

EPIPHANY 3 YEAR C
NEHEMIAH 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10
1 CORINTHIANS 12:12-31a
LUKE 4:14-21
JANUARY 26, 27, 2019

Many of us grew up going to Sunday School. If it was not in our Sunday School it was in another church. We learned Bible stories about Adam and Eve, Noah and Abraham. We might have heard stories about David and Goliath as David killed the giant with a stone and a slingshot. We learned Bible stories about Jesus and his ministry. We also sang songs like “Jesus Loves Me”, “Fishers of Men” and others that we hold dear and close to our hearts. Some of us stopped reading the Bible after our confirmation instruction was completed. We might have thought the Bible was not that interesting and did not have much to say to us about life decisions. It could be that we saw the Bible as being too difficult to read and understand. The Bible may have been placed on the coffee table or the book shelf and started to gather dust. It was brought out of hiding and the dust wiped off when the preacher was coming for a visit or when grandma was coming over.

I would argue that the Bible is not boring nor is it irrelevant for helping us with important life decisions. The Bible becomes boring when we allow the words of scripture to die and become dormant. It stops being alive when we think it has nothing to say about life. The Bible is alive when we remember that our God is a living God who shares words of life. 2 Timothy 3:16 says **All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.** The word of God is useful for our life’s direction and decisions.

Our readings from Nehemiah 8 and Luke 4 share how this word of God comes alive for those who hear it or read it. The word of God is alive and causes changes to happen in our lives. Some of those changes might mean a more

active worship life while others might cause us to seek to shut this word up. We will read next week that the people in our Lord's home town were not pleased to hear the words and teachings of Jesus. Today we see that the Israelites returning from exile heard this word of God and worshipped and praised God.

Nehemiah 8:3 He read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law.

The beginning parts of the book of Nehemiah describe how the Israelites were permitted to return back to Jerusalem by the Persians who had defeated the Babylonians. Nehemiah was a relatively minor figure in the court of King Artaxerxes of Persia. When Nehemiah heard that Jerusalem was a broken, fire-razed wreck, he asked the king to let him return to his homeland and rebuild the city of his ancestors. There were many obstacles facing Nehemiah as he sought to rebuild. Nehemiah was persistent and faithful. Nehemiah was finally successful in restoring Jerusalem's wall and gates. The people returning from exile were invited to gather in the square before the Water Gate so that they could hear the word of God read and interpreted.

If we read some of the biblical history behind the people of Judah being exiled we see that the people had forgotten the word of God. Because they stopped reading it or hearing it they stopped learning about God's direction. They failed to live according to God's word and God's directions. At one point the Law of Moses was lost. The people of Judah and Israel were becoming corrupt in business dealings and their leaders were not interested in listening to the word of God proclaimed by the prophets.

When Nehemiah 8 speaks about the book of the law he is talking about the Torah but not as the law that oppresses but as the word of God that sets the people free. It is a word that should be celebrated and not to be feared. The

people gathered at the Water Gate and listened from morning until noon. All were invited to hear this word as it was read by Ezra the priest. The people heard Ezra read and they came alive. They regarded the words of the Torah as interesting and vital to their lives. It is interesting that everyone was invited to hear. Men and women were gathered to hear. We can assume that there were also children present for this reading. All that heard were attentive to the book of the law.

Nehemiah 8:6 Then Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered, “Amen, Amen,” lifting up their hands. Then they bowed their heads and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground.

The immediate response to hearing the law read was to worship God. They bowed down to the ground in acts of worship. It could be that many were hearing the reading of Torah for the first time. They were amazed at what this word of God said to them and about their lives. They may have heard their parents and grandparents speak about it but they may have never heard this word for themselves. The people were moved as they listened. It could be this word of God convicted them and moved them to change. Their natural response was to worship.

We hear the word of God read and proclaimed every time we gather for a church service. Sometimes we see ourselves in the readings and in the preaching. We might feel convicted as we hear God’s word. We look at our lives in ways we may not have looked before. We might see something that needs changing. The intent of our hearing and listening is that our hearts are stirred to worship the Lord. Most of us do not fall on our faces to worship but the intended response to God’s word is for our hearts to be moved and our lives changed.

Nehemiah 8:9, 10 And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, “This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep.”

For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law. ¹⁰Then he said to them, “Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our Lord; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.”

Nehemiah, Ezra, the priest, and the Levites encouraged the people to not mourn or weep because of this reading but to rejoice. They proclaimed that this was a day to celebrate the Lord’s deliverance. It was a day holy to the Lord. The Lord is their strength. They are to celebrate because they Lord has seen their attentiveness and there is joy. The people are to rejoice because God is also rejoicing with them.

You and I are invited to celebrate the word of God. We celebrate as our hearts are filled with joy and excitement as we remember God is present among us. The joy of the Lord is our strength. God is pleased with us as we gather and hear the word of God. We are invited to hear this word and read it often. Hear the Bible stories again as if it is for the first time. Allow yourself to be amazed at the Lord reaching and the Lord’s presence. Celebrate because the Lord is our strength. AMEN