

3rd Sunday after Epiphany – Year C
January 31, 2010
Faith Lutheran, Radcliff, KY
Nehemiah 8:1-3,5,6,8-10
Pastor Paul Horn

“Stop reading the Bible!”

So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. ³ He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law.

⁵ Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up. ⁶ Ezra praised the LORD, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, “Amen! Amen!” Then they bowed down and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground.

⁸ They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read.

⁹ Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, “This day is sacred to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep.” For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law.

¹⁰ Nehemiah said, “Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.”

She pours his coffee, scrambles his eggs with a little cheese, and gently slides his plate in front of him. With barely a grunt of acknowledgment he remains buried in the morning newspaper. He prefers reading a report about the latest scandal in politics, a list of scores from yesterday's games, and the opinions of a couple columnists he'll never meet rather than listen to the voice of the person who shares his bed – and his life. A voice that promises love and hope, that expresses emotional depth and intellectual exploration far greater than what he can find in any paper. Sometimes reading gets in the way of listening.

Do you ever find when watching the news you read the updates scrolling along the bottom of the screen instead of listening to the broadcaster? Or when we show the WELS Connection video with closed caption text do you catch yourself reading the words instead of listening to Pastor Bill Bernhardt? Maybe you know a teen who prefers texting to talking. Sometimes reading gets in the way of listening.

A pastor once wrote, “Listening and reading are not the same thing ... Listening is an interpersonal act; it involves two or more people in fairly close proximity. Reading involves one person with a book written by someone who can be miles away or centuries dead or both ... When I read a book the book does not know if I am paying attention or not ... I can read by myself; I cannot listen by myself.” He then offers this alarming statement, “Reading Scripture is not the same as listening to God” (Peterson, Eugene, *Working the Angels: The Shape of Pastoral*

Integrity, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI, 1987, pp. 87-89). So **Stop Reading the Bible!** And instead, listen to the Bible, listen to God in his Word extending an interpersonal act that involves your full attention. Listen, just like the exiles who returned from their 70 year captivity, who, when they heard God's Word read publicly for the first time in many years they stood to listen, and when it was all done, they broke down crying. Why? We'll answer those questions as we listen to God's Word this morning.

Our lesson this morning is from the book of Nehemiah. Nehemiah was a Jew who was employed by King Artaxerxes of Persia as his personal cupbearer. A cupbearer tasted the wine before it was delivered to the king to make sure it wasn't poisoned. One day as Nehemiah entered the king's chambers to present the goblet of wine, he came in with a long, sad face. In the king's presence this was not allowed. So the king asked him, "Why do you look so sad?" Nehemiah had recently heard a report about the gates and walls of the city of Jerusalem. They still lay in ruins. The Babylonians had destroyed God's holy city nearly 70 years ago. Since that time two waves of exiles had been allowed to return from the land of their captivity to Jerusalem. But reconstruction work had been delayed by Israel's enemies. Nehemiah boldly petitioned the king, "Send me so that I can rebuild it!" The king not only granted his cupbearer's request, he sent money, he wrote letters to neighboring kings telling them to supply Nehemiah with wood for construction. The king even sent the best officers from his army and the king's own cavalry for safe travel.

At the time of Nehemiah rode through the rubble of the city to inspect the walls, approximately 42,000 Jews had returned. It took those people just 52 days to rebuild the walls Nebuchadnezzar had knocked down. 52 days... certainly the hand of the LORD was with his people. (6:15,16). Six days later, it happened to be the New Year's Day of the civil calendar, which the Jews celebrated with the Feast of Trumpets. Everyone had the day off of work, but instead of sleeping in or going fishing, they all gathered for a day of sacred assembly (Num 29). In other words, they went to church. Since the temple was still a pile of ruins, the people in the city gathered in one of the city's squares located by one of the city gates.

Enter a new character to the story, a man by the name of Ezra. He is the one after whom the book of Ezra is named in the Old Testament. He was a priest and scribe. He had returned to Jerusalem from Persia 13 years before Nehemiah with one of the first wave of returning exiles. Ezra stood up before the great crowd of people and read the Book of the Law of Moses – what we call the Torah or the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible which Moses wrote; Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy. He didn't just read parts of it, Ezra read the whole thing.

As he opened the scroll and began to read, the people all stood up. Ezra didn't tell them to, they just did it! And they remained standing...from daybreak till noon. (vs3) We complain when we have to stand 10 minutes for prayer or if we don't get to sit for the final hymn. Why stand for 5-6 hours? Just as we stand for the reading of the Gospel, they stood out of respect for the Word – God's words. They didn't just listen, **vs3 all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law.** They paid attention! They were eager to hear God's Word. They had the right attitude. And the priest didn't just read the Word... While they were standing there, the Levites, men from the tribe of Levi, set apart for public service in the temple, **clearly explained the meaning**

of what was being read, helping the people understand each passage. (NLT)

Don't you love coming to worship and getting excited when you listen to the lessons read, especially the lesson that I'm going to preach on and you wonder, "I hope he explains that verse in the sermon. I wonder what it means?" And the joy that comes when the Word is explained? Isn't that the same joy found in Bible class or Sunday school, when the Word is discussed and we all understand it? It makes us all the more eager to listen! That's how the Jewish exiles felt as they stood to listen attentively to the Word of God. It also caused some other emotions to come out.

vs9,10 tell us that the people were weeping and filled with grief when heard the Word read and explained to them. Why? In those five books of Moses God had told his people, "If you disobey me, if you worship false idols, this is what I'm going to do..." The Jews in Jerusalem knew exactly why their fathers were sent into exile. They knew why God allowed the Babylonians to destroy their city and temple. They felt guilt over the sins of their fathers and their own sins. They were very aware of the threat of divine judgment.

