

## *Rediscovering the Basics*

Nehemiah 8:1-14

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January 11, 2011

When I saw the members of Congress this week taking turns reading out loud an edited version of the U. S. Constitution, it was another incidence of that human need to turn to sacred texts, to go back to the beginning and remind ourselves what we are all about. Of course, the Constitution is not a sacred text, although we may treat it with such deference and ritual that it seems so. But it is not unusual for humans at the beginning of the year and in times of crisis to recite their history and refer to their founding documents. We see this more than once in the record of the Hebrews we call the Old Testament.

The story in Nehemiah 8 is a classic story of a people seeking to go back to basics, to remember who they are as a people in relation to God. The Jewish people had come back from two generations in which the elite were all forced to live in the capital of the Babylonian empire. Now the Persian king had allowed them to return to their homeland and even to rebuild the wall under Nehemiah's supervision, so that they were safe at last in their own country. Most of a century and many of the institutions of the nation had been lost. Traditions that were once known to everyone had been forgotten. The stories of what God had done for them in the past had faded from view. They were back in their homeland but it was no longer all that clear how they were to live.

So on the first day of the seventh month—what we now call Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, the people gathered for a public assembly in their equivalent of Times Square, not to watch the ball drop but to hear what it means to be God's people. They asked the priest Ezra to read to them the book of the law of Moses. We don't know what exactly he read—probably not the whole Torah, the first five books of the Bible; that would have taken even longer than six hours. But no doubt Ezra read some of the great old stories, including how God first called Abraham and created a people, how he saved them from slavery in Egypt, and how he gave them the law and the land.

It must have been quite a scene. The people built a wood platform for Ezra, a kind of outdoor pulpit. They held the event outside the temple in a public square so that everyone could be part of it—women, children, even the unclean. This was not an event for priests but for the people. Ezra was flanked by Levites, teachers who could explain the Bible to the people. Ezra stood up and opened the scroll; when he did, all the people stood up. Ezra prayed, blessing Yahweh, the God of Israel, and the people responded, Amen! Amen! Then with an acute awareness of that God's holiness, they fell down on their knees and put their faces to the ground.

Ezra began to read from the scroll the ancient text written in Hebrew. The people no longer spoke Hebrew. They had been assimilated and spoke mostly Aramaic, the language of the Persian Empire, the language Jesus later spoke. The thirteen Levites translated the Hebrew into the language of the people and explained the meaning of the stories and the laws as they went along. This went on for six hours, and the people paid attention the whole time. You can read the U. S. Constitution in about half an hour, but not the founding document of God's people. There was still news in the old words, so they listened.

There are two reactions to the reading of the scripture. The first is that the people weep. It reminds me of the story of King Josiah, earlier in the history of Judah—the young king who

presided over a nation that had drifted away from God. He presided over a renovation of the temple in Jerusalem, and in the midst of that the construction workers found a book. They took it to their supervisor and eventually it was brought to the king. Unbeknownst to him, it was the Book of the Law. I like to think it was Deuteronomy, but we don't know. But when the words of the book were read to the 26-year-old king, who had reigned since he was 8, he tore his clothes in grief. If this is what God wants, our fathers have misled us, and God himself is angry with us because we have not been doing what he requires of us.

Have you ever felt that way when you read the Bible, or heard it read? I felt that way when I was a teenager and first really read the Bible for myself, when I read the Sermon on the Mount, and the book of James, and First John. If this is what God wants, our fathers have misled us, and God himself is angry with us because we have not been doing what he requires of us. I have felt that way many times as a pastor as I struggle with a text that challenges our American way of life and the way we do church. I don't think I've ever torn my clothes, but I can see why people listening to Ezra would weep. It hurts to hear my sins named out loud. It hurts to know that you are unclean and you dwell among an unclean people. There is a bitter disappointment in recognizing that the institutions you have defended have misled you, that you've taken your identity from a group of people who fall so far short of what God wants.

When Ezra read from the book of Moses, the people felt shame in the presence of God. This is not, you know, a bad thing. It would appear in the Bible to be a necessary thing. That is the thing that leads to change. It seems that the people became aware of the great gulf that separated them from the holy God and they had no idea how to bridge that gap. But just as the Torah reminds us of our sins, it reminds us of a God who keeps his promises, a God who saves us, a God who forgives. Even the Torah—long before the cross made it crystal clear—tells about a God who takes the initiative to rescue sinful people not because of their righteousness but because of his love.

And yet, even that can bring tears. Maybe you've been there: reminded first of your sin, then reminded how deep and high and wide is God's love for you. That used to be the structure of Baptist preaching—to remind you of your sin, then to remind you of God's mercy. But most people today don't come to church wanting to receive the gift of tears. They prefer the gift of self-esteem with no strings, no story behind it, nothing to make you feel a debt or to make you love the one who would forgive you so in spite of everything. Just I'm OK, you're OK. Exchanging the gift of tears for a pat on the back is a terrible loss—one of which a whole generation is unaware.

