

Nehemiah 8:1-10 Pastor Bill Uetricht 1/22/10 3 Epiphany

I wonder if you noted a fascinating part of the reading from Nehemiah today. Ezra, a priest, is at the Water Gate, the southeast corner of the temple mount (a place, by the way, that Richard Nixon had nothing to do with), and he (that is Ezra) is reading from the law of Moses to the people of Israel—**all** the people, the Bible says. According to the text, and this is the part I find fascinating, “he read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from the early morning until midday.” *Early morning until midday.* I’m not sure what early morning is. But let’s go with banker’s hours. Nine o’clock until, perhaps, three o’clock. I don’t want to ever hear you complain about how long our services are. I mean, we, sometimes, may go an hour and a half, but never six hours! And it seems that the people—men, women, and those with understanding (i.e., older children)—stood the whole time. And what’s more, we are told, “all of the people were attentive to the book of the law.” No one was dozing off. No one was texting on their phones. No one was coloring in their coloring books. No one was surfing the Internet. No one was jamming to the tunes on their I-pods. They were all attentive.

Now, the Bible is known for using hyperbole (exaggeration) on many occasions. And maybe this is yet another example of such exaggeration. But knowing what had happened to those who are listening to Ezra might give us some other insights as to their attentiveness. Many of the folks who are listening had known the reality of being exiled into other countries, cast off far away from their home town, their religious gathering places and rituals. Now they are back home, as Nehemiah says, “settled in their towns.” They are

getting to go to “church” for the first time in a long time. And oh, what a moving experience that is!

Let’s face it. They had probably started to forget some of their story, some of their people’s story, their people’s memoir. How great it was to hear it again! How potent it was—so potent that it led them to cry. Who knows for sure why they are crying? Maybe it’s because the reading of the law of Moses was revealing to them how far they had strayed from the law. Maybe it’s due to the fact that they are deeply aware of how much they had forgotten. Maybe they were just overwhelmed with the sense of being home, of connecting again to the big story that they were hearing. Who knows for sure? But this is for sure, the Word, the law, was for them a phenomenally engrossing and moving experience.

And note, they—the people, not the religious professionals—were the ones who were calling for the reading of the word. They were the ones who told the scribe Ezra to bring the book out into the assembly of the people. It wasn’t the pastors who were begging their people to come to church, to read their Bibles. No, this was a grass-roots movement. The people were longing to gather, longing to hear the word read.

Sometimes I wonder if we catch onto the bigness of what we do here week after week. I wonder if we have lost a sense of what a marvelous thing it is to gather publically and to be comforted and confronted by the word, to be reminded of our story, our people’s memoir. Gathering together is no small matter. I understand that more fully when that gathering doesn’t or can’t take place. Some of you have told me how hard it is for you when at the death of someone you love you are unable to gather together with others. As an aside, let

me give you a little pastoral advice here. Don't go telling your relatives that you don't want a service held on your behalf when you die. Get over yourself! There's power in gathering together. There's power in the story that we tell when we gather. The bigness of death demands more than a private story. It needs a big story, a story that is bigger than the little one that I personally tell or my family tells.

I am convinced that one of the major challenges for our culture today is the lack of big stories, the lack of a memoir. As the Bible is read publically, people, we are reminded of our big story, our memoir. We need to know where we have come from. We need a history. We need a tradition. We gather together so we can be given these things, so that we can remember them (we are a forgetful people, after all), or so that we might experience them for the first time. Some people come here with little connection to something big, with little sense of a memoir, of a living history and tradition.

The Bible, friends, is our memoir, our people's memoir. And the amazing thing about that memoir is that it connects to our own situations. For us, the Bible is "inspired" not because once upon a time God told people what to write down. The Bible is a very human book. It was written by very human authors with very human concerns. It didn't drop from heaven one day. It is the product of real people who lived in real situations dealing with real problems. Yet we say that it is "inspired," that is to say, that the Spirit breathes life into our midst through it. Its stories are our stories. When we hear about a nation that was enslaved we, too, recognize that we are enslaved. When we hear about people who have been exiled, we, too, recognize that we live far from home. When Adam plays the blame game, saying that Eve and the serpent were responsible for his bad choice, we recognize

ourselves as those who play blame games. When Jesus is led by the Spirit in the wilderness to be tempted by the devil, we see ourselves as living in the wilderness being tempted to be anything but who we are.

The Bible is our story, our big story. And by the way, amazingly, that story is not some static story that is forever the same, that always says the same thing week after week, year after year, century after century. Did you notice in Nehemiah the emphasis on the interpretation of the word? In one of the verses that was left out of our first lesson for today, we are told about the Levites, the priests, who it appears are roaming through the crowds as Ezra is reading the law, interpreting it to the people. The Levites are making sense of the law of Moses for the people in their new situation, maybe even translating it into the language they are speaking.

Sometimes I think that we view the Bible as some ancient book that has spoken words in the past that forever mean the same thing. Frankly, that is convenient for some folks who have certain agendas. But the Bible itself demonstrates that it is forever interpreting itself, speaking a fresh word in a new situation. In today's gospel lesson, Jesus speaks a fresh word in a new situation. He has gathered with other Jews, *as was his custom*, Luke says. He must have realized how significant it was to gather, to experience his people's memoir. He did it regularly. And it appears on this day he was the lector, the reader. As he stood up to read, he was given one of the big stories of his people, the story of Isaiah. **He** chose the verses from this story to read, verses from two parts of Isaiah in which the prophet said *he* had been appointed to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, freedom for the oppressed. After he read these words, Jesus sat down. He then preached. He interpreted the words. These

words, he said, are fulfilled today, *in him*. He and his ministry, as this first sermon of his demonstrates, will be good news for the poor and freedom for the captives. The word now becomes living. The word now becomes a human being. Jesus is the word.

You and I when we gather do so in light of the big story of Jesus, who is the fulfillment of the hopes and dreams of the people of Israel. Wow! We need to hear his story. It's an amazing story. It's an energizing story. It's a story that comforts us and challenges us. It's a story that leads us to tears **and** to big parties where the best food and the best drink are served. It's the story of forgiveness. It's the story of love. I can't imagine why we wouldn't long to hear that story, why we wouldn't stand from morning to midday to hear it, why we wouldn't be fully attentive to it, why we wouldn't demand that it be told to us over and over again?