

The Power of Scripture

Nehemiah 8:1-10
Luke 4:14-21

January 27, 2019
Faith Community

The Old Testament book of Nehemiah tells of a demoralized people. God's Chosen People, the inheritors of the promise, occupants of the Promised Land, felt weary, worn, vulnerable, and helpless.

For all the world to see, the wall protecting Jerusalem had basically fallen apart. Jerusalem was, of course, not just a big city, but it was also the spiritual and emotional heart of the country. The Temple was there, God's dwelling place, God's home, and if the wall was in such catastrophic disrepair, what would come of it as well as the people themselves?

Nehemiah rose to the challenge. He took charge of the project that would rebuild the wall and restore not just the people's safety but also their dignity, their identity, their service and faithfulness to the God who had given them life, their home, and so much more.

It took two months to get the job done, backbreaking work that took an emotional toll as well as physical. There was great opposition, but thanks to God's faithfulness and the builders' vigilance, the wall was completed.

This was a big deal.

It just so happened that the calendar had a part to play in this story as well. Today's passage takes place on 'the first day of the seventh month. This would've occurred in early to mid-autumn, September-October. The specific day in question was the Feast of Trumpets, essentially New Years Day, or Rosh Hashanah as our Jewish friends call it and celebrate it to this day. Also during this month came the single most important day of the year, the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, and the Feast of the Tabernacles, during which the people symbolically relive their travels through the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land. So this period of time would be not unlike our celebrating Christmas and Easter during the same month.

On this New Years Day the people came together near the temple area, anywhere from 30,000 to 50,000, to celebrate the completion of the wall and to mark the beginning of the high holy days. This is where Ezra, the

‘teacher of the Law,’ took center stage. He was a scholar and teacher, and worked hard to renew the people’s commitment to their God and to one another. He had arrived in the area about a dozen years before Nehemiah, and laid the emotional and spiritual groundwork for what would happen under Nehemiah’s leadership. And so on this day of days the two great agents of renewal, Ezra and Nehemiah, came together.

The people wanted to hear Scripture. Remember, most of them were illiterate at this time in history, and so hearing the Word was as close as they’d come, and what better time to do so, having completed such an ambitious project and with the high holy days at hand. And so it began.

A special platform was built for this occasion so that Ezra could be seen, and he began to read. He read the ‘Book of the Law of Moses,’ which we know to be the first five books of the Old Testament: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The passage tells us that this went on ‘from daybreak until noon,’ which means somewhere between five to six hours. Reading. Everyone standing, except for those times when they worshipped, prostrate, their faces to the ground.

Now Ezra wasn’t alone in this process. There were people on either side of him, including Nehemiah himself. So Ezra would read a portion, and then the others stepped forward, as the passage tells us,

....making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read. (Nehemiah 8:8, TNIV)

Notice how the people responded. First of all,

All the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law. (v. 3)

They paid attention! Another translation says they were ‘riveted.’ But it went even deeper than that. So taken were they that Ezra had to stop and remind them of something very important:

”This day is holy 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. (v. 9)

How could the people not be impacted? Their very way of life had been threatened, their safety, their future, and where was God in the midst of it all, and then came Ezra, and then Nehemiah, and the wall was reborn, and now comes the most meaningful time of year.

Now we come to the heart of the matter for today. Has Scripture ever touched you so deeply that you were moved to tears? The tears could be for any reason, by the way. Joy, heartache, anger, inspiration, the result of some kind of connection that makes an impact, a powerful one. Something is ignited inside you; it's a renewal perhaps. Let me tell you how it happened to me.

Many of you know that for much of my life I've struggled with depression. I know all too well what living in overpowering darkness can do to you. It's why I constantly tell you that hope is a choice long before it's a feeling. That's because healing can take intensely hard work in areas you'd just as soon not deal with and discoveries you'd just as soon keep buried. I've told you before how I'm convinced that Jesus saved my life. Not just spiritually or for the other side of the grave, although those things are included, of course, but Jesus saved my life physically. This side of eternity.

Up until sometime in my late thirties or early forties I thought the constant anxiety, negative thinking and overall darkness were just parts of life. Growing up, we dealt with such things by not dealing with them, at least not in any healthy way. Instead we lost ourselves in work or alcohol or who knows what else. You know the routine. You deal with it by covering it over with whatever you can, and keep pushing ahead. Even with my father's death at 47 and my brother's suicide at 30 I just kept going. I could talk a good ball game and had a bit of energy, and on most days that got me through.

It was a long time coming, but I reached a point where I knew I couldn't do it anymore. You know what that's like? Fran picked up on it. I talked precious little, of course, but she knew I was barely functioning. Then the morning came when I arrived at my office back in Pennsylvania and found a note on my desk. It was unsigned, but I knew Fran's writing. All it said was this:

Psalm 20

Of course I reached for my Bible, found Psalm 20, and read this:

***May the LORD answer you when you are in distress;
may the name of the God of Jacob protect you.***

(Psalm 20:1)

I had read that passage countless times, but it wasn't until that morning that I really read it. I had explored it from just about every angle you could think of, except for the one that counted. That was the beginning of a long road filled with hard work, painful discoveries, and the faithfulness of God who knew a thing or two about brokenness himself.

Friends, please understand. As long as you keep your Bibles on the shelf and limit your religion to special occasions you'll be just like Jerusalem with its broken down walls. You are constantly subjected to the onslaught of a consumerist culture that measures personal worth by beauty and brains. No amount of success will give you the peace you need. If you have kids you'll subject them to the same mindless schedules that drain the life out of you and won't even know it's happening. You think you just want the best for them when in reality they'll turn out like everyone else who see religion as one more way to the good life as long as they don't have to go to practice first.

As long as Jesus is a way to get to a happy successful life nothing will change. That's because our real priorities look more like this:

Money
Beauty
Smarts
Sports
Watered down Jesus

Ezra stood up there on his platform in front of primitive, illiterate people with no public address system, no visual displays, no fancy music or windows, and all he did was read out loud for five or six hours, and it was like gentle rain on parched ground, the people couldn't get enough, and if you only knew, the same applies to you.

Don't ever think that this stuff is reserved for an occasional Sunday morning or special occasion, or best left to the professionals. The stakes are way too high, friends.

Friends, Ezra just read Scripture. But the people were ready to listen and to respond. And in the process they discovered a life changing fact:

....the joy of the LORD is your strength. (v. 10)