

Epiphany-3-c2007

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Nehemiah 8.1-3,5-6,8-10

First Church of Christ in Longmeadow UCC Luke 14.14-21

Third Sunday after Epiphany

January 21, 2006

The Gift Of The Law

“For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law.” —Nehemiah 8.9

Let us pray: In all that we say and do, may the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen. (Congregation is seated.)

This morning we're eavesdropping on a dramatic moment in the history of ancient Israel. In order to understand what's going on, we need to go over a bit of Old Testament history. Ancient Israel thrived for a while, but then it entered a dark time when it was defeated by the Babylonian Empire and its leaders sent into exile. That was in the sixth century BC. Out of that time of exile sprung many of the messianic and hope-filled themes of our faith. Dark times can engender great faith.

This morning's text narrates a period of time about a century more recent. In the last part of the sixth century BC, the Babylonian Empire was defeated by the Persian Empire—under the leadership of the more liberal and humane King Cyrus. “Shortly after Babylon capitulated to the Persian army, Cyrus issued an edict allowing Jews the privilege of returning to their homeland. So Jewish exiles began their homeward trek to Jerusalem. When they arrived, they found everything in ruins: the temple was destroyed, the walls of Jerusalem were leveled, the city desolate. Nevertheless, inspired by the prophecies of Haggai and Zechariah, they set about rebuilding the temple, a project which was completed about 515 BC.

“Then Ezra came onto the scene... With the permission of the Persian king he led a caravan of Jews back to Palestine around the middle of the fifth century BC... Most important, he brought with him a copy of ‘the book of the law of Moses’ ...and he lost no time in convening the people to hear the reading of its contents.”¹ The solemn ceremony on this occasion is our text this morning.

“Someone has said that Israel went into exile as a nation and returned as a church. The word “Judaism” refers to a new stage in the biblical drama when Israel was no longer a state but a religious community.”² In this morning’s lesson, we witness the turning point in that drama. From this point on, no more will Israel rely on armies and wars to sense the workings of God in their history. Now they will renew themselves as a people of the Book, a people of the Word. God will speak to them through a text—a text that will lend structure, balance, and boundaries to their lives.

Ezra and Nehemiah were, respectively, the spiritual and political masterminds of this reorientation of Israel. Together, they helped the people of God to adjust and adapt to a new reality. It was a time for building walls and setting limits. It was a time for concentrating on their own spiritual problems, rather than trying to solve the spiritual problems of the whole world. In a day when their own empire was exhausted, they allowed God to turn them into something new. By rediscovering God’s Word—God’s Law—in the torah, they became a new kind of community that could survive and thrive in an innovative

way. Orienting a community around scripture seems commonplace to us now, but it was not widely practiced before this time.

The first reaction of the people to this new approach was unexpected. Here they were—back from exile, connected once again to their roots, receiving the guidance of Holy Scripture. We'd expect them to be overjoyed, but their initial reaction was quite the opposite:

So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep." For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law.
—Nehemiah 8.8-9

I've never been quite sure how to read this reaction. When I first encountered it, I took their tears to be tears of joy. But the response of their leaders indicates that the people are not joyful. They are sad.

The tears, I suppose, are tears of grief. As they return to God's Word, they are painfully aware of all the time that they spent in exile from it. As they gather for worship and instruction, they realize how much they have missed and how much they have lost. Their past

weighs heavily as they dedicate themselves to the future. I guess that's not so surprising after all. Whenever we make a big change in our lives—breaking or starting a relationship, discontinuing a destructive practice, taking on a new discipline—we come with mixed emotions. Future hope, after all, is born out of past pain.

It seems to me that the story of Ezra and Nehemiah is a great story for the Christian Church in America in our time. As we noted in the “Funeral for Chirstendom,” back in November, we no longer have the empire we once had. Church attendance and participation is no longer an assumed part of good citizenship. The era of Constantine is past. No longer does the emperor decree that we shall all be Christians. Our political leaders may echo words of a past Christian hegemony, but we know different. Church is no longer the central cultural institution of our nation. Don't get me wrong—I think it is an important one, but it does not hold the privileged place it was once afforded.

In a time such as this, we need leaders like Ezra and Nehemiah. We need people who will help us to define ourselves as a unique—but marginal—community of faith. We don't need people who will conquer

the world for Christ, but rather people who will reintroduce *us* to the Word of God. Like the people in this morning's story, we may weep in grief for what we have lost. But we can gain a new prize of greater value than the Christian Empire ever offered.

Ezra and Nehemiah did not let their people remain in tears. They wished for them to rejoice: "Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our LORD; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength." (Nehemiah 8.10) This is the beginning of the time when the people of faith will learn to delight in God's word, to shout out in joy even when times are hard.

It seems strange to delight in having laws given to you, but that is the appropriate response to God's guidance. The new Judaism of Ezra and Nehemiah gave rise to poems such as Psalm 119:

Blessed are you, O LORD; teach me your statutes. With my lips I declare all the ordinances of your mouth. I delight in the way of your decrees as much as in all riches. I will meditate on your precepts, and fix my eyes on your ways. I will delight in your statutes; I will not forget your word. –Psalm 119.12-16

In a time of rebuilding and rededication, we can—indeed—learn to delight in the law of God. Our salvation comes from the Grace of Jesus Christ, but we can still, even now, give thanks that God offers us a path of instruction.

We would do very well to hope that our spiritual stories conclude as does our lesson for this day: “And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them.” (Nehemiah 8.12)

Let us pray. We thank you, God, for the gift of your Word and for this community of interpretation in which we receive it. Amen.

¹ Bernhard W. Anderson, *The Unfolding Drama of the Bible: Eight Studies Introducing The Bible As A Whole* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), page 54.

² Ibid.