

Second Sunday in Advent; December 5, 2021

Nehemiah 8:9-18

“Rejoice in the Lord”

**Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites, who helped the people understand, said to all the people, “Today is holy to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or cry!” because all the people were crying as they heard the words of the Law. Nehemiah said to them, “Go, eat rich food and drink sweet drinks and send portions to those who have nothing prepared, because today is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, because the joy of the LORD is your strength.”**

**Then the Levites silenced all the people saying, “Hush! Today is holy. Do not grieve.”**

**All the people went to eat and drink and to send portions to others and to celebrate with great joy, because they understood the words that had been made known to them.**

**Now on the second day, the heads of the families of the people, the priests, and the Levites were gathered around Ezra the scribe to study the words of the Law. They found written in the Law, which the LORD had commanded by the hand of Moses, that the Israelites should dwell in temporary shelters during the festival of the seventh month, and that they should proclaim this and make this announcement in all their cities and in Jerusalem: “Go out to the mountains and bring branches from olive trees, wild olive trees, myrtle bushes, date palms, and leafy trees to make shelters, as it is written.”**

**So the people went out and brought branches and made shelters for themselves. Each man made a shelter on his roof. They also made shelters in their courtyards, in the courtyards of the house of God, in the square by the Water Gate, and in the square by the Ephraim Gate. The entire congregation that had returned from the captivity made shelters and stayed in the shelters. From the days of Joshua son of Nun until that day, the Israelites had not celebrated in this way, because there was very great joy. Ezra also read from the Book of the Law of God every day of the festival, from the first day to the last. They celebrated the festival for seven days, and on the eighth day they held an assembly according to the ordinance.**

Please listen to the following story. And as you listen, please ask yourself: how realistic is this story? One April, a Christian church held its annual Spring Cleaning Saturday. The goal of this year’s Spring Cleaning Saturday was to get into the closets and clean out all the stuff nobody ever really used anymore. While they were cleaning out the closets, the members of the church came across a dusty, musty, moldy book. But it also looked old and kind of fancy and kind of expensive. So they took it the pastor, and asked him, “Pastor, what’s this old book we found? On the cover it says, ‘Bib-lee.’ What’s that, French or something?” The pastor took the book in his hands, blew the dust off and thought carefully. “Ah, yes,” he said, “A Bible. I remember hearing about this once, but I can’t remember the last time I used one, or even saw one.”

How realistic does that story sound to you? Not very, I’m guessing. There is no way that a supposedly Christian congregation could get so far away from the Word of God that it would not even recognize a copy of the Bible. That couldn’t possibly happen.

Now let me tell you another story: Once there was a king named Josiah, who reigned over Judah (the Southern half of Israel). Josiah was a good king, who wanted to keep the Lord's will. Josiah noticed that the Lord's temple in Jerusalem had fallen into disrepair because of neglect. So he ordered a sort of spring cleaning of the temple. During the cleaning and restoration of the temple, the priests found a book. It was a book they had never read or seen before. They didn't even recognize it. And it turns out that book was the Bible – at least as much of it as had written up to that time. That's how far the people of Judah had fallen from the Word of God. Not even the priests – not even the high priest – recognized it when he held it in his hands. And that story is a true story. You can find it in 2 Kings, chapter 22.

That's how far the people of Judah had fallen from God's Word. Even the high priest had no idea what it looked like or what it said. That was the Word of God that they were supposed to be reading constantly, every day, memorizing, binding to their hearts, teaching to their children. Eventually, the people of Judah suffered the consequences for neglecting God's Word so bad so long. It wasn't too much longer before the Babylonians came as God's scourge to conquer Judah and drag the people away into exile.

But as they sat in exile, the people who had neglected their Lord's Word remembered at least this much: the Lord is gracious, and he restores those who call out to him for forgiveness. So that's what they did. And the Lord heard them, and forgave them. After a few decades, God brought the people of Judah back out of exile and returned them to their homeland in Israel. Once they returned home, they rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem, and they began rebuilding the temple that had been destroyed by the Babylonians.

The story we hear today takes place on the day the walls of Jerusalem were finished. That was an important day, because once the walls of a city were finished, it was like the city was officially alive again. So, on that very big day when the walls of Jerusalem were finished, the people gathered together to listen to their leaders read. The leaders' names were Ezra and Nehemiah, and these two men marked the occasion by reading the Law of God to the people.

Now remember, this was the nation who had neglected the Word of God so thoroughly and thoughtlessly that it cost them seventy years of suffering in exile. Now they were back home again, and they were hearing that Word of God read to them for the first time. And as they listened to God's Law for the first time, **all the people were crying as they heard the words of the Law.** The people broke down and wept as they heard God's Law, because now they understood just how guilty they were of sinning against God. Now the people understood just how far they had fallen short of God's commandments, just how thoroughly they had neglected the Lord's will. And it brought them to tears.

Most often today, God's people do not break down in tears when they hear God's law read. When you hear, for example, God's commandment to honor your father and mother, you probably don't begin to weep. When you hear his command not to hurt or harm your neighbor, you probably don't start sobbing. But hearing God's commandments still has a way of making people feel lousy. For example, whenever I hear the Seventh Commandment, "You Shall Not Steal," I can remember times I've swiped money. I can think of the thousands of unauthorized Chicken McNuggets I used to wolf down when I worked at McDonald's, or how I steal from you and God by not always giving my best effort as your pastor. I don't cry. I don't weep. But it makes me feel lousy.

