

### Lectionary 3 C 2022

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

January 23, 2022

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

I don't know if you were paying close attention, but our first reading today was verses 1 through 3, then 5 and 6, and then 8, 9, and 10. Verse four and verse seven were omitted. I think I can guess why they were omitted. Because each of them is a long list of thirteen hard-to-pronounce names. *Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiyah, Maaseiah, Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hash-baddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam.* And that's just verse four. I won't read the entirely different list of thirteen names from verse seven.

This seems like stereotypical Old Testament stuff. At least that's what I would have thought when I was a teenager or young adult. Typical Old Testament stuff. From a book called Nehemiah. Whose name itself is a stereotype. Jeremiah. Jedidiah. Josiah. Azariah. Amaziah. Obadiah. Uzziah. Zechariah. Hezekiah. Zedekiah. Uriah. Those are all real Old Testament people. You can't make this stuff up. If somebody told me when I was twenty years old that they wanted to talk about Nehemiah, I would have asked for some strong coffee and some Tylenol.

But back then, I was young and stupid. And today, decades later, I'm no longer young. But... I'm still stupid. Who says nothing stays the same? But seriously, you might overlook Nehemiah. Who is both a book and a man. In fact, his book has been called the only "political autobiography" in the Bible.<sup>1</sup> With a name like Nehemiah, you might think he was a prophet, a man of God. But no, he is paired forever with Ezra, who *was* a man of God, a scribe. Nehemiah was a city manager, a political appointee, a statesman, a judge. Nehemiah the political leader and Ezra the religious leader had one of the hardest leadership projects in human history: the rebuilding of the city of Jerusalem and its temple. Ezra and Nehemiah are forever paired because they worked together, the religious leader and the civil leader, and their books stand side-by-side in the Old Testament.

When I was young and stupid, no one ever told me that over half of the Old Testament pertains to how Babylon conquered the Israelites. There's the lead-up to the Babylonian conquest. There's the time of the conquest and the exile, the captivity. And then there's the return from the captivity. This was the great trauma of the Old Testament. And it's about two thirds of the pages of the Old Testament, all spread out of sequence, in a variety of different literary forms, in a variety of contexts. I wish someone had explained that to me when I was young. It would have saved me a lot of time having to figure it out myself. The man Nehemiah, and the book that bears

his name, are in the aftermath part of the timeline. After the destruction and the enslavement, and now the people come home to the ruins. And it's physical ruins. And it's also social ruins. The collapse of law and order, what today's experts might call a "failed state." The two men, and the two books, Ezra and Nehemiah, are about the recovery. The rebuilding, the restoring, the reconstruction. Any verb with the prefix "re-."

And so what happens in our first reading today is that when the rebuilding is complete, they kind of have a grand re-opening. And they do that by gathering the entire population, and doing a reading of the scriptures from early morning until mid-day. Ezra said that 42,000 people had returned from Babylon. So you can kind of think of a football stadium-sized crowd. And they spend the whole morning listening to a reading of their scriptures. Nehemiah says it was the law of Moses. Who knows how much of the Old Testament they might have actually covered in four or five hours? But however much was read, Nehemiah tells us two details that we mustn't miss. He talks about the interpretation of the scripture. In other words, the Bible was not simply read aloud. It was explained. And he talks about the emotional reaction of the people.

And the emotional reaction of the people is described as weeping. And placing their faces to the ground. And at the end, Ezra and Nehemiah say, "go home and feast." Feast and share. Do not be sad. The emotional reaction could not have been simple. The city and the temple had been destroyed approximately seventy years earlier. In Bible reckoning, three and a half generations had passed. So the emotion is partly about grief, about what has been lost. The emotion is partly joy, about what has been recovered. I daresay that a large part of the emotion is memory. A collective recollection: "Oh. This is who we are." The Greek philosopher Plato and the Christians who came later had this Greek word *anamnesis*, which Christians came to use in connection with the Lord's Supper. *Anamnesis* is the recovery of memory, the re-surfacing of memory, that recalls us to the truth of our selves and of our God. These tens of thousands of citizens had not heard the story. The flame had slowly gone out in Babylon as the generations who remembered the story had died.