When the people of Jerusalem heard the words of scripture, they cried. If this is what God wants, we are screwed. They had been warned about this, too. This is the pattern of God's people—including churches—from the beginning until today: they experience a saving event and a beginning as a people, they are in tune with God's purposes in the world, but then their hearts begin to drift and they value other things more than God, they slowly turn away from him until they have forgotten his purposes entirely. Only an act of God's judgment can bring them back to God—a defeat, an exile, a famine—either that or a revival in which people genuinely turn back to basics and return to the founding documents, the scripture themselves.

One of the themes of Deuteronomy is "Remember, and do not forget." We are such forgetful creatures, even losing track of our place in the universe, to able even to remember which way is up and which is down. Moses stood outside the Promised Land on the banks of the Jordan and delivered a sermon to the people who were about to cross over. "When you get there, when you live in houses you did not build, when you drink the wine of grapes you did not plant,

when you have fields full of sheep and your families grow, Beware! Beware lest you say to yourself, 'My power and the might of my hand got me this wealth.'" The great Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann says, "Prosperity causes amnesia." Ain't it the truth—in our experience and in the stories of people we know. And that's what's going on when Ezra reads the scriptures. All of a sudden the long period of amnesia is over, and the first reaction is to think: "How could I have forgotten everything? How could we have forgotten what it means to be God's people?" And the people weep. But the second reaction is joy.

That's the surprise in this story. When the people begin to weep in a spirit of repentance, the leaders say to them, "Don't mourn or weep. The day when you hear God speaking to you is a holy day; it is a day of deep joy, because you have made contact with the Almighty. It is a day of remembering, a day of finding something that had been lost. This is a day for celebration." As suddenly as the gift of tears came upon them, the gift of partying arrives. The instructions of the leaders are not: beat yourself up for your failures, twenty Hail Maries for you, crawl on your knees up the church steps. What they say is: eat the fat—the richest foods—and drink the sweetest wine. Celebrate, and send take-out portions to the people who are missing the Roll Call Dinner.

The purpose of God's word is not to produce guilt; its purpose is to produce change. God's word holds out the possibility of redemption, of a better you and a better church, even in this case a better nation. The law is always given in the context of salvation and the promises of God. What God wants from us in the end is not sorrow but rejoicing. What God wants from us is joy.

The mystic Julian of Norwich wrote, "The greatest honor we can give Almighty God is to live gladly because of the knowledge of his love." It is a frequent command of scripture: Rejoice! Again I say, Rejoice!

Ezra, after reintroducing people to the Bible, says, "Don't be sad, for the joy of the Lord is your strength." I think that he is not talking about Yahweh's own joy, but the joy that his people have in him. Your joy in the Lord is your strength. One of the roles of a pastor is to call you each week back to the founding document, to pull the lost scroll out of the rubble and explain it. Sometimes the proper reaction to God's word is weeping, but that is always penultimate, not the final goal. What God is after ultimately is joy—abundant joy—joy in who God is and in the fact that God loves us, joy in being part of God's people who have a purpose in this world that really matters, joy in knowing that the future belongs to the very one who loved us and saved us. So we read the Bible not just to make anyone feel guilty, not to just go through a ritual or to make a partisan point—as they did in Congress. We go back to the basics of the Bible because that is how the joy of our salvation will be restored.

Leonard Sweet was the dean of the theology school in Madison, New Jersey, where I was pastor. He told a story a few months after his mother had died. She had lived her life in the mountains of West Virginia with a Bible in her hand, almost as an appendage. She seemed incomplete without it. She was an old-time Holiness preacher who just stayed in that word of God every day. Mother Sweet's heart was getting weaker, but she had decided she didn't want surgery again. She would just rather go. Leonard was just about to leave his home where his mother now lived when he found she just wasn't well. He insisted on taking her to the hospital in spite of her protests. As he physically carried her out of the house they passed by the table where her purse and her Bible lay. With her one free arm, she could only pick one to take to the hospital. You can guess which one.

At the hospital, the doctor told Mother Sweet that they were going to admit her, but he wanted to give her a little test. "Can you tell me what year it is?" *Of course, it's 1907.* "Can you tell me what this is that I'm holding in my hand?" *Why, it's a...a...a writing thing.* "Can you tell me who this is standing next to me?" *Heavens, that's my son!* "Can you tell me his name?" *Surely, it's uh...uh.* Leonard knew he'd have to leave his mother overnight. He said, "Mom, I'm going to leave now, but I'll be back tomorrow evening. I will come back. Do you understand?" He repeated this to the nurse. "Now Mom, the nurse will be with you. She'll take care of you. What's your name, nurse?" The nurse's name was Joy. Leonard said "Mom, isn't God good to give you a nurse named Joy to see you through? You always taught us the Nehemiah principle, Mom. You remember, don't you? The joy of the Lord is my..." And Mother Sweet said, "*Strength.*" That was the last time Leonard saw his mother alive, but he was left with that memory: that when everything else was gone, when she didn't know what year it was, or what a pen was, or her oldest son's name, her mind was so marinated in the word of God that she could say at the very end, "The joy of the Lord is my strength."