**Nehemiah 8:9-18** December 16, 2018

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 *Nehemiah 8:9 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. 10Nehemiah 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.” 11The Levites calmed all the people, saying, “Be still, for this is a sacred day. Do not grieve.” 12Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them.*

 *13On the second day of the month, the heads of all the families, along with the priests and the Levites, gathered around Ezra the scribe to give attention to the words of the Law. 14They found written in the Law, which the Lord had commanded through Moses, that the Israelites were to live in booths during the feast of the seventh month 15and that they should proclaim this word and spread it throughout their towns and in Jerusalem: “Go out into the hill country and bring back branches from olive and wild olive trees, and from myrtles, palms and shade trees, to make booths”—as it is written. 16So the people went out and brought back branches and built themselves booths on their own roofs, in their courtyards, in the courts of the house of God and in the square by the Water Gate and the one by the Gate of Ephraim. 17The whole company that had returned from exile built booths and lived in them. From the days of Joshua son of Nun until that day, the Israelites had not celebrated it like this. And their joy was very great.*

 *18Day after day, from the first day to the last, Ezra read from the Book of the Law of God. They celebrated the feast for seven days, and on the eighth day, in accordance with the regulation, there was an assembly.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

**“The Joy of the LORD Is Your Strength!”**

 Nehemiah. What kind of name is that? For the most recent year of record, less than 1,000 babies were named Nehemiah in the entire nation. Nehemiah is one of those Bible names with just a little too much clunk to it to make it popular. But even if you know your Bible, Nehemiah is still obscure. In our three-year cycle of worship readings, this is the only time we read from the book of Nehemiah, and here it is an alternate reading.

 So what is going on? Nehemiah lived right at the end of the Old Testament. After Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. After Moses and the judges, and after David and all the kings. Even one hundred years after the Babylonian Captivity, we have Nehemiah. Now in that one hundred years between captivity and Nehemiah, the Israelites (by this time called Jews) were under the rule of the Persian Empire. For that century they were just scraping by, politically and spiritually. They got to build their temple, but it was down-sized from the old one. They had re-inhabited their war-torn capital city, but the Persians did not trust the Jews enough to let them build defensive walls. So in the malaise of political weakness and a half-hearted religion, the once starry-eyed Jews who had returned to rebuild their fatherland, had slouched into the same sins that had gotten Israel sent off to Babylon.

 At this point in history, Ezra and Nehemiah, the first two men mentioned in our reading, led a religious and political revival. The Jews had just been granted permission to rebuild Jerusalem’s walls. Now the Jews had a real capital. Their temple was protected. They would not be victims, or at least not *easy* victims. Feeling blessed by recent developments, they rededicated themselves to God’s ways. “Let’s do it right this time. Let’s get serious; serious about God, our faith, all of it.” So great crowds gathered and listened to the Word of God. And when they listened, do you know what they did?

**A. I’m Not Feeling the Joy**

 ***“All the people [were] weeping as they listened to the words of the Law.”*** They wept. Does that seem strange to you? Because it does to me. After all, when was the last time I read God’s word and you started crying? Doesn’t God want us to be happy? Isn’t he loving? Don’t we come to church for the warm-fuzzies?

 Jesus once told the story of two men who went to church to pray. One of them prayed, “You know, God, I have a positive self-image. I do what I am supposed to. I am an example to all the people out there who never pay you attention,” and on he went. The other man who went to church was so ashamed of himself that he couldn’t look up to heaven. He was so agitated he couldn’t fold his hands. Instead, in his regret over what he had done and been, his fists kept beating against his chest and all he could say was, “Forgive me. Forgive me.” And do you know who was declared righteous in God’s sight? The fearful, repentant one.

 Maybe the weeping worshipers before Nehemiah had it at least partly right! If I hear God’s word and what he wants from my life and I just keep on checking off the boxes, “Yep. Got that one. Did that. No problem. Uh-huh,” Jesus says I am going to hell. The people assembled before Nehemiah and Ezra understood that. They listened to God’s commands. In their hearts they knew that they had *not* done everything they were supposed to. They knew that they words were not as pure, loving and truthful as they were supposed to be. They realized that they had put their jobs, their hobbies, their vacations, their kid’s social lives, in front of God. They knew the bitterness of sin that we with our self-satisfied egos are too calloused to feel. They knew that every single sin was a reason for God to cast them from his presence into the abyss of hell. What’s more, they didn’t have a single sin, they had a mountain of sins. Unlike us, they took sin seriously!

 But sometimes it happens to you too. Like when you wake at night and worry that maybe you haven’t done right by the family, haven’t steered them in the ways of the Lord, and you worry for their spiritual well-being. And you think about the harsh word you said to your classmate, and you try to rationalize it, but your conscience keeps bringing you back to the fact that whatever circumstances, you failed your God. But hey, why worry! You can turn on the music and drown out the conscience. You can check the latest news feed and get yourself off those negative thoughts. You can do that, but these Jews took God more seriously than that!

 And if you don’t know what I am talking about, then go ahead like that “religious” man Jesus talked about in his parable. Go ahead and brag to God—and go home unforgiven, still in your sins.

