly think of ourselves in worship but, as it says in our text, also as one person. As the Word is about to be read, the people in response stand together and prepare to hear. For them the Law is a gift of God, and it is their center and their starting place.

Many remember the times and place of their exile when they couldn't hear the Word.

Can you imagine such a reaction in our day? When the Scriptures are read in public or in worship, how do people in our day respond? Is it with the same joy and reverence? What is our response?

What a remarkable comparison for us today with our Christian worship! By the very sacrifice of Christ on the cross, we are gathered together into one body as the baptized children of God. We gather to hear the Word of God and raise our voices as one in our confession. The Word contains life, forgiveness, and salvation. It gives us Christ!

The Word of God powerfully opens ears and hearts. The people of God are read to, proclaimed to, and instructed. They receive the words that are being spoken, and they understand. The people have been gathered, but now they hear the words as they are delivered. The leaders and teachers are faithful to their calling to proclaim and teach the Word of God in a way that can be understood. And what the people hear, their hearts and minds receive and believe.

Again, the whole experience of Nehemiah 8 relates back to our appointed Psalm: ***“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer”*** (Psalm 19:14).

We think of the prayer that ***“we inwardly digest”*** the Word. Or, ***“Lord God, bless Your Word wherever it is proclaimed. Make it a word of power and peace to convert those not yet Your own and to confirm those who have come to saving faith”*** (LSB Altar Book, p 435).

The Word of God powerfully moves hearers to respond in repentance and joy. Ezra and Nehemiah have a bit of a situation on their hands. As the people hear the Word, they respond in tears and are visibly, physically moved (v 9). The Law as it is spoken brings a conviction of sin to their hearts. We know that God’s Word is sharper than any double-edged sword, and it seems to have pierced to their inner core. Ezra, Nehemiah, and all who are teaching call for the weeping to cease, for this is a day to the Lord. They send the people off to go and celebrate, and they even provide for those who aren’t prepared, because this is a day for joy.

The people are given their direction and blessing to go in the strength and joy of the Lord. They are to turn their hearts to God and find their joy in him. They should be filled with celebration, as David who danced before the ark. And for us, too, there should be repentance and joy. We should hear in the reading of God's Word, his Law, that we have much of which to repent. Just look at the world around us and just look in the mirror.

But we, gathered together in one, may also turn our hearts to the Lord in joy, because we have also heard that other Word from the Lord, his Gospel. The Savior to which Ezra, Nehemiah, and their people looked forward has come, has died for these sins of ours, and has risen!

We are receiving the benefits of this Word. We know the joy of the Lord is our strength. There was a time when the Word for us meant weeping and tears, but now we live in the time of Jesus. And the Word for you this day is, "Your sins are forgiven. Here is my body. Here is my blood. Here is my blessing."

Our mistake would be to consider Nehemiah 8 just for this Sunday. Our situation is not unlike theirs. It is our every Sunday. It is our gathering together, hearing the ever-moving and ever-sustaining Word of God, and having our hearts turned to his eternal joy.

We live in a culture that devalues and reduces human significance. Some of our most prestigious universities are dominated by those who regard human beings as but an accident in the aimless evolutionary process of the cosmos. They reinvest the sun, moon, stars, and galaxies with power that they do not have, as if they were the deities that determine our futures, just the way the ancient pagans saw them. In James we read we are to; ***“to put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls. But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like.”***

Nehemiah 8 is not just the start of our year or for the time of our resolutions; it is also the weekly, even daily, return to God's Word with our brothers and sisters in Christ to find renewal of life and the revival of forgiveness.

Let us as we gather together remember the words of Nehemiah and let us rejoice in God's Word celebrating His gifts of faith, forgiveness, life and hope.

And let us remember the words of our Lord, ***"I am the light of the world.***

Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." (John 8:12)

Amen