



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
Asheville, North Carolina
23 January 2022
Sermon: For the Time Being
Rev. Dr. Richard Coble

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10 (NRSV)

8:1 all the people gathered together into the square before the Water Gate. They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the LORD had given to Israel.

8:2 Accordingly, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding. This was on the first day of the seventh month.

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.

8:5 And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up.

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.

8:8 So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.

8:9 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.

8:10 Then 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."

A retirement-age(ish) couple prepares dinner. Well, Bill is actually doing the cooking; he's also multi-tasking. Towards the end of his preparations, everything seems to happen at once. As soon as the timer goes off to take the dish out of the oven, the dog circles his legs asking to go outside. The phone rings. The pot on the stove starts to boil over.

"And Laura's sitting there," he recounts, "just watching me do everything." So, Bill turns to his partner Laura and asks her to set the table. But Laura stares at Bill without comprehension, without answer.

The phone continues; it rings until it stops. Bill walks over and lets the dog outside, returning to the kitchen to turn off the oven, to turn down the stovetop. He turns again to Laura, his patience strained, "Please, could you just set the table?"

And Laura says, "Sure," but keeps standing and starrng, no movement toward the cabinet. So, Bill finishes what he is doing. He grabs the dishes. He lays them on the table. Well, actually there's a bit of bang when he sets them down. Laura stares, bewildered, frustrated.

Years later, after Laura has passed away, Bill Smutny recounts this moment in a lecture for Memory Care at Givens Estate.¹ At the time, both Bill and Laura were coming to grips with Laura's Alzheimer's diagnosis and the progression of the illness.

"And it really kinda hit me hard," says Bill in his lecture, "what was I trying to achieve?" What mattered most in that moment? Was it setting the table? We all have tables to set, next steps we need to move through, things we must accomplish.

And in that moment, the task superseded the relationship. Bill asks in the lecture:

- Did I see Laura trying as hard as she could, or did I just want to set the table?
- What was more important, that I get the task done as fast and as efficiently as possible, or that I let Laura work and live at her own pace?

The frustrations of the moment, coupled with grief, and annoyance, and the confusion of that time in their lives, meant that Bill failed to meet Laura where she was; failed to be in community with her, when that relationship got in the way.

Grief has a way of doing that.

Stress has a way of doing that.

Anxiety has a way of doing that.

Exhaustion has a way of doing that.

We get caught up in our frustrations; we get caught up; and we fail, really, just to be with those around us; to be, really, with ourselves. Bill recounts this episode for Memory Care, in an effort to remind partners and care-givers, when frustrations build, of what really is important. Ask yourself, what really matters in these moments, he tells us.

¹ Bill Smutny, "Navigating the Maze of Alzheimer's," May 7, 2020, Memory Care, <https://vimeo.com/421552532/5c1371a136>. Our MCI group has been using these lectures in our support group. I'm thankful to GCPC member Bill Rupp for introducing them to the group.

In contrast to Bill and Laura, Nehemiah, Ch. 8, provides perhaps too rosy a picture of a stressful time. The priest Ezra reads the Torah to the people assembled, and they say in assent, “Amen, Amen.” It’s just not that simple.

Remember, when Ezra stood on the platform before the Water Gate in Jerusalem, he was the priest of a broken and fragmented people. Some three quarters of a century had passed since the city was decimated and the people taken off into exile by the Babylonian empire. In the ensuing decades, the rise of the Persians and the fall of the Babylonians gave the people the chance to return and rebuild, but they were no longer the same people. Time had passed. The Jews of Nehemiah and Ezra’s time were the children and grandchildren of those taken to exile. They did not have any personal memories of what Jerusalem once was, of who the people of God once were.

And they were a divided people. Those with power and wealth crushed their neighbors, charging them inordinate interest, forcing entire families into debt slavery when they could not pay. Others conspired against Nehemiah, working with his adversaries to tear down the city he was helping rebuild.

So, when the priest Ezra stands before the people, they are left with these dire and fundamental questions about their identity: Can we be again the people of God, like our ancestors once were? Can we worship together as community? Can we even be community again, in the midst of change, frustration, division?

Many are asking about the possibilities of community today. Perhaps you are asking yourself questions like these, of your communities, of this nation, today. Perhaps you have been asking them for a long time.

