

✧ *In the Name of Jesus* ✧

Lots of Christians have never heard of Ezra or Nehemiah except when they memorized the names of the books of the Bible in order. ...First and Second Kings, First and Second Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah... These two have quite a story and a great message to help us: **THE JOY OF THE LORD IS YOUR STRENGTH.**

When God's people of old, the Israelites, would not repent, the Lord sent them into exile in Babylon. This was about 600 years before Christ. Seventy years later, over 42,000 Jews returned to Jerusalem from Babylon (Ezra 2:64). They put the Lord first and immediately laid the foundation of the Temple. The joy of the Lord was their strength. It took about 20 years and the encouragement of two prophets (Haggai & Zechariah) to complete the Temple, but there it was, beautiful, and beckoning all to come worship the one, true God.

For the next 60 years the Jews kept trying to rebuild the city of Jerusalem and its walls (Ezra 4:12), but without much success. An infusion of 1500 men, plus women and children, arrived with Ezra the priest. But the sense of renewal they brought was short lived. About ten years later the Jews demoralized again. The walls had been broken down by the locals who didn't want the Jews to succeed. Little joy in the Lord.

Enter Nehemiah. He was so honest and trustworthy that the Persian emperor employed him as cupbearer. In other words, Nehemiah was the one who made sure that the king didn't get poisoned—think how many political leaders have been poisoned to death! One day Nehemiah's face betrayed his sadness over the condition of his people. The emperor wanted to know why he was sad. Before Nehemiah left the throne room that day, the emperor made him the next governor of Jerusalem and its environs.

By October 2 of that year Nehemiah traveled to Jerusalem, inspected the walls, and organized the Jews into stone-laying teams. After lying in ruins for nearly a century and a half, the walls were rebuilt in just 52 days. Nehemiah credited the Lord with giving them strength to work hard for his glory.

October was a very important month for God-fearing Jews. There were three religious festivals to be celebrated, all of which were supposed to be especially joyful.¹ Ezra the priest was told to bring out the Book of the Law—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy—and read it to the people (Nehemiah 8:1). You see, once every seven years when debts were cancelled, the Law of the Lord was to be read to the people during these October festivals (Deuteronomy 31:10-13). Ezra had been in Jerusalem for thirteen years already. Had he read the Book of the Law to the

¹ There's Rosh Hashanah, a kind of civil new year, sometimes called the Feast of Trumpets. There's Yom Kippur, the Great 12 December 2021 Advent 3 - C Nehemiah 8:9-18

Day of Atonement. And there's Succoth, the Feast of Shelters (or Tabernacles).

people seven years earlier? If so, had anyone come to listen? If they listened to God's Word, had their hearts been turned to the Lord's way of thinking? None of this seems to have happened on a large scale.

The people listened **this** time. In fact, they had built a wooden platform for Ezra to stand on so he would be up high enough for everyone to see him (Nehemiah 8:4). This reminds me of how things use to be here at St. John's. To get into the pulpit the pastor had climb up a number of stairs and come through a door where the screen is now. The people who built this church considered the Bible to be the voice of God, God's message, God's Word. They wanted to hear it coming down to them from above, like what happened in this chapter of Nehemiah where Ezra stands on a high platform to proclaim God's Word.

When Ezra opened the book, all the people stood up (Nehemiah 8:5). If God's Word was going to be read to them, they were going to show respect! We still have a custom like this today. We usually stand to hear the Gospel lesson read to us because it tells us something about our Savior Jesus. We also stand to hear the sermon text read.

Ezra read the Bible to the people in the Hebrew language from daybreak till noon (Nehemiah 8:3). There were 13 other men on the high wooden platform with Ezra. Perhaps they were just dignitaries, or perhaps Ezra read loud enough for the 13 men on the platform to hear him, and then they took turns repeating the words of the

Bible in loud voices—but I'm just speculating. We also know that 13 Levites were on the ground with the people, perhaps scattered among them, making the message "*clear and giving the meaning so the people could understand what was being read*" (Nehemiah 8:8). This probably means that the Levites translated the Bible from Hebrew into Aramaic right there on the spot, since the Jews had mostly lost the ability to understand Hebrew during the Babylonian captivity. (These Levites may have done this teaching in the afternoon.)

This is where our sermon text picks up the story. *⁹Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, "This day is sacred 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. Why were they crying? We're not told, but we can imagine. In the five books of Moses, the Lord teaches his people right from wrong and promises them trouble and disaster if they refuse to follow his ways. He even predicts their exile in Babylon. Now put yourself in the sandals of these people hearing the Bible for the first time. Imagine the realization sinking in, "Our Lord was kind enough to teach us his ways in the books of Moses. Our forefathers ignored the Lord. That's why our nation has been decimated and there's only a remnant left. We ourselves are at fault too. We have not listened to our Lord or put his ways into practice. The worst tragedy of all is that we have not taught our children to know the Lord. We have made ourselves*

and our children liable for punishment and destruction.” I hope you’ve known this same kind of honesty, that you have felt godly sorrow over sin, even shedding tears of contrition when you realized God’s hatred toward sin.

