

“Returning: Judgment and Grace”  
September 5, 2021

Nehemiah 7:73b-8:3, 8-12  
Matthew 5:17-20

If all goes according to plan—and we are now quite familiar with things *not* going according to plan—next Sunday we will gather in this sanctuary for our first in-person worship service since March 8, 2020.

We continue to take a prudent approach. Masks will be required for all worshippers. We will keep social distance in the pews. We will not sing. We will continue to track new Covid cases and hospitalizations and adjust what we are doing accordingly. Those who are ready and feel comfortable with these arrangements are invited to join us in person.

While it won’t happen next Sunday, as we are still working out some of the technical issues, our plan is to begin live-streaming the worship services, so that you can still join us online—and in real time—if that is your choice. Next Sunday, and for a few more upcoming Sundays, our worship services *will* be posted online later in the afternoon. And all the worship services will remain online permanently for viewing at other times.

It seems appropriate, then, that today we conclude several weeks of listening to Ezra and Nehemiah and their account of the Jewish people returning to and rebuilding Jerusalem after nearly 60 years in exile in Babylon. In doing so, they speak to our situation as we return and reopen and resume, no doubt also doing some rebuilding and restoration of our own.

I’ve said a few times during this series that much in the two books is quite removed from our situation. Much is either obscure or troubling or both. These books don’t speak directly to our circumstances as a congregation emerging from a pandemic some two and a half millennia later.

But I hope you have discovered that these books *do speak*. And if we have listened, we have discovered much that encourages and informs and inspires us in the tasks that we face in the months ahead.

This morning we heard how, with the Temple and the walls and gates of the city restored, the people gathered to hear the Torah—the teachings of God through Moses in the first five books of the Bible—read publicly.

Now, the first question we need to ask when the Bible is read is not “What should we do?” But “What has God done—and what is God *doing*?” Because the scriptures are God’s story first of all, they keep us from reducing faith to stale moralizing. When we listen to scripture and ask “What is *God* doing?” we begin to experience both the challenge and the comfort that God offers our lives and our congregation.

What is God doing?

God is bringing judgment.

God is bringing grace.

When those ancient people gathered at the Water Gate, what they heard disturbed them: “all the people wept.”

We do well to realize that when we listen for the word of God, we might not like what we hear. Words about things such as release of the captives, recovery of sight to the blind are good news. But they first might only make you aware of just how imprisoned, how unseeing you are.

We are those who listen to Jesus, well aware that our own righteousness has not exceeded that of the scribes and Pharisees. It often seems that our righteousness doesn't exceed even that of the Lutherans and Presbyterians. Our goodness is often far less than that of people who never darken the doors of a church.

God is bringing judgment.

But God is also bringing grace—because knowing you're captive is a moment of opportunity. Only then can you seek freedom. Ezra reads the *torah*—God's way—to the people. Then as grown men and women are standing there weeping, what does he say?

"Good. At least you know how rotten you are?"

No. Ezra calls the people back to the present. He tells them twice “This day—*this day*—is holy to the Lord your God.”

Then Ezra tells the people to rejoice. He suggests that they have a feast.

To the captive, the poor, the sightless—to the lost of the world good news is spoken. We are set free from trying to save ourselves.

Left to ourselves we would certainly be called least in the realm of heaven that Jesus announces.

But we have not been left on our own.

The One who holds out a greater righteousness as our calling also offers the mercy and forgiveness of God. The One who tells us that the law of love is binding for us is also the One who has fulfilled that law.

Let's be honest: when it comes to righteousness, all we have—and all we can offer to others—is the assurance that God still loves us and still makes it possible for us to love others.

Some fear the judgment of God.

Some fear God's forgiving grace.

The word of God comes to us as we are but does not leave us that way. It informs our choices. It transforms our lives.

Listen for the Word of God. It comes both as judgement and as grace.

When the people of God return, when the people of God listen, there is both weeping and rejoicing.

So, what should we do? Sell what we have and give to the poor? Feed the hungry, clothe the naked? Love our neighbors as ourselves? Announce good news?

Maybe. The Word of God locates us in the world and sends us out in mission. When we listen, we begin to hear God's claim on our lives. For God is the one who releases, sets free, gives sight, and sends people to bring good news.

Before we do anything else, however, I think we need to follow the advice of Ezra and Nehemiah to those ancient exiles finally home once more: rejoice, have a feast. And by coincidence or providence, such a feast is just what we are offered again this morning.

God can teach us again the language of feasting if we open ourselves to the joy of faith.

We are set free from dull moralizing, from cramped duty. We are set free to follow the God who keeps finding us in the most amazing places and leading us on in the most astonishing ways. We might even, like those ancient Israelites, learn that even the judgement of God is cause for rejoicing and that the grace of God is reason enough for a feast.

Even now. Even now in these incredibly difficult days that have tried all of us in ways we never imagined, even now we can expect countless occasions of joy each day if we will be open to them. As one person put it: "Just when some of us have thought that life was about half over, and all we had to do was stay out of major trouble until the end, our God gives us a new day."

Let us then, this day and in the days ahead rejoice and be glad in this time we are given.