In 2021, Americans bought 2 million guns.²

Hate crimes are at their highest level in 12 years.

Alcohol consumption and overdoses are at all-time highs.

Since the pandemic, people have driven less, but motor vehicle deaths have risen, up almost 20% in 2021. We’re not watching out for one another. We are driving with less patience.

Anger erupting in public places is common. People get into shouting matches on planes and in stores. People scream at school board meetings about wearing masks to protect the most vulnerable.

Church attendance and charitable giving are down, across the progressive and evangelical spectrum.

² I learned many of these statistics from David Brooks, “America is Falling Apart at the Seams,” *The New York Times*, Jan. 13, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/13/opinion/america-falling-apart.html>.

This breakdown of community is taking its toll on all of us.

In a recent survey, 38% of all pastors reported that they have seriously considered leaving the ministry since the pandemic, many citing burnout, physical and emotional exhaustion from trying to lead fracturing communities.³

2/3^{rds} of nurses are considering leaving their profession, as the pandemic wears on.

1 in 4 teachers say they may not make it past this current academic year.

38 million people quit their jobs in 2021. Many of these were service jobs where people felt thrust into unsafe conditions, many employed by corporations that underpaid and underappreciated their staff, many left because they were sick of facing customers who treated them more like objects than people.

Where have you felt this loss of community? Have you felt this exhaustion, or this fear?

And what, after all, did Ezra read to the people, that changed their division and grief into rejoicing? We could use a bit of that these days, right?

A few chapters later, after our reading, we get more of the content of what Ezra read aloud. Ezra reminds the people, of the God who had traveled with them, throughout their history. He recounts God's covenant with Abraham, who's heart God found faithful (9:8). Ezra speaks of how God heard the cries of their ancestors enslaved in Egypt, and "heard their cry at the Red Sea" (9:9). Ezra prays, "Many years you [O, God] were patient with [our ancestors], and warned them by your spirit through your prophets...in your great mercies you did not make an end of them or forsake them, for you are a gracious and merciful God" (9:30-31).

In other words, Ezra reminds the people of the God who was with them, in joy and in hardship, in the unbearable weight of oppression, in the impossibilities of life.

But it is not just a reminder of the God who *was*, but of the God who *is* in relationship with these people. So, Ezra proclaims, "This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep...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."

Throughout this week, I've been thrown by Ezra's command to the people not to mourn or weep. For lament is a good and just response to these difficult and uncertain days. Just as Jerusalem had many grief-filled and uncertain days ahead in time of Ezra and Nehemiah.

Instead of a 'do not,' what I hear Ezra say, is more a 'nevertheless.' In this uncertainty, in this lament, never-the-less remember, he says, remember:

³ Kate Shellnut, "The Pastors Aren't All Right: 38% Considering Leaving the Ministry," *Christianity Today*, Nov. 16, 2021. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2021/november/pastor-burnout-pandemic-barna-consider-leaving-ministry.html>.

- Remember the community that surrounds you, the people who are people and not tasks to be completed, or obstacles in your way, or objects for you to use.
- Remember that even in hard days God has given us life, and that gift is not something to be rushed through, not something to be taken for granted, not something to be thrown away, but it is to be cherished, for life is a gift of your creator.
- And remember that goes for the lives of those around you as well, especially lives pushed to the margins – lives pushed out of sight, out of mind; lives made to feel that their lives do not matter, in this city, in this country. God is especially with and for and cherishes lives our communities pushed to the margins.
- And finally, remember, remember when you feel the farthest from the divine spirit, that the God of love and grace surrounds you and goes before you and loves you, not for who you should be, not for who you are becoming, but for who you are, right now, today. Hold fast to that love, when all else falls away.

Stay present so that you will remember that this day is holy. Find practices that help you to hold on to these important reminders: study scripture, take time for prayer, enjoy the company of loved ones, come back to worship, and breath, find breath, breath, stay present.

For the people who surround you are to be treated with grace, and that also includes you. You are holy, and loved, and meant to be treated with grace.

Yes, these days are hard and uncertain. But like our ancestors in the faith, remember, nevertheless, that we proclaim “this day is holy to our Lord...for the joy of the Lord is [our] strength.” Amen.