When people hear God's law, his commandments, it has a way doing of that, doesn't it? It makes us think of all the times we've failed to keep them. Like the people of Judah in this story, it makes us realize just how often we neglect God's will, just how guilty we are. And for different people it may be different commandments that do the trick. For people who struggle with sexual sins, it's probably the Sixth Commandment that makes them squirm. For people who skip church a lot, the Third Commandment is going to sting. For people who like to gossip, the Eighth Commandment drags them down.

When we hear the law of God, listen carefully, and think honestly about our lives, it may not make us cry. But if we're assessing ourselves honestly, it will make us feel guilty and uncomfortable. And it should. Because we have neglected God's commandments in our lives. We are guilty. And we ought to feel lousy about that. If we don't, then we're either not listening to his commandments, or we're not being honest about our lives.

But now listen to what happens next in this story, as the people of Judah weep over their sins. Their leaders, Nehemiah and Ezra, say, **"This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or cry!"** ...Nehemiah said to them, **"Go eat rich food and drink sweet drinks and send portions to those who have nothing prepared, because today is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, because the joy of the LORD is your strength."** Then the Levites silenced all the people, saying, **"Hush! Today is holy. Do not grieve."** **All the people went to eat and drink and to send portions to others and to celebrate with great joy, because they understood the words that had been made known to them."**

When the people of Judah weep over their sins, their leads don't stand there and say, "That's right, you miserable pagans. You just go ahead and cry. You deserve to cry for everything you've done against God's Law. Cry and cry, you sick little heathens." No, Ezra, Nehemiah, and the priests tell the people, "Stop crying. Rejoice! Celebrate!" And they tell the people why: **"And do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength...Be quiet, for this day is holy."**

The Lord had come that day to give these people joy. He had shown his forgiveness for their sins by bringing them back to their land and allowing them to rebuild. He had given them this holy day when the walls of Jerusalem were whole again. This was no day for weeping and wailing. This was a day for rejoicing and celebrating because proof of God's forgiveness was right in front of them.

As soon as God's people today are stung by his commandments, as soon as we feel guilty because we have neglected his law, we need to hear, **"Do not be grieved; be quiet; for the joy of the LORD is your strength."** As God forgave the sins of the people of Judah – and proved it by returning them to Judah and rebuilding their city – he has forgiven us – and he has held this truth out to us through his Word. There he shows us the holy life of his Son, who kept all of God's commandments from top to bottom. There he shows us the death of his Son, where Jesus took all the guilt and all the punishment of our sins on his own back and died for them. Easter morning shows us beyond a doubt that our sins are removed from us because of Christ's work. Because he rose that morning, we know that the death our sins deserved has been swallowed up in victory.

The forgiveness of Christ is our joy. It removes the guilt, the sting, the curse, the punishment that our sins against God's law deserve. God has made that forgiveness our own by giving us faith in Jesus. In Christ's

forgiveness, it is no longer time to weep or mourn or to feel guilty or stung or ashamed. It is instead time to do what Ezra and Nehemiah told the people of Judah to do on the day of their forgiveness: Do not be grieved; instead, **“Go, eat rich food and drink sweet drinks and send portions to those who have nothing prepared, because today is holy to our Lord.”**

In the joy of God’s forgiveness, Christians are free to live in joy. We have the joy of the Lord’s forgiveness, and this is our strength to live as joyful people, not disturbed and downcast, but joyful. This season of Advent is designed for Christians to prepare for the Lord. We prepare for him with repentance; we prepare for him with faith. And with faith in his forgiveness, we live as God’s joyful sons and daughters as we wait for our Savior’s arrival.

Do not be grieved over your sin; it’s forgiven in Christ. Let that be your strength to live in joy. As you wait for Christ, enjoy your life in this world. Eat the fat. Drink the sweet wine. Be glad and joyful people, for the sin that grieves us is gone in Christ. Wait for Christ’s arrival with joyful hearts. People who think that being a Christian means being sullen and dead serious and stern aren’t quite getting it. Christianity is a joyful heart and a joyful life because we know God’s forgiveness for our sin in Christ.

There is one more part to this story about the people of Judah. As their leaders kept reading from God’s Law, they saw that it was the time of year for a festival that God had commanded his people to observe every year at that time. And so the leaders told the people: As you rejoice and celebrate God’s love, carry out this command of God that we had neglected before. And the people did. They listened to God’s command of exactly how to carry out the festival, and they carried out the command with hearts of joy. As God’s people they kept the command of his Word. **And there was very great rejoicing.**

Once God’s people realize the joy of Christ’s forgiveness, they live joyful, celebratory lives. And as they do, they listen to God’s commands again. And this time, they carry out his commands as they live their lives of joy. They do not keep his commands out of fear of punishment or under compulsion. But this time, they keep God’s commandments the way the people of Judah did: with hearts full of joy and thanksgiving. Keeping God’s commandments doesn’t ruin our joy. It adds to our joy, because we are glorifying our gracious God as we do what pleases him.

Live your life as a joyful celebration of God’s grace and love. And with a heart full of joy, listen again to God’s commandments for you. Keep his commandments joyfully as you wait for your Savior’s arrival. Live your life as a celebration in the joy of God’s love, and you will carry out his will joyfully as you do. Amen.