

Sermon - 02/23/2022
Ps 19; Neh 8:1-10; 1 Cor 12:12-31a; Lu 4:14-21
Free to Trust

“Billy had been misbehaving and was sent to his room. After a while the five-year-old emerged and informed his mother that he had thought it over and then said a prayer. ‘Fine, I’m very pleased,’ said Mother. ‘If you ask God to help you be a good boy, He will help you.’ ‘Oh, I didn’t ask Him to help me be good,’ said Billy. ‘I asked Him to help you put up with me.’”(beliefnet.com – accessed 01-21-22)

Nehemiah is the governor of Jerusalem under King Artaxerxes of Persia. He hopes to inspire his people to return to God. God’s people, Judah, went into exile under the Babylonians around 586 BC. But there was a regime change when the Persians conquered the Babylonians. So, Nehemiah was a Hebrew who served the Persian king as cup bearer.

The story told today in our Old Testament Scripture takes place in about 445 BC – 141 years after exile. The king of Persia sends his cup bearer back to his hometown to help his people rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. Especially, to rebuild the temple of God. The Persians were generous with the Hebrews. They began allowing the Judahites to return home in about 516 BC. The stories of Nehemiah the governor and Ezra the scribe are found between 2 Chronicles and the Book of Esther in the Old Testament.

Today we look in on the people of Judah at an important moment in their history. They have understood that they were exiled on account of their unfaithfulness to God. They had worshiped idols, ignored God and broken His Law. The walls of the city of Jerusalem have just been rebuilt in this scene – with much difficulty and danger. Nehemiah and Ezra are setting about to bring their people back to faith in the one true God. They have been under the influence of a pagan society for two generations.

Nehemiah orders the Torah to be read and interpreted out loud in the city. All who can hear and understand are assembled to hear God’s word. All means all. What we see is the repentance of the people with weeping. Instead of calling for fasting and self-denial, Nehemiah tells the people to cook a big feast, to give and receive gifts and to celebrate their return to the covenants of the Lord. They are told to celebrate the gracious forgiveness and restoration God has given them.

Nehemiah is a prayerful, wise ruler, for the most part. The matter of separating the Hebrews from the surrounding nations is another story. We won’t look into that today. I urge you to read Ezra-Nehemiah and judge for yourself Nehemiah and Ezra’s push for religious and racial purity.

We tend to forget that God is dealing with an entire nation here. God often does relate to humanity as one people – with Israel/Judah as His own chosen nation. And yet, the people are responding to the reading of the Law in individual ways – with worship, conviction, confession, repentance and – what comes next? What did Nehemiah say? “This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep.” He told them to celebrate because “the joy of the Lord is your strength.” After the cleansing of confession and repentance comes thanksgiving and rejoicing!

Our journey from the birth of Jesus through His visit from the Magi – the Epiphany – has been our Exodus out of bondage and exile. In Christ, so much more than in the former times, we are constantly renewed in this world – and eternally new in the world to come. We have good cause to rejoice every day! We are delivered from sin and death! The Lord is a fountain of life. Hallelujah!

As Jesus meets us in this Gospel passage once again, after His baptism and His testing in the desert, He stands in the synagogue of Nazareth, His home town. He is telling everyone there – and us here – very clearly that He comes as Liberator – God’s one and only Messiah. Jesus reads the Isaiah scroll:

“God’s Spirit is on me,’ He says ‘He’s chosen me to preach the Message of good news to the poor, Sent me to announce pardon to prisoners and

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recovery of sight to the blind, To set the burdened and battered free,
to announce, 'This is God's year to act!'" (Lu 2:18-19 MSG)

These words are for you and me today as much as then. When we enter this place consecrated to God, we are here to do business with the Almighty. It is always the time and place of decision. These are covenant moments. God covenants with us as the various parts of the whole body of Christ – God's people. Inside this covenant there is covering and comfort. God's rules for living stop the decay and ruin of sin and rebellion. Freedom from our fallen nature is true freedom – and with it comes true joy.

This morning, if you are ready to be released from the prison of spiritual blindness and weakness and exile – if you want to tell Jesus that you are burdened – that you are battered – this is the right time and the right place. Jesus can turn your grief into joy. He longs to lift that heaviness and mourning from your shoulders. He came to bear all of it for you and me.

Let Jesus set you free – so that you can trust Him for everything. The joy of Christ's presence is your strength. Amen.