Why then did Nehemiah and Ezra tell the people not to weep? Because the law had already condemned their hearts. The people had felt the hot fire of God's wrath burning down against them. They felt the fires of hell leaping at their feet. They were sorry for their transgressions. In Isaiah 57:18,19 the LORD makes it very clear that he will not stay angry forever toward those who are repentant, he will bring comfort and peace.

Have you ever cried when you listened to God speak to you through his Word? Sometimes I see people crying when they sing certain hymns: Silent Night, The Old Rugged Cross, Amazing Grace. Why do they cry? Because of the truths of the Word of God contained in those hymns. Some folks cry during certain worship services. There are some members who cry every time they take the Lord's Supper. Some cry during the Good Friday Tenebrae Service, some on Easter Sunday morning. After walking with their Savior for six weeks through Lent, observing his passion and suffering, Easter Sunday is a joyous event! Tears stream down our faces! Why? Because we listen to God's Word. And when we listen to the Law, it points out our sins. It makes us realize the harsh reality, how we have repeatedly disobeyed our God and disappointed him. How often do we let distractions get in the way of attentively listening to our God! We do not set aside the remote control, we do not shut off the computer monitor, we do not mute the cell phone. We allow other appointments to busy our schedules so that we cannot stay and study God's Word in Bible study after church. Sometimes we hinder others from listening, when we talk out loud or whisper too loudly during worship and distract others. Just like the Israelites, listening to God's law makes me want to cry. Just like the Israelites it makes me want to fall down on my face in repentance.

When penitent, God comes to us and speaks to us through his Word again. Listen to him, and you will weep again, this time not out of sorrow, but because of your joy. Nehemiah told the people, **vs10 "Do not weep, do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."** This joy is the gladness of your heart when you ponder the blessings the LORD has showered upon you. Food, clothing, shelter, loving parents, children, grandchildren, Christian friends, a free country in which to live peacefully and worship him, the skills necessary to perform your job and

provide for your family, time to relax – these blessings make us rejoice in the LORD!

How much more so when we ponder the spiritual blessings! **Do not weep, do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength, (literally, a place of safety).** I can't imagine how vulnerable the people of Israel felt when they returned from exile, living in a city with no walls, susceptible to imminent attacks from their neighbors who wanted nothing more than to see them fail... again. It would be like setting up a forward operating base (FOB) in the middle of Kandahar with no walls, no razor wire, no gates, no guards with machine guns. But imagine how the hearts of the people felt secure when they listened to the LORD speak through his prophets Nehemiah and Ezra. They could confess with confidence, **“The LORD is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will not be shaken.” (Ps 62.2)**

When we repent of our sins, in faith we turn the ears of our hearts to God. And then God speaks to us through his Gospel, not to crush us with his condemnation, for that is the purpose of the Law. But in the still, quiet whisper of the Gospel do we find a place of safety, a refuge from our sins and our guilt. The Gospel, the good news of Jesus, is found in His Word, the Bible, and there we hear him say, **“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. The blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.”** (1John 1:9,7) Doesn't it bring tears to your eyes, to know that your sins against God's Word are hidden in Christ's blood? Doesn't it cause your heart to rejoice knowing that Jesus took the guilt of your sins upon himself on the cross, so that his Father might declare you innocent?

When you repent, in faith turn the ears of your heart to God and listen to him as he speaks to you through the Gospel found in the Sacraments. Baptism for example.... Doesn't it bring a smile to your face every time you witness a baptism here at Faith Lutheran as we were privileged to do the last three Sundays? Because you know that at one time you too were washed through water and the Word, and at that moment, God put you in a safe place, his loving arms, and rescued you personally from your sins, from Satan's power, from the fires of hell, from your grave? Doesn't your heart well up with joy whenever we sing, “God's own child, I gladly say it, I am baptized into Christ. He, because I could not pay it, gave my full redemption price.” “Satan, hear this proclamation, ‘I am baptized into Christ.’ Drop your ugly accusation, I am not so soon enticed.” “Death you cannot end my sadness, I am baptized into Christ.” (CWS 773) You will listen to God speak to you through the gospel in his Word and in the Sacraments, for the LORD has provided a place of safety from the wicked foe, from death, from my sins, that place of refuge is your Savior Jesus.

So don't read the Bible. Instead, listen to God in the Bible. Before you listen, you will set aside the remote, shut off the computer monitor, mute the cell phone. You will be mindful of others in worship so they can listen. You will schedule quiet time for just you and God, and you will listen.. Amen.

We pray, “Speak, O Lord, as we come to you, to receive the food of your holy Word, take your truth, plant it deep in us; shape and fashion us in your likeness that the light of Christ may be seen today in our acts of love and our deeds of faith. Speak, O Lord, and fulfill in us all your purposes for your glory.” (CWS 737:1) Amen.

