

SERMON FOR JANUARY 27, 2019

TEXT: NEHEMIAH 8: 1-3, 5-6. 8-10

THEME: THE JOY OF THE LORD IS YOUR STRENGTH

And all the people gathered as one man into the square before the Water Gate. And they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses that the Lord had commanded Israel. ² So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could understand what they heard, on the first day of the seventh month. ³ And 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. ⁵ And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people, and as he opened it all the people stood. ⁶ And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground. ⁸ They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. 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 as they heard the words of the Law. ¹⁰ **Then he said to them, "Go your way. Eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength."**

In the name of Jesus:

There was once a Franciscan monk in Australia assigned to be the guide and "gofer" to Mother Teresa when she visited New South Wales. Thrilled and excited at the prospect of being so close to this great woman, he dreamed of how much he would learn from her and what they would talk about. But during her visit, he became frustrated. Although he was constantly near her, the friar never had the opportunity to say one word to Mother Teresa. There were always other people for her to meet.

Finally, her tour was over, and she was due to fly to New Guinea. In desperation, the Franciscan friar spoke to Mother Teresa: If I pay my own fare to New Guinea, can I sit next to you on the plane so I can talk to you and learn from

you? Mother Teresa looked at him. "You have enough money to pay airfare to New Guinea?" she asked.

Yes, he replied eagerly. "Then give that money to the poor," she said. "You'll learn more from that than anything I can tell you." Mother Teresa understood that Jesus' ministry was to the poor and she made it hers as well. She knew that they more than anyone else needed good news.

We all need Good News, don't we? In each of our lives we are battered bruised and confused. Why are these things happening to us? How come things don't work out the way I want them to work out? Bad news is all around us. Arguments, broken promises, shattered dreams. We all would like some joy to come into our lives. Certainly Nehemiah and those who were with him could relate. They returned to their homeland, to the city of Jerusalem. They were seeking to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem and as they try to rebuild the city and their lives, they were met with all sorts of resistance. Enemies worked against them. Some spoke behind their back. There was one hurdle after another. It seemed as if they would never get their lives back on track. They needed good news. But where would the Good News come from? They found it when they opened the scrolls and listened to the Law of Moses, when they took time out to listen to God. This is instructive for each and every one of us. Where do we get this Good News? You get it when you study God's Word, when you assemble around God's Word taught and proclaimed. That is what Ezra, Nehemiah, and the people of Israel rediscovered in our text for today. We need to rediscover this today.

The scene is set in the once proud city of Jerusalem. I say once, proud city because Jerusalem and the surrounding area had been leveled and laid waste when the nation of Babylon destroyed the city and took its entire people into exile. Imagine for a moment the city of Lancaster and its surrounding towns all leveled, without a home, store, or church left standing. That is how Ezra and Nehemiah found their homeland when they returned from captivity in Babylon. Where does one begin to build or rebuild a home?

Nehemiah returned to rebuild Jerusalem and in the rebuilding of the city the people made a discovery. The people had found their Bible, the books of Moses, the sacred holy writings; they had found God's Word! Their copies had been destroyed in the leveling of the city. But now, they found God's Word. They had known that their nation was destroyed because they had forgotten God and despised His Word. But now that they had found God's Word, just listen to what happened next: ² So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could understand what they heard, on the first day of the seventh month. ³ And 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." They spent all morning, from about 9 to noon, reading God's Word. And note how the people responded, all the ears of the people were attentive to the Book of the Law, they listened to God speaking through His Word.

But that is not all. Ezra and others spent time explaining God's Word to the people. Ezra and the priests were giving sermons based on what God was saying in

His Word. “⁸ They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.”