**B. The Road to Joy**

 Here is the other half. The problem wasn’t that these Jews misunderstood what Nehemiah and Ezra were saying, but they didn’t hear *all* that they were saying. In truth, those people were sinners who had returned to the rebellious ways of their fathers. But they didn’t hear the other part of God’s word. The other part is sacrifice for sin. God made a way for sinful people to be made right with him. In those times before Jesus, it consisted of bringing offerings for sin to God’s house; animals to be slaughtered. It was a sign of a future sacrifice for sin that would one day enter the world on a day we now call Christmas. Since the people were not hearing God’s loving forgiveness, even though it was read to them, Nehemiah had to tell the conscience-stricken crowd, ***“This day is sacred to the Lord your God. Do not mourn or weep… Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.”***

 I love those last words: ***“The joy of the Lord is your strength.”*** You and I have moments of being conscience stricken. We should, for we sin! But we have this hope, there is a sacrifice, a payment for our sin. It is forgiven in Jesus Christ. And though our human minds have difficulty processing information that quickly, from that moment God wants us to have the joy and confidence of hope. What is it that we frequently sing after the sermon? “Create in me a right heart , O God…” and a little later, “Restore to me the joy of your salvation.” When you leave today, having heard your forgiveness, having been encouraged by God’s loving deeds, having received the body and blood of our Lord, remember, ***“The joy of the Lord is your strength.”***

 And then he added, ***“Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared.”*** Spiritual joy led to joy in life. They went in the joy of the Lord and ate choice food and sweet drink. Today, you can go down to the corner and in five minutes get a greasy burger and a super-sized sugar-laden Coca-Cola for $2.12. But some of you can remember times more like to Nehemiah’s day, when meat was a luxury, when for the half-year between December and May you didn’t have fresh produce. Canned maybe, but not fresh. And candy was a holiday luxury, not a snack between every meal.

 So when Nehemiah told the people to go enjoy fatty food and sweet drinks he wasn’t telling them to commit nutritional suicide but to, instead of fretting over their sins, rejoice in the Lord’s spiritual gifts with their earthly blessings. He advocates celebration and fun!

 Can we do that? Have fun in church? Yes, (and here I stand self-convicted), we should do more to convey the joy of God’s people. Don’t let people think that being Christian is to be sad-faced, or worse yet, sour-faced.

**C. Reliving the Joy of the Lord**

 This joy of the Lord so infected the listeners that the next day, they again gathered to hear God’s Word. ***“On the second day of the month, [they gave] attention to the words of the Law. They found written in the Law, which the LORD had commanded through Moses, that the Israelites were to live in booths during the feast of the seventh month.”***

 According to the Law of Moses, on the 15th of that same month, two weeks later, they were supposed make “booths” to live in, little huts or lean-tos of leafy branches. (After church, do a search for pictures of the Feast of Tabernacles and you will get an education. Jews still celebrate this feast.) The reason for living in these lean-tos was a reminder of the years when they came out of Egypt and made their way to the promised land. They came through the wilderness. Think about the classic Western ghost-town with dust, sun, wind and tumbleweed, and you pretty much know what the Israelites went through in the years of their Exodus. Why would they want to remember that?

 Somewhere in the prophets, I couldn’t find where, one of the Old Testament prophets compares Israel’s years in the wilderness to the first years of marriage. Remember those first years? You didn’t have much but you had each other. When you got on the Illinois toll road you had to look under the seats to find enough change to pay the tolls. When you made your weekly budget, you budgeted down to the last penny, not even enough for an extra piece of gum. It was the worst of times. But something about the joyful companionship of your first years combined with the optimism of youth made it the best of times. The worst of times, maybe, but you wouldn’t trade it for anything.

 And the Israelites in the wilderness had been on a honeymoon, if you will, with the Lord. Every morning crawling out of their tent before sunrise, they saw the pillar of fire reaching to the sky, and as the sun lit the sky it became a dark cloud of smoke, a manifestation of God’s presence with them. Every day God provided the mysterious manna. Through numerous miracles he sustained them on their weary journey through the desert.

 That’s what the Feast of Tabernacles remembered, and the feeling it was meant to capture. The hard, simple, desert days, when all the Israelites had was the Lord. And so God told them, in September each year when the land of Israel gets less than half an inch of rain, to build little lean-tos of branches and live in them for the week. Not just sit out there in the evening, but live in them, to take them back to Israel’s honeymoon with their Lord. It is still the Jewish people’s most joyous of festivals.

 We have more than that in these days leading up to Christmas. Each week in Advent we celebrate something even better: the growing expectation of our Savior. Maybe you noticed today that today on our advent wreath we lit the pink colored candle. And if you wonder why we have this odd-colored candle, it is this: it is a symbol of joy, joy in Jesus.

 This is the joy that Paul encouraged in us, *“Rejoice in the Lord always! I will say it again: Rejoice!”* It is the joy that the baptized people before John the Baptist felt when he awakened their hearts to a coming Savior.

 Let your Christmas joy be seen by all. Of course, not the sort of “joy” that the world often rolls into their Christmases—the joy of excess—that is spiritual vandalism of Christmas. But the joy of forgiveness, acceptance, of memories of God’s goodness to you and the people special to you, and most of all, joy over the expected Savior. Let that joy be seen in your Christmas parties, your gift exchanges, your cookies and lights and trees and cards. May the joy of the Lord be your strength. Amen.