

Sermon, 1/23/2022, St. David's, Nehemiah 8:1-10 (Elizabeth Felicetti)

I get excited when Nehemiah shows up in the Sunday lectionary because we rarely hear from this book in church: only three times in the three-year cycle. Nehemiah takes place after the exile, a seminal period in the life of God's people, when they were forced to live in Babylon, except for a remnant left behind in the ruins of Judah.

The ruins included the city wall of Jerusalem broken down and its gates burned. Nehemiah was called by God to rebuild, and under much duress, he did so. Today's reading takes place after the rebuilding. Different communities have come together: that remnant that had been left behind, as well as those who had been in exile in Babylon who were now released by King Cyrus to return to their homeland. All of these people joined together to hear holy scripture, which at that time had not been gathered into one book, so was read from different scrolls. They heard the old stories about Abraham and Sarah and Hagar, about Shiphrah and Puah and Moses, about Deborah and King David. And they interpreted these stories, like I stand up here Sunday after Sunday and try to interpret, or somehow align, these ancient stories to our life today.

While this oral reading of Scripture and interpretation was happening in today's story from Nehemiah, the people were moved sometimes to tears, but Nehemiah advised them instead to celebrate. Eat and drink and share with those for whom nothing is prepared.

Nehemiah was living in Persia when he heard about the wall and was moved to tears himself, so what he says in today's passage does not mean that the man was against crying. His own strong emotion had stirred him to action. After he was moved to tears, he asked for the chance to return to Jerusalem, and that chance was granted to him. But he met with resistance there, including scorn and ridicule for his vision of a rebuilt wall.

Despite this, Nehemiah and a hardworking team persisted and managed to rebuild, and eventually invited exiles back. Then we get to today's chapter. Those who built the wall, those who remained, and those who returned came together to worship. To lift up their hands in worship and to bow their faces to the ground.

The last two years have been really hard not only on our church but on churches across the country, and the damage isn't over. Many churches are still closed, and some in our church think we should still be closed to in-person worship. Other members aren't coming right now because they don't like the current restrictions. Some have grown accustomed to not coming to church and won't be back. Others have moved. Others have died. Others have or will end up at churches whose response to the pandemic has been more aligned with their own personal views.

So if we put ourselves in Nehemiah's story, or try to draw a parallel to our own, where are we?

Clearly, we have to rebuild. It's hard to know what this means in a time when we have to check ourselves at the door to think, is that just a tickle in my throat? It's hard to know how to rebuild when some of us are only able to worship through a screen. Please hear me that I believe our livestream is one of the most important ministries of our church, but our hybrid services do make forming a community challenging—something Nehemiah understood, as in today's passage, he

had brought together people who had remained in the destroyed homeland as well as people who had gone into exile.

Building the wall was not the only thing that brought these people together, because some of them were not involved in building the wall. Some of them were invited after the wall was rebuilt.

We at St. David's need to turn our attention to rebuilding. We've been in survival mode for almost two years, and we need to focus this year on rebuilding and reconnecting, because this church is needed on this corner of God's kingdom, and it is needed by all of those in the room today as well as those watching at home now or later when they are able to; and it is needed by those who have not yet found their way to us. We have scattered in certain ways, like those exiles, and we need to stop judging each other's choices and recognize that we are all God's people, in need of hearing the Scripture together and interpreting together, like Nehemiah's people did.

Nehemiah implored the people not to weep, but to celebrate instead and to find joy in the Lord. I know I get caught up in what we can't do right now but focusing on those things we cannot do is not rebuilding. I find joy and strength in what we can do. Like our staff: Bonnie with her music week after week, which she is rebuilding, thanks be to God. Connie, who not only administers the parish but cares for people. Dana, whose imagination dazzles me as she seeks out and shares ideas about what we *can* do *now* forming kids for Christ, vs. what we cannot do right now.

Nehemiah does not say eat drink and be merry for tomorrow you may die. He tells us to go our way, eat the fat and drink the sweet wine *and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared.*

In other words, we cannot forget that we as a church do not exist only for members of our church but for those for whom nothing is prepared: those outside, and not only those outside of this room today, but those outside of our church who may not know Christ, who may not have a church, and those who may never want to be part of any congregation but for whom nothing is prepared and so need us to share what we do have even though there is nothing in it for us personally or for St. David's.

We need to share with others and give to them without expecting anything in return. Rebuilding is not only so that we can survive as a church, but to thrive, and thriving means reaching out. Opening the rebuilt gates and moving outside them to show God's love to all who need it.

Those of you who are here in the room this morning or watching from home are the faithful remnant. What can you do today to rebuild? We need people to livestream our service, and it's not hard: it's plug and point. We need people to usher, do altar guild, arrange flowers, serve as security. We need people with buildings and grounds skills or at least enthusiasm. We need leaders and workers and people anyone who loves God. What can *you* do to rebuild?