Sometimes it’s good to spend a while repenting with sadness, like we do on Ash Wednesday or Good Friday. There’s a time and a place for grieving. But after we repent, it’s time to rejoice in the goodness of the Lord. He does not treat us as our sins deserve; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us (Psalm 103). So there’s a time for mostly joy in the Lord, like Christmas and Easter. The festivals that the Jews were celebrating at this time of year were supposed to be filled with rejoicing, not mourning.

So ¹⁰*Nehemiah said, “Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared so they too can rejoice. This day is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve, for **the joy of the LORD is your strength.**”* ¹²*Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them. They understood: THE JOY OF THE LORD IS OUR STRENGTH.*

But the people weren’t done with Bible study yet. Apparently they sensed how much they still needed to learn because ¹³*the heads of all the families gathered around Ezra the scribe to give attention to the words of the Law.* This would equip

them to teach their families God’s ways. As they studied the Bible, they found the section where the Lord instructs his Old Testament people to celebrate the feast of Shelters or Tabernacles. So they cut branches from trees and made booths and lived in them for a week. It was the biggest celebration of Shelters since the time of Joshua. Their hearts were filled with joy because they understood God’s mercy and how special they were to be chosen by the Lord as his very own.

Today is the third Sunday in Advent: Rejoice Sunday. But our nation is dealing with a surge of delta variant infections. Mass shootings continue. People who care about our nation won’t come to the middle and discuss politics or culture with civility. It’s a little hard to rejoice at such a time. Perhaps you can think of other occasions when sadness got in the way of your joy.

There is a time for grieving. When you see someone break down into sobbing, don’t be in a rush to shush them out of their sobbing, or they may pull away or lash out in anger. Let them cry a little. You don’t want your actions to communicate that their grief is too much or unnecessary or inappropriate. That’s not always for us to say. Let that wave of grief wash over them while you wait nearby. Soon they will want human touch. You’ll know because they’ll look to you. Then comfort them with a warm hand or a hug or smoothing back their hair or crying with them. In their own time, they will want to come back up out of the valley of grief. Some will want to talk about it, which is good. Let them ask their

questions, especially the unanswerable questions. You may not be able to explain why, but definitely answer the questions that can be answered from God's Word. Here's where all your years of Bible study and faithful worship attendance will prove helpful.

"Why is there such evil in the world?" It doesn't make sense, does it? But think about it from God's point of view. He doesn't want anyone to do any kind of evil. Yet we all have evil inside us. We all inherited a propensity to do what is evil in God's sight. "Oh, come on now, I'm not that evil!" Are you saying that you have enough sense not to go on a shooting spree? I'm glad of that. But if we're really going to look at this from God's point of view, which he revealed in his Word, then worrying is evil, so is disrespect, and lust, and pride, and drunkenness. Granted, most of these hurt only ourselves, but imagine God asking, "Why would anyone do any evil?" And yet we do. This is one of two keys needed to unlock the door that leads us out of grief over the lovelessness and sinfulness of our time. Let's thank God that we have been taught to restrain the worst impulses of our sinful flesh. Who taught us? The Lord. He gives us strength to resist many sins.

But there's an even more important truth, the other key needed to unlock the pathway out of grief. Even though we have acted on our evil impulses many times, the Lord has led us to repent and

turn back to him for forgiveness. He is good to us.

Now think of this in terms of what Nehemiah said to the grieving Jews. **THE JOY OF THE LORD IS YOUR STRENGTH.** The joy of the Lord. The Lord's joy. Jesus says that God rejoices when sinners repent. The Bible teaches that God rejoices to forgive us and wash us clean. This is the joy of the Lord. This causes the Lord joy. **THE JOY OF THE LORD IS YOUR STRENGTH.** The Lord's joy at forgiving us is our strength. His joy over us gives us strength to get out of bed in the morning and try to live the rest of the day for his glory and for the benefit of people. His joy over us got us here to his house this morning so our faith could be fed a meal of God's Word. His joy over us gives us the strength to keep teaching our children and teen about the Savior, even though there are many setbacks in their path to Christian maturity. His joy over us moves us to try repairing relationships that have been harmed by hurtful words and actions. His joy over us gets us to the point where we say, "Yes this world makes me sad, but my God's love for me is even more important than any earthly situation. God's love gives me peace. And God's peace will be what guides my mind and my actions. **THE JOY OF THE LORD IS MY STRENGTH.**"