Now, scholars call this moment the beginning of Judaism. Now the Jewish people, the Israelites, go back to Abraham. But this is the beginning of the Jewish religion, of rabbinic Judaism. The people come together around the scripture. And the scripture is read. And importantly, the scripture is interpreted. It is explained. What is old is made relevant for a new generation. Keep in mind that what had gone on prior to this was a temple religion in a temple that contained the original ark of the covenant. What had taken place earlier was a hereditary monarchy based on the DNA of David and Solomon. Prophets had spoken to these kings. There had been roaming charismatic leaders like Samuel and Elijah. There had been teachings and psalms attributed to King David and King Solomon. There had been pilgrimages to holy places such as the temple. All of that had basically been erased or lost.

But what emerges in today's first reading is the written word. Essentially, this moment is the dawn of the Bible. It is the first time that there seems to be a coherent collection of works that can be called the law, and that can take a few hours to read aloud. It is the first time that all the

people gather around this collection of writings, and listen, and have it explained to them. It is the dawn of the Bible. It is the dawn of the religion in which the community gathers around the Bible to study it and to have it interpreted. It is the dawn of preaching. The reading is included this morning because it frames what Jesus does in today's assigned gospel reading in his hometown of Nazareth. The scroll of Isaiah is handed to him. And he unrolls it to a certain location, and he reads it. And then he begins to explain what it means. "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." But Jesus is doing this about five and a half centuries after Nehemiah. But it's the pattern of worship established by Nehemiah. That became the hallmark of rabbinic Judaism. And eventually a chief characteristic of Christianity, and perhaps Islam.

We mustn't take this for granted. In world religions, including Christianity, it is common to have holy places. In world religions, including Christianity, it is common to have gurus—charismatic leaders who bring messages to the people. In world religions, including Christianity, it is common to have sacrifice—animal sacrifice, monetary offerings, or even what the apostle Paul refers to as the living sacrifice of spiritual worship. Our own sanctuary is centered upon an altar, which is the name for a place of sacrifice. All of these things are characteristics of world religions. But the idea that a text—a Bible—is at the center, and the idea that a rabbi or scribe or priest or pastor should interpret the Bible (rather than preaching their own personal truth): this is something new, and important. And is not always part of religion.

The events that are being recorded in the book of Nehemiah and its companion book Ezra are the final historical events of the Old Testament. The books are way, way out of sequence in our Bibles. But in many Jewish Bibles, including the oldest surviving Jewish Bible, Ezra and Nehemiah are placed last.<sup>2</sup> The end of the Old Testament. All of that stuff that took place over several hundred years, and all of the writings associated with it, are now becoming a Bible, a scripture. If you put this stuff in chronological order, which is what some Jewish traditions have done with their Bible, then at the end of the Old Testament, that scripture is becoming the anchor of the community, the center of God's people, the heart of reflection. And you can draw a straight line from Nehemiah to Jesus in today's gospel to you and me, right now, in this congregation.

Our worship began with the prayer of the day, which you may not have been paying close attention to. It is not a prayer that fits with our gospel reading today, which has something to do with Jesus and Isaiah and good news to the poor, sight to the blind, and release to the captives. No, the prayer of the day for this Sunday is actually about the Bible. And it comes from one of the greatest religious leaders of the Reformation, Thomas Cranmer, the Archbishop of Canterbury, who played a pivotal role in the Reformation of England. He wrote our prayer in 1549. And it is very venerable. Because it is very good. Regarding the scriptures, Cranmer prays: *Grant that we may hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them.* Those are his original words. Hear and read and learn. But also mark. And inwardly digest. And that's what happened to the people of Jerusalem in our first reading, and why they were so emotional. Because they heard and were able to inwardly digest. May we do the same, and by the Holy Spirit may the same thing take place in our midst. That God may gather and shape this

community. And that in this place, we may hear his living voice, calling us back to the truth of our selves, and the truth of his goodness. Amen.

1.Simon Sebag Montefiore, Jerusalem: The Biography (2011), p. 56.

2.The Leningrad Codex, a Masoretic text ffrom the 11<sup>th</sup> century CE.