

January 23, 2022

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The 3rd Sunday after the Epiphany

St. Dunstan's Episcopal Church

Sometimes life is hard, and it takes a toll on us. We look around, there are communities and families broken and hurting. Neighbors rise up against neighbors. Accusations are made. Gossip spreads. Criticism rises, and arguments prevail about who is right, who is wrong, who is to blame. For many of us, the struggles of our everyday lives – the worries and concerns we carry for ourselves, for our families and friends, and for our community and world feel overwhelming, too much to bear. Add to this the continuing presence and threat of the Covid virus, an adversary that is relentless and determined, and we may find ourselves tired, weary and longing for relief. We may find ourselves relating to the people of Israel in the 5th.

In today's passage from Nehemiah, we meet them as they gather at the town's center. They have called a meeting, are directing the scribe Ezra to bring and read the scrolls of the Law of Moses, their Torah. Earlier chapters tell us that theirs is a fractured community, where folks are at odds with one another, and injustice is commonplace. Life has been difficult, distancing them from Jerusalem, from God and from one another. And so, they have come – downtrodden and seeking the hope and restoration only God can bring.

Nehemiah is a faithful public servant of the people. What he has witnessed grieves him deeply. Born and raised in a time of exile and devastation, knows the threat of violence is ever near: Jerusalem's wall has fallen, the city is in disrepair and hope seems lost. Although the prophet is optimistic and determined, sure of his call to bring God's people out of the depths of their anguish, at every turn his adversaries rise up against him. They condemn him and his guidance to the people with criticism, judgment and ridicule. And it feels personal. Nehemiah is tired, and weary.

And so, in his grief and sorrow for the plight of Jerusalem and all of Israel, Nehemiah turns to God with weeping, fasting and praying. And then, rising up himself, he calls to the people. He invites them to do their part, bit by bit, to work together to restore the wall, and their city, to actively show forth their trust in God. And they came, and they built, and then, gathered for renewal. The scriptures tell us that the people were attentive, and that as Ezra opened the scroll and blessed the Lord, the people stood up, raised their hands and answered Amen, Amen.

With the reading of each text, they are reminded of their journey out of the land of Egypt, through the wilderness and the long struggle to find the promised land; they are reminded of God's law and their covenant. With each story, they become aware that the promised land of the past is no longer theirs, and with deep regret for their faithlessness to God, they weep.

We too, come and gather to hear God's word. We, like those who before us come with all our burdens to listen for what God is saying to us, hoping in God's we might find encouragement, hope, assurance that all shall be well.

The locals of Nazareth came hoping for the same when Jesus taught in the temple that day. As He took the scroll, unrolled it, found the verses from Isaiah and then read them aloud, they listened intently to the words. Words that spoke of the Spirit's anointing, of good news and release, of restoration and freedom. And after he rolled it back up and sat down, all eyes were fixed upon him. Before them is Jesus, the one anointed by the Spirit at baptism and who in the presence of the Spirit weathered the wilderness, one of their very own. Not only has he taught from the Torah, he has offered a new interpretation: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." What has captivated them so? What might they have heard in those words? For themselves or their community?

When the weariness of our world feels too much to bear; when the challenges overtake us and our sadness overwhelms; when we wish, in the words of Rodney King, that we all could just get along, It is the word of God we need to hear. Words spoken to particular people, in a particular time and context that still have meaning for us today. Words that guide and remind us of who we are. Words of hope, encouragement, and promise; Words like those found in our readings today spoken by a 5th century BC prophet, by our 1st Century CE savior, and by his dedicated and faithful apostle, Paul. Words that call us into community, that we might in turning toward and trusting God remember that there is hope, and that together, in unity, we will make it through. They are words that we need to hear as we navigate the challenges of our 21st century lives.

So, today, let's claim them as our own. Let's embrace and garner from them all the goodness, and hope and possibility of they promise. Let us hear in the words of the prophet encouragement and permission to celebrate and be strengthened by God's joy! Let us rejoice with the heavens as they tell the glory of God; let us take heed to Paul's wisdom that teaches us what it is to be in community; In our hearing of Jesus' reading of Isaiah, let us give thanks to God for the Holy Spirit who anoints us and calls us forward in faith to embody the Good News – to be agents in the world who bring good news to the poor, release to those held captive, sight to those who cannot see, and freedom to all who are oppressed. We might think Jesus came for these but not for us, for in the most literal sense, we may not see ourselves as poor, or unable to see; as people held captive or oppressed. And yet, Jesus came for all people, not just the poor but the poor in spirit; not just the blind but we who fail to see; not just those pushed down or held captive in our prisons, but we who are often held captive by our fears and sadness. Jesus came for us, God redeems God's people and this is good news.

Let us offer to God all that we are, and then let us remember the words of Nehemiah, Ezra and the Levites:

“This day is holy to the Lord your God; so do not mourn or weep. Go, celebrate!
Eat, drink and share with others in need, for this day is holy to our Lord.
Do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength!” Amen.