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Sermon – Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10

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May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be reflections of your word to us this morning.. Amen.

Turn to a person next to you, preferably not the person you came with, and tell them one reason why you come to worship.

The tradition of gathering for worship in the Christian church has deep roots and is one of the defining things about our Christian practice. As I said to the kids earlier, the first movement in our liturgy is not centering and calling ourselves to worship . . . it is coming in and sitting down, it is showing up with our bodies . . . as a wise person said, there are many things we can do on our own . . . Christianity isn't one of them. Once we are physically here, we name why we have come and we set an intention to worship.

People have been gathering for Judeo-Christian worship for a few thousand years, but what makes this story from Nehemiah special is that we get a rare glimpse into what worship actually looked like, and at that time gathering in a place where all are welcome was pretty exceptional . . . like our sign out front . . . all are welcome.

Of all the Hebrew scriptures included in our Bible, Nehemiah and its companion, Ezra were written last, after which there is a 400 year gap before the first of Paul's letters are written. Nehemiah and Ezra tell the story of Israelites coming back to Jerusalem after the Babylonian exile – the Persian Emperor gained the Babylonian Empire in 539 BCE and granted permission for the Jewish exiles to return to the land of Israel to rebuild their temple. Not only was the temple previously destroyed, so were the buildings, homes and the wall around the city. It reminds me of the drone footage over Aleppo, showing devastation everywhere you look. People who return there have to search for safe spaces to call home amongst the rubble, which I'm sure is easier said than done. In Syria today it's impossible to keep out the enemy, no matter what you do, but in 400 BCE one could keep the enemy at bay by building a wall around the city – it's admittedly a unique moment in history to be talking about walls. But as we see in the opening lines of this book, the wall around Jerusalem was useless. Here is what Nehemiah wrote: "while I was in Susa the capital (modern day Iran) one of my brothers, Hanani, came with certain men from Judah; and I asked them about the Jews that survived, those who had escaped the captivity, and about Jerusalem. They replied, 'The survivors there in the province who escaped captivity are in great trouble and shame; the wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been destroyed by fire.' When I heard these words I sat down and wept, and mourned for days, fasting and praying before the God of heaven."

With Nehemiah's leadership as the new governor, the whole community pulls together to rebuild the wall with all of its gates. Finally safe from their enemies, this morning's reading describes how the people of God come from neighbouring towns and all around, to the square outside the temple area, across from the Water Gate. If they had gathered inside the temple, only the priests and men who had been deemed clean would be allowed in, but across from the Water Gate, where people come to find the best source of water in the city, all are welcome: men, women, children, clean and unclean. Anyone who wants to come and hear are welcome.

Why do they gather? Why do they worship? Their reasons aren't so different reason from ours, really . . . to hear God's Word, (for them) to remember God's Law, and to remember who they are. They remember by gathering together where all are welcome; they bless

God and worship, praising God for God's transcendence, God's awesomeness, and faithfulness. Ezra, the priest stands for hours and reads from the Torah, which are the first 5 books of our Bible, the books of Moses, also known as the Law of Israel. He reads the story of creation, of God saving them from slavery in Egypt and their wandering through the desert, before entering the Promised Land. They read the purity laws, those ritual practices that make them uniquely Jewish. While Ezra reads, he is flanked by representative members of the community who support Ezra in the reading, underlining the importance of the moment . . . it would be like having the council stand up at the front during worship. It's probably not council's first choice to stand up with me for an hour, let alone 6 . . . it shows us what a big deal this is.

Those of you who have spent time in the Roman Catholic church, do you remember when the mass was in Latin before Vatican II? Even the readings as I understand were done in Latin, but could be repeated in English if the priest chose to. It makes for a very different worship experience when you don't understand what the priest is saying. By 400 BCE most Jews speak Aramaic, the same language Jesus spoke, and not all know their Hebrew, the language of the text, so the Levites are walking throughout the crowd, translating the text and helping them understand its meaning. Think back to a time scripture really spoke to you. I was hanging out with my aunt some years ago when I was visiting New York and she slipped into a story how when she's feeling afraid or lost, she opens her Bible and reads, and remembers (breathing in and out) everything is going to be ok. I often think about that line that's repeated through the gospels: "Jesus is going ahead of you to Galilee." Jesus is going ahead of us, he's paving the way. When I get discouraged about climate change I think . . . Jesus is going ahead of us . . . not to fix it all, but he's paving the way for us . . . we've got this because he's got us. Ezra is reading the story of God's relationship with them, a story that is ever ancient, ever new, with new circumstances. It renews them like the water from the Water Gate. It's a word of hope and purpose and a future for their people. They weep at the scripture . . . they weep because they have forgotten God. Oh, that's an intense feeling, the moment we remember God is with us and for us, and we've been ignoring God. The people weep because it's good to be home again.

God comes to God's people in a spirit of renewal, but it is the people who gather, who worship and pray, and who work to understand God's word to all of them and respond to what they hear. This is the worshipping community at work.

After this intellectual, emotional, physical and spiritual journey, imagine their exhaustion. Their leaders say, go and eat, feast together and share your food, for this day is holy to our Lord; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength. It's good to eat after worship, isn't it. Eating is a very grounding activity and sharing a meal with others is a holy act. Eating together connects us to God's joy . . . offering us strength and sustenance for the road ahead.