Did you catch how the people reacted? They could have, in fact they should have felt guilty, embarrassed, and ashamed for what they and their forefathers had done to God. They had forgotten about God, paid lip service to Him, and God had every right to lay low everyone who heard Him that day. But instead, God did something different. He gave them Good News. Their lives were rejuvenated. They had new life, given to them by God Himself through His Word. The Lord was their strength. Their joy. They rebuilt the city of Jerusalem, rebuilt the Temple that was torn down, build synagogues in communities all so that the people of God could gather to worship God, hear His Word proclaimed, and receive strength for the days ahead, for the Lord was their strength and joy.

Four hundred or so years later Jesus went to the synagogue. In this particular instance, Luke records what took place. Jesus is back home, in the town of Nazareth, the place where He grew up. Luke records that as was His custom, meaning that Jesus always went to church, He went to the synagogue and it was His turn to read the Word of God. The reading was from the book of Isaiah, and this is what He read: “¹⁸ “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, ¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.” And with that, Jesus rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat back down. By this time every

one is looking at Him, and so Jesus replied: "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Jesus was the long Promised One from the Father. He was the promised Messiah, the very Lamb of God who would take away the sins of the world. But how would people know that Jesus was who He said He was? It was because of not only who Jesus was, that is, the true God Man but also because of what He did. You see, the Jewish people knew that when the Messiah would come, He would do spectacular things. Things that the prophet Isaiah spoke about, that which Jesus read, that the lame would walk, the deaf hear, the blind would receive their sight. Jesus came to earth as the Messiah to do what God promised. This is why, when asked by John the Baptist's disciples if He was the One who was to come or if they should look for another, Jesus replied: "Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵ the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. ⁶ And blessed is the one who is not offended by me." Jesus was actually doing that which God had promised! Jesus was bringing Good News to all sorts of people who were under the grips of sin, Satan, and death.

Jesus brings Good News to you today. The same Good News given to Nehemiah and Ezra, that God was on their side and would be their ever present Hope and Help, is your Good News today. Once the people of God heard of God's love and care for them in the promised One who was to come to deliver them, they responded in worship and praise to God. They set their minds and hearts to

following the Lord in all that they would do. Their strength was renewed like an eagle's. The Joy of the Lord was their strength.

Would you like that same joy and strength? Would your friends and relatives like to have that as well? It is yours, you already have it! It is offered here, at this church, Sunday after Sunday. Just as Jesus, as was His custom went to the synagogue on every Sabbath so also Jesus is here every Sabbath; He is here present at every worship service. He reminds us that where two or three are gathered together in My name there I am in the midst of them. Each service we begin with the invocation, asking God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to be present among us. And they are! God speaks to us, reminding us of what He has done for us, that He has created us and gives us all good things we need to support this body and life; that in love He sent His only Son into the world to live for us, die on Calvary's cross for us, and rise again from the grave for us. That the Holy Spirit brings us the Good News and gifts of God as He comes to us in the waters of Baptism making us His children; He speaks to us regularly in and through His Word. The Word of God brings Jesus to us, and Jesus also comes to us in the Lord's Supper. Sunday after Sunday, and at other times when we worship, Jesus is present, to forgive, to renew, to strengthen us poor miserable sinners, so that we might be renewed as His people, to live our lives in His presence and to His glory. God continually gives us His Good News that we are His forgiven children, that He is with us always, and that He is at work for us in our lives.

Every week in the worship service is a mini celebration of Christmas and Easter. He fills our hearts and lives with joy and a holy purpose of living for Him by

loving and serving others. He forgives and blesses us so that we rejoice and live lives of forgiveness blessing others. And it takes place Sunday after Sunday. God's people faithfully coming to church to meet Jesus, and Jesus, here in His house, faithfully loving and blessing those who come into His presence. God has Good News for you! Jesus has come and in Him you have the love and favor of God. All so that we can continue to be faithful to Jesus in worship, and living our lives for Him, saying with the Psalmist each and every Sunday: "I was glad when they said let us go to the house of the Lord." We are glad, for God loves us in Jesus, and we now go forth to live in His love with His blessing.

Amen